

# The University and *The Meaning of Life*

**Project 5** of the Epistemic Responsibilities  
of the University (ERU) Program

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Emanuel Rutten

# The project's aim

Elucidate how reflection on the existential question of *What is the meaning of life?* can be undertaken by both scholars and students at the university.

Can it be approached by purely scientific means, or is there a need for a more inclusive model of intellectual enquiry and deliberation?

# What I have been working on thus far

- Bentham famously argues that life is all about pleasure and pain. This is existentially too narrow though. What's central to life is *love* and *suffering*. I wrote about both.
  1. Essay: *De vraag naar het lijden*,
  2. Essay: *De amoureuze liefde: een innerlijke modale explicatie*,
  3. Public lectures on (1) and (2).
- In an article I develop a meta-rhetoric and show how rhetoric – if philosophically responsibly and not sophistically construed – can be used for (a) personal growth and (b) to engage students in deep questions such as that of the meaning of life.
  4. Article: *Het Retorische Weten*,
  5. Multiple public lectures on (4).
- In a paper I show that the deep question of the meaning of life can be effectively addressed at the university by engaging in worldview deliberation, how worldview deliberation can be cogently done, and how rhetoric and such deliberation relate.
  6. Paper: *Meaning of Life and Worldview Deliberation*,
  7. Multiple public lectures on (6).

## Fourth paper: *Meaning of Life and worldview deliberation* (excerpt)

Let **S** be a human being whose cognitive faculties are functioning properly and who entrusts (trusts, relies on, has confidence in, puts faith in) worldview **W** after a honest, careful, critical and thorough process of intellectual deliberation.

S deploys W to orientate in the world, and to interpret and guide her life.

Let **C** be the context of orientating in the world, and interpreting and guiding one's life.

## Fourth paper: *Meaning of Life and worldview deliberation* (cont.)

Consider the following **assertions** about S's entrust in worldview W:

- I. Within context C, it is *intellectually reasonable* for S to entrust W,
- II. Within context C, it is *intellectually rational* for S to entrust W,
- III. Within context C, S is *intellectually justified* to entrust W,
- IV. Within context C, S is within her *intellectual rights* to entrust W,
- V. Within context C, S's entrust in W is an *intellectually responsible entrust*,
- VI. Within context C, S's entrust in W is the result of *well-functioning intellectual faculties*,
- VII. Within context C, S's entrust in W is the result of *intellectually responsible conduct*.

## Fourth paper: *Meaning of Life and worldview deliberation* (cont.)

- Many philosophers claim that **I-VII** must be understood solely epistemically (i.e., concerned with the likelihood of truth). They maintain that I-VII entail that *within context C, S is epistemically entitled to hold that W is true.*
- In my paper I argue that this is misguided. Although I-VII surely have an epistemic component, there is also a non-epistemic (practical, existential) component involved.
- In particular, I argue that I-VII hold in all those cases in which S after a process of critical intellectual deliberation, selects W because it sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the following *ten criteria*:

## Fourth paper: *Meaning of Life and worldview deliberation* (cont.)

- a. W is consistent, coherent *and simple (epistemic)*,
- b. W has explanatory power and scope (*epistemic*),
- c. W is background-plausible and supported by evidence (*epistemic*),
- d. W is in line with our common sense and our intuitions (*epistemic*),
- e. W contributes to our self-understanding and our understanding of universal (moral, aesthetic, etc.) human experiences (*epistemic*),
- f. W is practically livable *and enables personal growth & self-realization (non-epistemic)*,
- g. W shows us how to practically live *and enhances one's quality of life (non-epistemic)*,
- h. W fulfills deep existential needs and longings (*non-epistemic*),
- i. W is able to inspire, motivate and inspirit (*non-epistemic*),
- j. W remains faithful to fundamental experiences and major events that deeply impacted and changed one's life (*non-epistemic*).

# Fourth paper: *Meaning of Life and worldview deliberation* (cont.)

The **argument** for this thesis goes as follows

1. A human being must orientate in the world, and interpret and guide his life in order to live his life. (*premise*)
2. A human being needs a worldview in order to orientate in the world, and to interpret and guide his life. (*premise*)
3. A human being can select only one worldview. (*premise*)
4. The primary goal of intellectually selecting a worldview for a human being is to orientate in the world, and to interpret and guide one's life. (*from 1, 2, 3*)
5. Selecting a worldview after **successful** critical intellectual deliberation, amounts to intellectually critically selecting a worldview that sufficiently serves the goal of being able to orientate in the world, and interpret and guide one's life. (*from 4*)
6. A worldview that sufficiently serves the goal of being able to orientate in the world, and interpret and guide one's life is one that sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the ten criteria. (*premise*)

## Fourth paper: *Meaning of Life and worldview deliberation* (cont.)

7. Selecting a worldview after **successful** critical intellectual deliberation, amounts to intellectually critically selecting a worldview that sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the ten criteria (*from 5, 6*)
8. If after a process of critical intellectual deliberation S selects a worldview because it sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the ten criteria, then S selected that worldview after **successful** critical intellectual deliberation (*from 7*)
9. An instance of **successful** critical intellectual deliberation is an instance of **I-VII**. (*premise*)
10. If after a process of critical intellectual deliberation S selects a worldview because it sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the ten criteria, then **I-VII** hold. (*from 8, 9*)

## Fourth paper: *Meaning of Life and worldview deliberation* (cont.)

- So S is intellectually justified to accept W. **But what about truth?** Would S also be intellectually entitled to maintain that W is true?
- On the presumption that truth is a pure epistemic notion, S is only entitled so in case W sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the *epistemic* criteria.
- But **what if** not just ‘intellectual justification’ (etc.) but even ‘truth’ itself is not always a pure epistemic notion?
  - There might be existentially loaded situations, such as S’s, in which we want to be able to speak legitimately of truth without having to suppose that all that is considered in such speak is purely epistemic.
  - In such cases truth is partly non-epistemic. Truth would have an epistemic part (for example: correspondence to the “plain”, “bare” or “raw” facts) and a non-epistemic part (that is not narrowly factual).
  - If such an broader or more inclusive account of truth can be developed, S might still be intellectually entitled to maintain that W is *true*, even though W does not sufficiently meet sufficiently many of the *epistemic* criteria.

# Next steps

- To enable cogent reflection on *the question of the meaning of life* I work out the model and criteria for intellectually responsible worldview deliberation (in context C) in much more detail.
  - Each worldview entails a specific answer to this indispensable question
- To enable such reflection *by students at the university*, I develop a concrete educational toolset for teaching them such deliberation.
  - Toolset can be used amongst others within course *Wijsgerige Vorming*
- Being able to cogently reflect on what is meaningful, significant and valuable to pursue in life is indispensable for personal growth and character formation.
  - Toolset thus enables universities to cultivate (intellectual) character formation in students