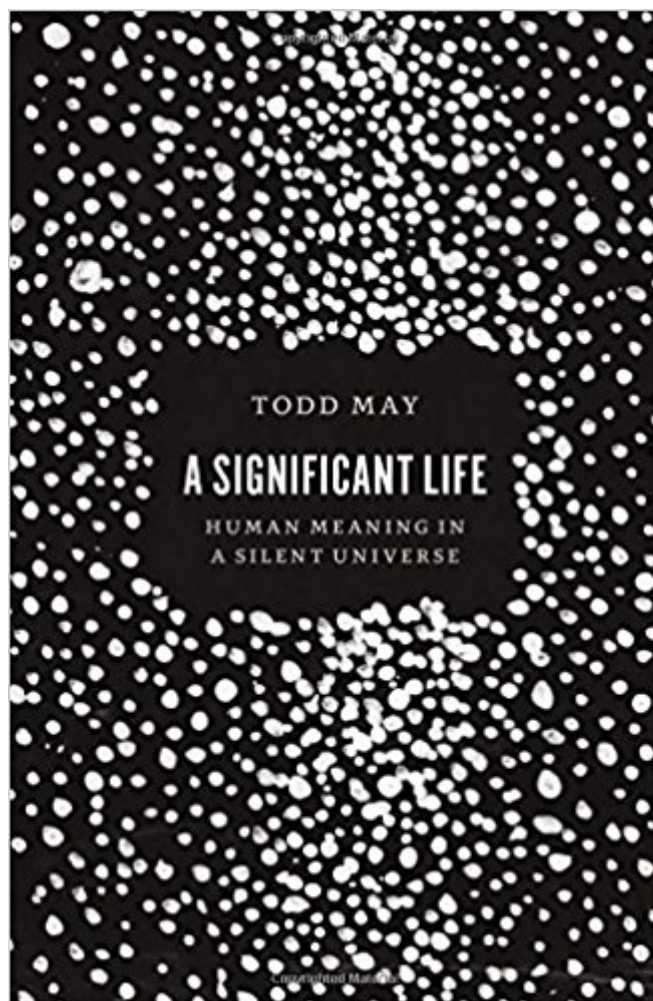


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A Significant Life: Human Meaning In A Silent Universe



Synopsis

What makes for a good life, or a beautiful one, or, perhaps most important, a meaningful one? Throughout history most of us have looked to our faith, our relationships, or our deeds for the answer. But in *A Significant Life*, philosopher Todd May offers an exhilarating new way of thinking about these questions, one deeply attuned to life as it actually is: a work in progress, a journey—and often a narrative. Offering moving accounts of his own life and memories alongside rich engagements with philosophers from Aristotle to Heidegger, he shows us where to find the significance of our lives: in the way we live them. May starts by looking at the fundamental fact that life unfolds over time, and as it does so, it begins to develop certain qualities, certain themes. Our lives can be marked by intensity, curiosity, perseverance, or many other qualities that become guiding narrative values. These values lend meanings to our lives that are distinct from—but also interact with—the universal values we are taught to cultivate, such as goodness or happiness. Offering a fascinating examination of a broad range of figures—from music icon Jimi Hendrix to civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer, from cyclist Lance Armstrong to *The Portrait of a Lady*'s Ralph Touchett to Claus von Stauffenberg, a German officer who tried to assassinate Hitler—May shows that narrative values offer a rich variety of criteria by which to assess a life, specific to each of us and yet widely available. They offer us a way of reading ourselves, who we are, and who we might like to be. Clearly and eloquently written, *A Significant Life* is a recognition and a comfort, a celebration of the deeply human narrative impulse by which we make—even if we don't realize it—meaning for ourselves. It offers a refreshing way to think of an age-old question, of quite simply, what makes a life worth living.

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Customer Reviews

“May’s book is a thoughtful, widely accessible, and comprehensive account of meaning in life. . . . As someone well acquainted with work on life’s meaning composed by professional philosophers, I have profited from reading May’s book, especially his discussion of what can confer (substantial) meaning on a person’s life. I especially recommend his work in virtue of it being a “good read”, avoiding technicalities and reflecting on everyday examples with insight. It would be ideal to assign for an upper-level undergraduate course or to share as a gift with reflective friends and family outside the academy.” • (Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews)

In *A Significant Life*, May has produced a tour de force. It is a thoughtful, subtle, beautifully written discussion of what it takes to live a meaningful life. A careful study of this book will tell you what it takes to make life worth living. It is refreshing to encounter someone worrying about such a big question in the small-minded times we live in, and an absolute joy to discover that he may actually have provided an answer.” • (Barry Schwartz, author of *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*)

In this eloquent and inspiring book, May argues that meaning in life is not given to us by God or the universe; nor is it, as the existentialists claimed, something we invent for ourselves. It is found instead in living in accordance with what he calls “narrative values,” which inform and structure our lives as wholes. May’s arguments are often illustrated with examples drawn from literature and his writing is frequently lyrical, though always accessible. The book does not claim to reveal the meaning of life. May is a seeker rather than a proselytizer. Indeed, it is in part because he is not content with simplistic certainties that he is able to offer such wise guidance in our efforts to understand how and why our lives matter.” • (Jeff McMahan, author of *The Values of Lives*)

Todd May is something of a legend, known for his lively, conversational style of discourse, and this book “on no less than the meaning of life” showcases all of his best features. It is engaging and clear, with vivid examples from literature and May’s own life. It addresses a topic of very broad interest, yet it does so in a philosophically sophisticated way. Despite Pierre Hadot’s claim that all ancient philosophy was about the meaning of life, there is surprisingly little engagement of the question by contemporary philosophers. May’s book fills this void marvelously.” • (Charles Guignon, author of *On Being Authentic*)

This is an engaging, beautifully written book that grabs the reader from the first page “something one cannot often say about a philosophy book. More important, May has given us a wise, humane reflection on one of the central

questions of philosophy—what makes for a meaningful life? While accessible to a broad audience, *A Significant Life* also makes a significant contribution to the scholarly literature. I highly recommend it. • (Daniel Haybron, author of *Happiness: A Very Short Introduction*)

Todd May is Class of 1941 Memorial Professor of the Humanities at Clemson University. He is the author of many books, including *Friendship in an Age of Economics*, *Contemporary Movements and the Thought of Jacques Rancière*, and *Death*.

Brilliant ideas. The author said sometimes he reads philosophy and wonders why he didn't think the thought himself. While his ideas open up a path for new thinking, he is right on, I do have a sense of what he proposes. He is clear in his writing, making his work something I can mull for a very long time.

May led me to think about life in ways I'd never considered. The meaning of life is not a question for many. May does not think Camus got it right. I do, but not in a negative sense. Camus and I are existentialists because there is nothing else in a godless world. Choose to enjoy life as best as you can. May could have better expressed his views by being less wordy and more precise.

Todd May tackles an important topic, but his run-on question-answer technique of exploring issues is confusing and frustrating. Well before I read the last chapter, I realized that the author really had very little to say to me. And then the last chapter reinforced my realization. May loved chewing on the ideas of meaning and happiness and goodness, but his conclusions were hardly satisfying.

I knew I wouldn't enjoy this book, having loved May's essay at the *NYTimes* Stone entitled "Against Invulnerablism". And when I read Mr. Hines's moving review of *A Significant Life*, I was initially sold. Hines's review was so vulnerable, honest, and moving that I needed to know who wrote it, and after a quick search learned that he was a pretty committed atheist thinker. As a person who finds Christianity appealing, I worried for a moment that perhaps May's book provided Mr. Hines with consolation that was intra-communal in nature and not as relevant to unlike minds. I can gladly report that I was wrong. May has provided as beautiful, clear, and compelling an account of meaning as any available. *A Significant Life* now numbers among the most valuable dozen or so books of my life, and it's the only one among them (just as a result of my natural tastes) written by an atheist. So, pick it up and read it.

Then, after you do so, if you're curious to bounce your response off of mine, read on below. But read *A Significant Life* first. I don't want to spoil any of the joy of discovery for anyone. With that said, spoilers (of the joy of discovery) ahead. The reason I'm inclined to like May is that I tend to agree that God doesn't settle the issue of meaning, even though I think God has a lot to offer (to put it mildly). If His existence settles the matter, then why do I, like May and many atheists (and certainly many theists), lie awake at night worried about meaning? Why do I fall into depression over long vacations when I'm not working or thinking or growing? Why do I try to stuff as much meaning into my life through learning instruments, playing sports, forming relationships, relishing in art and travel, and trying to grow as a professional, husband, and dad? If God settled the issue of meaning in the way many fellow theists claim, then I should be able to just put my life on cruise control and know that come what may, my life will have been meaningful. But as Paul Tillich explained in *The Courage to Be*, we are all haunted by three existential anxieties, one of which is the fear that we will make choices with our lives that will lead to an unfulfilling life. Will God actually say of everyone "You've lived meaningfully!"? If I spend my entire life eating Cheetos and playing *Skyrim*, will He applaud and shed a tear in pride? I don't think so. I can still live a meaningless life even if God exists and even if He'll redeem it somehow in the resurrection. What then, even if God does exist (and, as May notes, if I've gotten the correct God and the correct interpretation of what He truly values), would make my life meaningful? And here is where May shines. He presents the idea that narrative values are what make meaningful lives. By narrative values he means the qualities embodied through our lived lives that are desirable both to us and to others. He presents steadfastness as an example. Consider a parent who has throughout her life suffered through hardship without wavering in her commitment to living out a loving life for herself and others. The narrative value that many of us would see and approve of is her steadfastness. And it is this quality that largely constitutes meaning. (My only real disappointment was that May offered too few examples of narrative values. Being able to see that my life's meaning isn't about every single moment of my life but about the accumulation of acts that develop such a value is incredibly liberating for me. A boring day no longer has to feel like a haunting shadow of meaninglessness; it's but a normal lull in my life's meaningful long-term project. And one can better understand now how others we meet who are "successful" in worldly ways but rather uninspiring as persons are just so because they lack narrative values, or at least ones we can observe easily. But I would have loved to see a full list of possible narrative values for consideration. Certainly some would resonate with those prized by the Christian faith, and yet others

might be refreshingly valued in ways that people with theistic commitments might not see at least from the outset. These are the stained glass windows I most wanted to peer through after getting excited about their settings. But alas, they were missing save four of five exemplars, and the work is left to the reader to find the others.) May then splices the discussion into two other topics. Previous to the discussion of narrative values, he presents the most recent philosophical reflections on happiness and shows how one theory in particular seems to meld well with the way in which a person might subjectively feel engaged by such narrative values. The concept of this engagement, which is very similar to happiness, and the way in which narrative values take much from virtue ethics, leads the reader into a very rich picture of subjectively experienced meaning. But May doesn't think that this is satisfying enough. His attempt to move toward some type of objective meaning leads initially to the second topic, morality. Is morality tied to narrative values? Yes and no, May argues. In one sense, narrative values have an almost aesthetic quality that is somewhat independent of the morality of a lived life. His description reminded me of Norman MacLean's *A River Runs Through It* in which the (pastor) father reflects on loving his son who is at once beautiful and morally broken. May notes this ambivalence that we have toward people who have narrative values that are attractive but moral compasses that repulse or at least disappoint. There is a balance here in shades of colors, not black and white. It seems obvious that morality can invalidate the objective good of a narrative value. A very steadfast terrorist has not only invalidated steadfastness as a value, but his steadfastness has also tied him even more closely to the evil he perpetrates. All of this is very much in line with the idea from virtue ethics that some virtues require other morally robust ones (courage requires the goal of justice) in order to be admirable. But, and here's the key, a moral life alone doesn't make for a meaningful life. It might make for a good life, but meaning requires that the individual be engaged in narrative values on a subjective level. Imagine a morally good person who feels disengaged about every aspect of her entire life. Would that be a meaningful life? It doesn't seem so, even though it would obviously be preferable to that of a steadfast murderer. May notes that meaning is only one way among a few to measure the final value of a life and that the interplay between meaning and morality is complex. May's final chapter presents head-on his attempt to establish these narrative values as more than subjectively or culturally relativistic. He does as good a job as can be done. In brief, he notes that all knowledge is ultimately based on presuppositions that cannot be verified. Even scientific knowledge works within the web of a scientific worldview with its many unverifiable assumptions. (May turns the reader to the philosophy of science to discover these herself.) He presents a persuasive picture of how such coherentist

systems work in terms of providing some level of objective self-justification. Perhaps it was my own pre-conversion obsessions with Hendrix and Coltrane that welcomed me into May's world. Or maybe it was the shared, persistent hunger for meaning. Regardless of how I ultimately come to terms with *A Significant Life*, including the final chapter, (though as a fan of Alvin Plantinga and N.T. Wright there are diverse ways to enthusiastically affirm much of it), his writing is undeniably warm and personal. His question and answer format makes the book feel like a carefully constructed bridge, each plank leading directly to the next. No gaps. No holes. Little effort in the reader's steps. And his explanation of meaning, the grass on the other side of that bridge or rather the view from the bridge, is undoubtedly richer and more full of hope in terms of making sense of meaningfulness than any explanation I've ever come across.

This is philosophy through-and-through (not self-help). But I daresay this did more to lift the fog of existential nihilism for me than any other collection of ideas in a long time. While much of the book is given to following somewhat familiar lines of reasoning for and against sources of meaning, the real value here is in Todd May's solution to the problem of objective vs. subjective sources of meaning. I have always fallen into the trap of reasoning that, since I cannot fathom a source of objective meaning lingering somewhere out there in the universe, I must make do with whatever subjective choices of meaningfulness that I can muster (which I have always found terribly, painfully absent). However, Todd May shows a middle way. The argument goes that meaning arises at the intersection of subjective attraction (I value it) and objective attraction (???). The latter mysterious source of objective value is not some primordial set of preordained values imprinted on the universe, but the web of shared narrative values that we find ourselves enmeshed within our various cultures. It may sound like some sort of basic cultural moral relativism, but the values we're talking about aren't traditional moral values, they are narrative values. Narrative values are the values of the ways in which we live, and are not reducible to moral values (more on this in the book). This web of narrative values is ultimately fluid, but provides a relatively solid framework within which we operate as social beings. Anyhow, if this sounds compelling in the slightest or you're the kind of person that lives their life, however successfully, in existential ennui, do yourself a solid and read this book. For me it contained some significant steps toward relieving a life-long thorn in my side. In the meantime if you want to get a feel for his voice, you may want to read this:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/the-meaningfulness-of-lives/> or this:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/27/against-invulnerability/>

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