

NOTES FOR UNIT I
HUMAN LIFE AS A QUEST FOR MEANING
Dr. John D. Jones, Phil 050, Philosophy of Human Nature

1. Human existence is an issue for us; it is a matter of concern and a project to be realized. As free, our lives are not simply pre-fabricated nor the product of natural, biological and social forces completely beyond our control.
2. We confront our lives as an ongoing process of formulating and realizing various plans of action in order to 'live well' and 'live meaningfully.'
3. Our lives are a quest for meaning; i.e., an ongoing attempt in action and thought at trying to make sense out of our lives, of "getting-it-together"—of fashioning and discerning a wholeness, integrity and completeness to our lives.
4. This quest for meaning and well-being is worked out concurrently in two dimensions:
 - a. existential (choice/action): we fashion our lives and are, within limits, both individually and socially the authors of our existence. We seek to realize those possibilities which we believe are conducive to and constitutive of meaning and well-being.
 - b. comprehension: we exist as "knowers"—aware of ourselves as existing in the world. Thus we apprehend ourselves, others, and the world around us in perception, reason, imagination, moods etc. We continuously develop images, ideas, judgments, stories, theories, etc. to articulate the meaning of our world and ourselves.
5. Asking questions is central to our efforts at making sense out of our lives. Questions always reflect a lack of knowledge on our part. We don't bother to raise questions about what we know or, at least, think that we know. When we ask questions, we must always determine the appropriate way(s) to answer the question. We must answer the question "Whether it is legal for 18 year olds in WI to buy beer?" differently from the question "Whether voters believe that 18 year olds in WI should be able to buy beer?" A survey of some sort would be appropriate for the latter but not the former question. The manner in which we would answer the first question in the US, where all laws must be in written form, differs from the manner we would use to answer the question in England where there is an unwritten common law.
6. Methods are simply routinized ways of answering questions. Different sorts of questions require different sorts of methods. Various methods will work for some sorts of questions but not all. We can't use the scientific method to determine whether God exists if God is not a material or physical being. As we will see in discussing the *Apology*, Plato and Socrates thought there was a very significant difference between the questions and/or methods of philosophers and the questions and/or methods employed by various poets and others in Greece.
7. Crucial to human existence is the fashioning of a world-view—some understanding of the character of the world and the human place in it. For, we cannot make sense out of our lives without referring to the spiritual, social, historical, cultural and other dimensions of our existence. We cannot make sense out of human existence apart from the world and cosmos in which *we* find ourselves.
8. We all have *a* world-view. In many cases peoples' world-view are unarticulated and comprise an uncritical, taken-for-granted acceptance of the world-view of their society.

9. World-views are not correct simply because people, individually or collectively, believe them to be true. Part of the process of intellectual growth and maturity is to examine our *lives*—as Socrates said: “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Within the West, philosophy has played a crucial role in this process of examining our lives. This process includes:
- a. becoming aware of, articulating and assessing the adequacy of our world-view;
 - b. understanding the essentially social character of human world-views and how such world views are connected with the life of a society and its culture. In particular, we need to become aware of the ideological character of world views or their relation to the struggles of conflict and domination within society and culture; and
 - c. coming explicitly to grips with what we perceive as threatening meaningful human lives: threats such as evil, brokenness and tragedy. In particular we need to become aware of how we evade and deny these factors and how, individually and collectively, we stigmatize and denigrate others, groups of people and even aspects of ourselves because they are taken to represent such threatening or death-dealing factors, e.g., as in racism or in hatred of our bodies.