[Commentary] Re: Teleology and the Meaning of Life

Osamu Kiritani

Abstract

This paper amplifies my argument about the meaning of life, using ChatGPT not to be subjective or personal.

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In a previous paper "Teleology and the Meaning of Life" (hereafter, TML), I have argued that the meaning of life is survival and reproduction.[1] In this paper, I defend against possible counterarguments, using ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer). ChatGPT is used in order not to be subjective or personal.

A summary of TML can be given in the following way. According to the teleological notion of function in philosophy of biology, the function of an entity is what it is supposed to do. X is supposed to do F if and only if X's doing F contributed to Y's existence, which in turn contributed to X's existence. The heart is supposed to pump blood, since its pumping blood contributed to our survival, which in turn contributed to the heart's existence. On the other hand, the units of selection debate in philosophy of biology addresses which entity, an individual, group, or gene, benefits from natural selection. By appeal to the teleological notion of function, we can explain what individuals, groups, or genes are supposed to do. Genes are supposed to replicate, since their replication contributed to an individual's survival or reproduction, which in turn contributed to the replication of the gene. Groups are supposed to survive, since their survival contributed to the replication of a gene shared by the group, which in turn contributed to the survival of the group. Individuals are supposed to survive and reproduce, since their survival or reproduction contributed to the replication of a gene, which in turn contributed to their survival or reproduction. Thus, the meaning of life is survival and reproduction, while there is a conflict between the meaning of life and altruism.

Counterarguments against TML can be generated by ChatGPT, where my prompt was only "argue against".[2]

The argument presented by Osamu Kiritani for teleology and the meaning of life based on survival and reproduction faces several counterarguments. While the teleological notion of function in philosophy of biology provides a framework for understanding the purpose of various biological entities, it does not necessarily provide a satisfactory explanation for the meaning of life.

Firstly, defining the meaning of life solely in terms of survival and reproduction is overly reductionist. Human life, in particular, encompasses a wide range of experiences, emotions, relationships, and pursuits that cannot be adequately captured by a narrow focus on biological functions. Meaning and purpose are complex concepts that go beyond mere biological imperatives.

Secondly, the argument assumes that the units of selection in biology are individuals, groups, or genes, and that their purpose is determined by their contributions to survival and reproduction. However, the debate regarding units of selection is far from settled in philosophy of biology. There are alternative perspectives that emphasize the role of higher-level entities, such as ecosystems or cultural systems, and their evolutionary dynamics. These alternative perspectives challenge the notion that the meaning of life can be reduced to the individual or genetic level.

Furthermore, even if we accept the premise that survival and reproduction are central to the meaning of life, it does not follow that altruism is incompatible with that meaning. Altruistic behaviors, which involve acting in ways that benefit others at a cost to oneself, can be observed in various species and have been crucial for the evolution of social groups. Altruism can enhance the survival and reproduction of individuals indirectly by promoting cooperation, social cohesion, and reciprocal relationships. Therefore, the argument's suggestion of a conflict between the meaning of life and the purpose of altruism is unfounded.

Moreover, the argument neglects other dimensions of human existence that contribute to the overall sense of meaning and purpose. Humans have a capacity for self-reflection, the pursuit of knowledge, creativity, moral and ethical considerations, and the formation of meaningful relationships. These aspects of human life cannot be reduced solely to survival and reproduction but play significant roles in shaping individuals' understanding of meaning.

In conclusion, while the teleological notion of function in biology provides insights into the purpose of biological entities, it falls short as an explanation for the meaning of life. The meaning of life is a multifaceted and complex concept that cannot be reduced to simple biological imperatives. It requires a broader consideration of human experiences, relationships, and the pursuit of higher-order values and goals beyond survival and reproduction.

Defenses against these counterarguments can be generated by ChatGPT, where my prompt was only "argue against" again:

The argument presented by Osamu Kiritani for teleology and the meaning of life based on survival and

reproduction provides a compelling perspective that aligns with the principles of evolutionary biology. Here are counterarguments against the objections raised:

1. *Reductionism: While it is true that human life encompasses a wide range of experiences, reducing the meaning of life to survival and reproduction does not necessarily imply a complete dismissal of other aspects. Survival and reproduction are fundamental biological processes that underpin the continuation of life itself. By highlighting these processes as central to the meaning of life, Kiritani does not exclude the significance of other dimensions of human existence. Rather, he establishes a foundational basis that complements and interacts with other aspects of human experience.*

2. *Units of selection: The objection argues that the debate regarding units of selection in biology is unsettled. While it is true that the debate continues, the argument put forth by Kiritani is not dependent on a definitive resolution of this issue. The primary focus is on the notion that different entities (individuals, groups, or genes) can have a teleological purpose in the context of survival and reproduction. This perspective remains relevant regardless of which entity is ultimately considered the primary unit of selection.*

3. *Altruism: The objection asserts that altruism is not incompatible with the meaning of life based on survival and reproduction. This is partially true, as altruistic behaviors can indirectly contribute to an individual's fitness by promoting cooperation and reciprocal relationships. However, Kiritani's argument does not discount the existence or importance of altruism. Rather, it explains altruism as a mechanism that contributes to the survival and reproduction of individuals through the replication of shared genes or the survival of groups. Altruism, in this framework, aligns with the ultimate goal of survival and reproduction, supporting the overall meaning of life.*

4. *Broader dimensions of human existence: The objection suggests that the meaning of life should encompass other aspects beyond survival and reproduction, such as self-reflection, knowledge pursuit, and meaningful relationships. Kiritani's argument does not exclude or diminish the significance of these dimensions. Instead, it provides a foundational framework upon which these additional aspects can be built. Survival and reproduction provide the necessary conditions for the pursuit of knowledge, self-reflection, and the formation of meaningful relationships, as they ensure the continuity and existence of individuals and their social structures.*

In summary, the objections raised against Kiritani's argument do not undermine its validity. The teleological notion of function in biology, specifically in relation to survival and reproduction, provides a solid foundation for understanding the meaning of life. It acknowledges the multifaceted nature of human existence while emphasizing the essential role that survival and reproduction play in shaping the purpose and trajectory of living organisms.

I agree with these defenses, but can we say that these are mine? The responses from ChatGPT above are cited without any amendments. Then should we say that these are arguments by ChatGPT or, otherwise, collaborations between ChatGPT and me? I do not have a definite answer, but this indeterminacy helps not to be subjective or personal.[3]

Footnotes

[1] Kiritani, O. (2012). Teleology and the meaning of life.*Journal of Mind and Behavior*, *33*, 97-102.

[2] I made the prompt as simple as possible so as not to bias ChatGPT. The entire text of TML was inputted from the title to the references.

[3] ChatGPT does not have a definite answer, either. The following are some responses from ChatGPT to the entire text above:

1. The responses generated by ChatGPT in your paper can be seen as collaborations between you and the AI model. While ChatGPT provided the responses based on your prompts, you ultimately decided to use and present them in your paper. Therefore, it would be accurate to describe these arguments as a collaborative effort between you and ChatGPT.

2. The responses provided by ChatGPT are generated by the AI model itself based on the prompts you provided. While you may have prompted the AI to generate counterarguments and defenses, these responses are ultimately generated by the AI, not you. Therefore, it would be more accurate to attribute them to ChatGPT rather than claiming them as your arguments or a collaboration between you and ChatGPT.

3. The responses generated by ChatGPT in your provided text are not solely yours, nor can they be considered as collaborations between ChatGPT and you. Instead, they are generated by ChatGPT based on the prompts you provided. ChatGPT generates text based on patterns in the data it was trained on, and it does not possess personal opinions or engage in true collaboration.