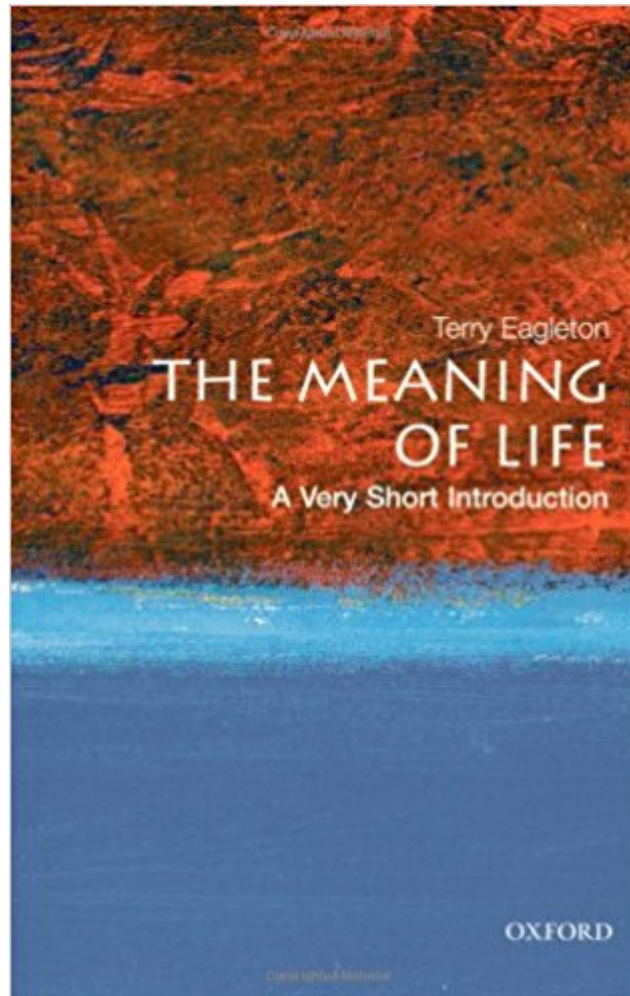




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# The Meaning Of Life: A Very Short Introduction



## Synopsis

The phrase "the meaning of life" for many seems a quaint notion fit for satirical mauling by Monty Python or Douglas Adams. But in this spirited Very Short Introduction, famed critic Terry Eagleton takes a serious if often amusing look at the question and offers his own surprising answer. Eagleton first examines how centuries of thinkers and writers--from Marx and Schopenhauer to Shakespeare, Sartre, and Beckett--have responded to the ultimate question of meaning. He suggests, however, that it is only in modern times that the question has become problematic. But instead of tackling it head-on, many of us cope with the feelings of meaninglessness in our lives by filling them with everything from football to sex, Kabbala, Scientology, "New Age softheadedness," or fundamentalism. On the other hand, Eagleton notes, many educated people believe that life is an evolutionary accident that has no intrinsic meaning. If our lives have meaning, it is something with which we manage to invest them, not something with which they come ready made. Eagleton probes this view of meaning as a kind of private enterprise, and concludes that it fails to hold up. He argues instead that the meaning of life is not a solution to a problem, but a matter of living in a certain way. It is not metaphysical but ethical. It is not something separate from life, but what makes it worth living--that is, a certain quality, depth, abundance and intensity of life. Here then is a brilliant discussion of the problem of meaning by a leading thinker, who writes with a light and often irreverent touch, but with a very serious end in mind.

About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

## Book Information

Paperback: 128 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (June 30, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199532176

ISBN-13: 978-0199532179

Product Dimensions: 6.7 x 0.5 x 4.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 36 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #237,089 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #156 in Books > Religion &

Spirituality > Religious Studies > Psychology #477 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Philosophy #508 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Religious

## Customer Reviews

"This is a brief, ambitious, and satisfying book. As a survivor of the theory wars, Terry Eagleton has emerged as a critic and thinker who will help us theologues ponder not only life's meaning but the next steps we should take as even postmodernism fades into cultural history. If there is a cultural life for us all in the aftermath of the conflict between essentialism and relativism, Eagleton's provocative essay will point the way both to making and discovering its meaning."--Gary R. Hall, Anglican Theological Review

"Eagleton's witty eclecticism is perfect for such a lofty subject, but would it be inappropriate to ask for more?"--Leopold Froelich, Playboy

"The Meaning of Life may be 'lie' relative to how much more a scholar like Mr. Eagleton might have said, but it is still a work that demands close attention from readers who are already well grounded in literature and philosophy."--Mark Grannis, The Washington Times

"The news that Terry Eagleton has tackled the meaning of life in a book of a mere 185 pages shouldn't raise any eyebrows. If anyone can pull it off, it's probably him. Eagleton, unsurprisingly, has written an elegant, literate, cogent consideration of a maddeningly slippery topic, one whose conclusions run contrary to conventional wisdom, especially in this country."--Laura Miller, Salon.com

"Eagleton's is unlike most works on life's meaning, in which writers often invoke theology. Eagleton's notion of love may seem to lead back to theism, but he shows us we can have meaningful lives whatever our theology, and he invites us all to choose. He deserves a place in most collections."--Leslie Armour, Library Journal

"Regardless of whether you agree with him, you'll find yourself challenged by this little book."--Houston Chronicle"

Terry Eagleton is Professor of Cultural Theory and John Rylands Fellow at the University of Manchester. His literary criticism includes *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, and *After Theory*. He has also written a novel, *Saints and Scholars*, several plays and a memoir, *The Gatekeeper*. He divides his time between Manchester, Dublin and Derry.

This short and well written book achieves its goal. Terry Eagleton produced a clear and well balanced essay about the meaning of life, familiarizing the reader with the different concepts, even with the ones that reject the question. The philosophy's and theology's insights are considered and related with the main question. The reader can grasp the most important facets of the problem, considering the challenges posed by this enterprise. This short introduction makes it happen!

I'm disappointed with this book. Not because I was left without a broader knowledge of the meaning of life, but because this was such a poor treatment of the topic. The author writes almost in a stream of consciousness. He spends the first 93 pages dissecting the question 'What is the meaning of life' nearly down to level of quibbling about what the definition 'is' is. This is unhelpful, uninteresting and, since he makes clear in the first pages he is not a philosopher, likely uninformed. He certainly has a superficial knowledge of a great many concepts, which he likes to prove in his rambling way. By the time he reaches his own thesis about the meaning of life there is barely room left to explain it and no room left to defend it, apparently. For >93% of the book, the reader is left hoping for something useful and taking solace in the fact that it is a very short story. But it can be made shorter! Everything of use be gleaned by reading pp. 94 through 101, which is the final page. Page 99 contains a full page picture, so all the better for you. Even better, I can distill it for you. Look away if you do not want the answer to be spoiled so that you too can take the meandering journey. The meaning of life is jazz. Jazz as a metaphor, not a musical genre. You will have to read the eight, er, seven pages to find out more. I actually appreciated this concept, which is why I awarded two stars instead of one. Look into Jay Garfield's treatment of the topic. Longer, but much more valuable.

it's small, (well, the print is small too) and it's short (for a book on philosophy) but it does not shy away from clearly addressing the Big Questions. A good introduction for those who have never dipped a toe into philosophy, and a fun review for those who have.

Eagleton is a funny man and a good writer. He's also not a philosopher but a scholar of literature or some such, which is why he wrote the Oxford Short Introduction to 'The meaning of Life?'

As a teacher who teaches a course about life's big questions, like "What is The Meaning of Life?", this book is a great resource on a variety of perspectives and research on the topic. While it is certainly not all-encompassing, it is a great starting point to then seek out more information from other sources.

I recall in one of the Star Trek films that Kirk and Bones were singing the song, 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat.' Spock was puzzled at the idea presented in the simple song. He concluded, quite logically, that the song was wrong - life is not a dream. But then, what is life? What is the meaning of life? Eagleton's small text doesn't purport to give a once-and-for-all definitive answer to this question

(for the shortest answer to this, perhaps one must go to 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Universe' or one-syllable meditative objects of some Eastern practices). This book is part of the Very Short Introduction series by Oxford University Press, but the copy of the book that I possess is actually under a different cover (the internal text is the same). Eagleton begins with a preface that starts, 'Anyone rash enough to write a book with a title like this had better brace themselves for a postbag crammed with letters in erratic handwriting enclosing complex symbolic diagrams.' One of the difficulties, of course, is that this is an area where philosophers and theologians overlap with every armchair (and pub stool) analyst. And there may be as much validity in the workings of the later as in the former. One of the advantages that the philosopher might have over the less academic is that the structure of the questions that follow from this are perhaps more apropos. The meaning of life proceeds quickly to the question of why there is anything at all, and this gets into the realm of understanding being vs. nothingness, but then it also gets into the linguistic areas that the twentieth century in particular is noted for - Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Sartre, Freud, and others whose thinking has had profound effect on the twentieth century (even if they themselves were not twentieth century figures) are discussed. Eagleton freely allows that 'philosophers seem to have been reduced to no more than white-coated technicians of language.' Of course, language is how we make meaning and interpret meaning even a la many non-verbal communicative forms, but we then get into a chicken-and-egg dance about which comes first. Eagleton states that we often have recourse to the question of the meaning of life when things that we take for granted break down - it has been common through history that in times of crisis, religious sentiment and practice increases, as people look for something stable. And yet our very way of trying to make meaning in the modern to postmodern world is unstable. Looking at works like those of Samuel Beckett, Eagleton describes 'the evaporation of stable meaning', but then goes on to look at literature, art, music, and other aspects of culture as well as philosophy to try to construct something back into existence. Love and Happiness, in the end, are key components to Eagleton's prescription for making an answer to the question of the meaning of life, and this is something that is done both individually and communally, in tension with each other. This book is a short one - the pages are small format (large index-card sized) and there are fewer than 200 pages at that, and thus the book could be read in one or two sittings quite easily. However, this is just to take in the text; for real analysis of the questions, one will want to ponder it for a longer time. Eagleton comments in a footnote that he saw a film entitled 'The Meaning of Life' (not the Monty Python one; however, he did see that one, too) at Salt Lake City, as a production by the Mormon Church, but noted that he only really remembered that the duration of the film was a mere four minutes long. In the world of philosophy texts, Eagleton's brief

text might be the literary equivalent of such a brief encounter with the question, and yet if one takes the time to ponder the question, one can realise that this is but one step along the way toward understanding life in the deepest way. This book will not have all the answers, but it can help one to formulate the questions.

school project. very good book

Indeed as the previous reviewer said, the book is witty. And, despite all the bad news this book recognizes Life is a miracle and a comedy. One has to know a bit about philosophy to understand it, but, just as I did when I read Professor Eagleton's memoir "The Gatekeeper", this was about the joy of life and the possibility of goodness even with all the very obvious suffering, pain and injustice. A very hopeful book. Debunks a lot of heavy lifting.

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