

*Understanding Human Conduct: The Innate and Acquired Meaning of Life* by Sam S. Rakover. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2021, 198 pages, \$99.97 hardcover.

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The author, Sam Rakover, comes from a background of research in psychology, in which he has a broad reputation in empirical experiments on animals (fear and avoidance learning) and humans (face perception and recognition). He has also a broad and deep background in the philosophy of science and mind, and he uses a psychological and methodological framework to analyze the difficult and complex issue of the meaning of life.

The subject of the meaning of life is relevant to every human being. Most literature dealing with these topics is philosophical, psychological, or religious. Rakover adds an empirical psychological framework to that topic and develops it in a new and exciting approach — the model of meaning. Many examples from these areas are presented and analyzed attractively and clearly.

The model has two types of meaning: innate (associated with sensory stimulations) and acquired. The latter splits into ordinary (social norms, values) and extreme (religion, ideologies). The empirical model is based on philosophical and psychological considerations, which aim to explain human behavior in various areas of life and during crises. Rakover tests that model in light of well-known phenomena, such as suicides and significant issues in our lives, that concur with the need to understand and decipher the meaning of life. The author does this in a careful and enlightening examination of the life histories of cultural giants: Leo Tolstoy and Paul Gauguin. Using the two narratives, the author profoundly analyses some philosophical considerations of the types of meaning and presents well-known existential approaches, such as Camus' and Sartre's.

The three types of life's meaning, inherent meaning, ordinary, and extreme acquired meaning, are based on the person as a conscious being. Consciousness is necessary to perceive and to understand the three types of meaning.

When unconscious, the individual does not sense and understand life's meaning. Being conscious is needed to experience life's meaning and understanding. Because one is constantly in one or another level of consciousness, the individual is unaware every second that she is endowed with a particular meaning in life. For example, the individual is in continuous sensory stimulation like vision. As a result of adaptation, she does not notice that what she sees is deeply connected to the experience of life, the meaning of "being alive."

Humans are born with the ability to perceive and experience sensory stimuli consciously. These sensory experiences bring about the basic meaning of life — the feeling of "being alive." This primary meaning, vitality, is induced by the consciousness of the sensory experience created through sensory stimuli, such as sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, trunk posture, orientation in space, pressure, heat, cold, pain, and pleasure (food, sex). These conscious sensations, therefore, are the innate and fundamental meanings of life — the feeling that the self is alive. Without consciousness, we cannot understand how people behave or what their purpose is.

For the cognitive system to confer meaningfulness and understanding of what the individual perceives, additional conditions must be fulfilled, such as the brain's normal functioning. However, as mentioned above, since a person is immersed all his life in one degree or another of conscious sensory experience, he does not notice that he is constantly in a state of the meaning of life. (For example, the individual does not always say to himself, "How wonderful it is to live.")

Although Rakover assumes that consciousness of sensory stimuli under normal conditions automatically engenders the meaning of being alive, this condition is limited to a specific range of sensory stimuli. Extreme changes in the degrees of conscious sensory experience may accompany changes in the degrees and quality of meanings, from pleasant and positive implications to unpleasant, unbearable, negative connotations.

Humans internalize ideas and thoughts, goals and intentions, values, and norms of behavior. These are abstract events on which consciousness confers a sense of meaning — an acquired meaning (ordinary or extreme). The ordinary acquired and extreme meanings are imparted to a person by the society to which the individual belongs. In most cases, the degree of ordinary life meaning is low, but meaning may become a tremendous and powerful sense. Following are several examples showing how acquired life meaning becomes extremely powerful. It might occur when abstract ideas become emotional over a long period (from childhood onwards), and especially when people undergo a process of imparting opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or worldviews in an intensive way, that is, when the individual experiences a process of spiritual strengthening, deep internalization of ideologies, or systematic indoctrination of political, social, or religious ideologies.

In times of crisis, acquired meaning, especially extreme meanings, such as religious belief and ideology, may disappear from a person's life. A person becomes

“sober” from creed or religion. However, the innate meaning is intact. It remains with the individual as the last line of defense against the ravages of life (except in the most extreme cases, such as hopeless illnesses). The individual can maintain their “basic,” given, innate meaning and pursue a new way of life.

When people lose their extreme life meaning, such as transitioning from religiosity to secularity and vice versa, they enter a life crisis, which may lead to thoughts about suicide. As a striking example, Rakover analyzes the life of Tolstoy.

In 1869, Tolstoy’s famous novel “War and Peace” was published; in 1877, his excellent book “Anna Karenina” was released. Tolstoy was at the height of his literary fame, and his family life and the management of his estate, Yesnaya Polyana, were also going well. But in 1882, Tolstoy attempted to publish his “Confession,” in which he wrote that he lost the meaning of life, and everything he had achieved seemed utterly worthless. (The Orthodox Church banned this book, but it was published in its entirety in Geneva in 1884 and in Russia in 1906.) So, what to live for? Tolstoy considered suicide! But he did not execute his intention, and after a candid discussion of the subject, he said that the consciousness of life was the main reason that prevented him from suicide. Rakover interpretes this as support for the hypothesis that when a person goes through a severe life crisis, the acquired meaning (ordinary or extreme) collapses. Still, the innate sense of life is not impaired, allowing one’s life to continue. The inherent meaning of life seems to be the last line of defense against self-destructive intentions.

The model proposed by Rakover does not specify what the desired meanings of life are, for example, the belief in God, the self-fulfillment of the individual, establishing a family, accumulating wealth, pursuing happiness, maintaining health, progressing toward fulfillment of a goal, the realization of a plan, the completion of every current moment of life, the pursuit of pleasures, the seclusion accompanied by reflections on self-discovery, immersing in social relations, and so on. The author does not recommend any particular way of life as having adequate meaning. He proposes a general template that can be filled and placed with different values and goals. Every culture and society provides its members with other purposes and meanings of life based on their origins or current cultural, social, political, economic, or military conditions. Additionally, the inherent and essential meaning is a general pattern restricted to sensory stimuli. Sensory stimuli such as sight and hearing evoke innate sensations that induce the person to feel alive.

Much of the meaning of life is innate, such as sensing the skin. The acquired meaning (ordinary or extreme) is not a person’s personal and exclusive creation but a meaning created by one’s social community, having various values, attitudes, views, and relationships.

In light of the above, Rakover’s model does not suggest that the meaning of things is objective and exists in them, like physical and chemical properties. To a large extent, the meaning is a subjective matter. If so, what is the difference between the current model and other personal approaches that assume that the

meaning of life depends on the belief and will of a person, on the fulfillment of the goals people have set for themselves, and on the achievements that seem to them to be of great importance? For example, according to Sartre, the individual determines the meaning of his life.

The present model of meaning asserts that, indeed, we do determine the meaning of life, but not in its entirety, as suggested by Sartre. First, not all the senses of life are subject to the choice of the person herself because a significant part of them is innate; that is, the sensory meaning of being alive is automatically given to us by nature. Secondly, the acquired meaning (ordinary or extreme) is not the product of the individual and is an exclusive creation of every person. A community creates the meaning, which is passed on to an individual, who learns it and internalizes it as her way of life.

In summary, Rakover proposed in his book a very original model of meaning based on two foundations: the innate and the acquired. On the one hand, the model is based on the inherent base (intrinsic meaning associated with conscious sensory stimulation) that developed evolutionarily and gave a person the most fundamental sense of life, "being alive." On the other hand, the model is based on learning, on the norms and values that the individual acquires from the society to which he belongs. Given this model of meaning, Rakover was able to explain a large number of behavioral phenomena, including life crises.

Finally, this book is a unique contribution to the meaning of life, and any discussion in this field of research and thought must refer to it. The book is illustrated with exciting and eye-catching case studies attractively presented. I was deeply impressed by his ideas. The book is highly recommended.