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| Candidate session number              |     |      |      |
| Candidate name                        |     |      |      |
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| School name                           |     |      |      |
| Examination session (May or November) | MAY | Year | 2013 |

Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: Philosophy  
(For an extended essay in the area of languages, state the language and whether it is group 1 or group 2.)

Title of the extended essay: A COMPARISON BETWEEN ARISTOTELIANISM AND NIHILISM AS VIEWS ON THE MEANING OF LIFE

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**Candidate's declaration**

*This declaration must be signed by the candidate; otherwise a grade may not be issued.*

The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).

I have acknowledged each use of the words, graphics or ideas of another person, whether written, oral or visual.

I am aware that the word limit for all extended essays is 4000 words and that examiners are not required to read beyond this limit.

This is the final version of my extended essay.

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## Supervisor's report and declaration

*The supervisor must complete this report, sign the declaration and then give the final version of the extended essay, with this cover attached, to the Diploma Programme coordinator.*

Name of supervisor (CAPITAL letters)

*Please comment, as appropriate, on the candidate's performance, the context in which the candidate undertook the research for the extended essay, any difficulties encountered and how these were overcome (see page 13 of the extended essay guide). The concluding interview (viva voce) may provide useful information. These comments can help the examiner award a level for criterion K (holistic judgment). Do not comment on any adverse personal circumstances that may have affected the candidate. If the amount of time spent with the candidate was zero, you must explain this, in particular how it was then possible to authenticate the essay as the candidate's own work. You may attach an additional sheet if there is insufficient space here.*

's comparison of two views on the meaning of life allowed him to explore an area of Philosophy which we had not studied in depth; additionally it enabled him to deepen his awareness of Aristotelian ethics and metaphysics and explore Nihilism as a new perspective. His personal interest for the topic sustained his motivation and spurred him to read widely as part of the research process. He has managed to follow the general structure and general format of an Extended Essay, with some exposition and engagement with his chosen perspectives, although he also could have made some more minor amendments to his referencing, as advised. It is unfortunate that he ran out of time towards the deadline to enable him to develop his analysis and evaluation of each perspective. He also could have made some refinements to ensure his closing thesis was developed through the progression of the essay, as a more evident thread of enquiry. Overall however he showed enthusiasm in researching this piece and demonstrated independent thinking.

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I have read the final version of the extended essay that will be submitted to the examiner.

To the best of my knowledge, the extended essay is the authentic work of the candidate.

I spent  hours with the candidate discussing the progress of the extended essay.

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**Assessment form (for examiner use only)**

| Criteria                      | Achievement level |         |            |         |            |  |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|---------|------------|---------|------------|--|
|                               | Examiner 1        | maximum | Examiner 2 | maximum | Examiner 3 |  |
| A research question           | 2                 | 2       |            | 2       |            |  |
| B introduction                | 1                 | 2       |            | 2       |            |  |
| C investigation               | 2                 | 4       |            | 4       |            |  |
| D knowledge and understanding | 2                 | 4       |            | 4       |            |  |
| E reasoned argument           | 2                 | 4       |            | 4       |            |  |
| F analysis and evaluation     | 2                 | 4       |            | 4       |            |  |
| G use of subject language     | 2                 | 4       |            | 4       |            |  |
| H conclusion                  | 1                 | 2       |            | 2       |            |  |
| I formal presentation         | 1                 | 4       |            | 4       |            |  |
| J abstract                    | 1                 | 2       |            | 2       |            |  |
| K holistic judgment           | 2                 | 4       |            | 4       |            |  |
| Total out of 36               | 18                |         |            |         |            |  |

A Comparison between Aristotle's view and Nihilism as views of the meaning of life.

Philosophy IB Extended Essay

Name:  
Candidate Number:  
Centre Number:  
Subject: Philosophy  
Word Count: 3.693  
Date: 25th June 2012  
Session Number: May 2013

## Abstract

My research question, a comparison between Aristotle's view and nihilism as views of the meaning of life, presents itself as a very complex discussion, because many different approaches on the meaning of life exist, but in this essay I concentrate on analyzing Aristotelianism, whose objective theory is all about developing a good character and leading a good life, and Nihilism which says that life cannot possibly have any meaning. For example Schopenhauer justified this because all our choices and actions are guided from the Will to life. The implications of the answer are great, how we approach the world and other people. Is the premise from which the nihilist starts right? In other words ought we to look at the world from outside and look for a grander meaning for humanity, a pre-determined meaning that cannot possibly exist because of God's death? Also against Aristotle, does it necessarily mean that by leading a good life, having developed the right virtues which somehow we have chosen, we will lead a meaningful, happy life which satisfies us?

I think that the answer lies, like Aristotle says in finding the golden mean, but not between which virtues to develop, rather between Schopenhauer's will of life, between the desires of the body, between following our human condition of forever striving and to be contented with what we have at times, to make the suffering bearable. Having read the basic claims and premises from several approaches I settled on this two for they were quite contrasting, an objective view and one which stated that no objective purpose or meaning could be found in humanity. This is one of the main reasons for choosing these two options, for in a discussion where the premises are the fundamental part, and the conclusion comes from these, it is hard to find two different approaches which start from the same premises. Also as it is very important for such a complex discussion, I have considered how to interpret the question and the various ways in which it is possible to do so: is Why are here? The right interpretation of the question the meaning of life and a right summary of the meaning of life?

Word count: 297 words

## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction.....                      | p4  |
| The meaning of the meaning.....        | p4  |
| Aristotle's view.....                  | p6  |
| An evaluation on Aristotle's view..... | p7  |
| Nihilism.....                          | p8  |
| An evaluation on Nihilism.....         | p9  |
| Conclusion.....                        | p10 |
| Bibliography.....                      | p11 |

## Introduction

What the meaning of life is has been discussed since the beginning of philosophy itself. How did humans, animals or even the abiotic environment appear on earth, what is their purpose and such other interpretations of the main question of life's meaning, have been discussed by every philosopher, if not directly on the topic, but indirectly, by taking the philosopher's words and not making any assumptions or add anything to his words we can clearly derive his idea for human purpose and the meaning of life. The discussion of the meaning of life has recently fallen into its own category, analytical philosophy. This is a very complex and rather new branch in philosophy which studies the words we use and how we construct questions and arguments rather than theories in themselves. For the meaning of life it concentrates on what do we mean with the word purpose or how can we start our search for the answer, should we look at our past, at our origins? Or simply on our individual lives? Or analyze successful people's lives? This resembles a lot the difference between ethics and meta-ethics and the difference between the two is of the same kind as the one I am talking about. The topic of life's meaning relates to many other discussions in philosophy like for example human nature, human condition or ethics. This meaning that the answer which one might reach after such an arduous investigation, there being any, will greatly influence our view on the world, the way we see other people the way we build our relations with others, how we use other people, are they means to our ends or the ends in themselves? And many other areas of our daily life as well, like whether to accumulate wealth and work as hard as one possibly can or to enjoy life and live it as if it was the only one. Only recently the method and the kind of answer required from such a complex question has shifted, and if before philosophers tried to come up with their own answer to the meaning of life, the new answer must now be one which encompasses many other areas of philosophy and answers many other questions and discussions. A meaning of life which starts from a research in the other areas of human life which will then give the premises for our logical reasoning, much like the work of Schopenhauer.

## The meaning of meaning

Many have probably heard the sarcastic answer that the meaning of life is 42. However what does this mean? This joke derives from the fictional story where a race of beings, decide to build a super computer to provide them the answer to the meaning of life, and Deep Thought after 7 and an half million years he answers the question what is the meaning of life, he says it's 42. The problem here is in the question rather than in the answer for some fault of the computer, it is not precise enough and can be misinterpreted so if they now know the answer they do not know what the answer refers to<sup>3</sup>. This is an example of the importance of the meaning of the words in the question in itself and

teaches not to look for an answer blindly, it is the proof, in other words for the importance of analytical philosophy.

In general what people mean when they wonder on the meaning of life they look for something which is a property of life, desirable in itself and that would make our existence worth living. This must not necessarily be true; however couldn't our life have a meaning for our afterlife? Or maybe for our children? Is our life a mean to an end or an end in itself?

Lately the discussion has been a lot about the possible differences that considering an individual on his own or a group or humanity itself could bring to the meaning of life. Many think that depending on how a life is chosen to be lived by its bearer the life can be considered meaningful or meaningless. This is a very existentialist approach and what we call a subjective meaning, every person finds his own meaning and chooses for himself the kind of life he wants to lead. This however doesn't necessarily imply that one or one's life must be superior to another, seeing it for example from a consequentialist point of view, only for the fact that one has the capacities to lead a meaningful life, then he must be considered equal to everyone else<sup>2</sup>.

The categories in which the question is divided today are many; first we have three main ideas: supernaturalism, which believes that our purpose or meaning doesn't have to be found in this present life or on this planet but it could well be present in an afterlife. It then follows the naturalist objection, which has a premise that humanity has come about through evolution and nature in particular and no divine figure exists, therefore the meaning of our life must be found in our present life and not in someone else's, this meaning can be one we assign ourselves, which is a great faculty of the human race. Then a different approach has developed from the same premise, nihilism. The latter believes that we cannot find a purpose in our life nor in an afterlife as "God is dead" meaning that we actually come from evolution and we are not the creation of superior being, however because of this and the fact that the probabilities of life developing are negligible, our present life can have no possible predetermined meaning.



## Aristotle's view

In order to understand the groundwork of Aristotle's theory, we must first understand Plato his teacher whom as well concerned himself a lot with the meaning of life for humans.

Aristotle was a student of Plato and we can see many similarities in their theories and ways of thinking, however whilst we can categorize the Platonist view on the meaning of life as a supernatural theory, as it tells us we have to find our meaning of life, not in our world but in a different realm, that of the forms, we cannot say the same of Aristotle's, which is a purely objective and naturalist theory.

Aristotle started to criticize and find problems with his master's answer in his adulthood. The problem which led him to reconsider the whole theory was that Aristotle believed that such a purpose, as that of the meaning of life, must be found in our own life and must be achievable in our living time and not in someone else's, nor in a life after this, for this would mean that the purpose is for that life rather than this one. Aristotle agreed with Plato in thinking about the forms of the objects; however he believed that these were to be found in our world. Aristotle explains everything, every object, in terms of his four causes: the formal cause which is made up of the characteristics of an object, the material cause, which is only the material out of which an object is made up, the efficient cause which is nothing but the agent which brings the change of the object and the final cause, the purpose of the change. Aristotle thought that to understand something is to gain knowledge of all of its forms. Because of this he then thought stupid to think of another realm or a life after death, he then considered about the nature of the soul, and whether it exists, he concluded that to say something has a soul is simply to state that it is alive. It follows then the soul is just a characteristic of human nature, the formal cause and that it cannot exist outside or beyond of the body.

Aristotle then started to think about what the purpose of our life might be which would be nothing but the final cause. He thinks that our meaning must be an attainable good in our life, a higher end and that this must be happiness as it is something that we try to achieve even when doing something else. The answer is happiness, he concludes. Happiness is the attainable good which justifies our existence and gives sense to our lives. Aristotle however doesn't mean happiness in the sense of pleasure or enjoyment. Aristotle thinks that to achieve this people will have to live virtuous lives as good people are generally happy. To do this we have to develop the right virtues, which are nothing but the golden mean, between lack of something or exaggeration. To find this golden mean between virtues we will use our reasoning ability, that which makes us different from all other creatures on the earth and that which he believed must have a great role to play in our lives meaning for otherwise the belief of the existence of an objective meaning, specific only to humans could not have been justified. To decide which virtues to develop is important and so it's the golden mean, for

take the example of courage, when there is little of it, we have cowardice, when there is too much is rashness, whilst the other two are not virtues courage is and it is the only one worthy of learning. Also an important point is the fact that the virtues for Aristotle are developed through use. The more one acts bravely then the more courage he has. When one has developed a good set of virtues the person has flourished, this is what he defines as eudamonia, the enlightenment of humans, the real meaning for each single individual but also of humanity as a whole. .

#### An evaluation of Aristotle's view

One criticism of Aristotelianism is that there is a difference when we ask someone whether their life is a happy life and whether their life is meaningful, so that this means that happiness could be a necessary condition but not a sufficient one for our meaning of life. However Aristotle would respond that we are not talking about happiness, but rather of people's development and self-fulfillment which he referred to eudamonia. Another criticism is that virtue ethics doesn't provide us with precise ideas and in fact one might ask how does one know which virtues to develop or what is the golden mean? However Aristotle says that through the use of our intelligence we can discover that is this however precise enough to work for people? A problem with Aristotle's theory is that he bases his theory on the premise: good people are generally happy people, however this must not necessarily be true, this is an assumption he himself makes after looking around his small restricted society. I could in equal rightness state that poor people are happier and satisfied with their life than good people, but we have no way to check since neither argument is supported with reasoning.

One more argument against Aristotle is brought about by the self-discussion. A person changes and develops a lot through his life, both physically and mentally, so regardless of where we think the core of our being is, it is undeniable that it can never be the same when we are children and later when we become old people. Aristotle claims that matter is continuously changing and therefore he cannot possibly deny that people change as well. If one were to see a young child and then see him again forty or fifty years later, he couldn't possibly recognize him for the changes that happened between those times. We say the person has changed and he is a completely different person. However when has this happened? This is the problem of personal continuity. We cannot put our fingers on one particular period in time and say here the person is not the same anymore, for the change is constant and gradual. Does this mean that the person changes every day? We can surely say yes, that this is the case, therefore when we do something thinking it will pay off in the future, are we doing that for a different person? It seems so, how can we then justify on this terms the fact that we have a purpose in this life, if it might be only one day long? How can we say that if today I

will use my reasoning to start developing my virtues, which will bring me to lead a happy life in the future, all of this is for me and not for someone else? Why begin a long path of self-development if we know that we are not going to enjoy the benefits of it?

## Nihilism

If we start from a naturalist point of view on the answer to the question “Why are we here?” one of the various interpretations, of the question what is the meaning of life, following Baggini’s reasoning<sup>1</sup> we have two possible theories and approaches, one is the positive and pro-active, existentialism, the second is more pessimistic and fatalist, nihilism. To reach the nihilist conclusion, however argues Baggini we have to think that a meaning must be given to something during its designing, and therefore that a predetermined meaning is worth more than an assigned purpose. From Nagel’s point of view, we enter nihilism if we try and look at the greater scheme of humanity and even the patterns of the world itself, and find no meaning, and then we enter into nihilism where life seems without purpose. One example of a Nihilist philosopher, who defined himself thus, very known, very pessimistic, antisocial and egocentric but extremely brilliant is Schopenhauer. He was so ambitious that not only did he want to answer questions on the meaning of life, ethics and human nature, but he attempted what for many people is an entire system of philosophy. What Schopenhauer claims on the human condition is no pessimistic and negative that he goes as far as saying that not existence would be preferable to life. Like in Buddhism, he thinks life is suffering and that suffering is positive, it is something we feel whilst happiness or satisfaction is simply an absence of suffering, an absence of striving and willing and only leads to boredom. However he does not simply say life is negative because it’s full of suffering, but justifies his idea with reasoning. He affirms that the human condition itself makes humans individuals who always are striving and trying to achieve something. However this means that we are always lacking something, for to will something, that something must be missing to us and that in the first place is suffering. More suffering, as obvious, comes from not achieving what we aspire to for one we will still be lacking something and moreover we will have the notion of failing. Do not however think that achieving what we want would change anything for because of human condition we will start to wish for something else immediately and the circle will recommence.

Also Schopenhauer is a supporter of the Darwinist idea that in nature (including human life) everything must struggle against something else for their existence. This helps him support his pessimistic view of the world. This has implications for his theory as well, from his idealist point of view every animal or plant, or living organism, must eat and kill someone else to secure a place for

its own existence. He joins all of this and concludes that there is a kind of force behind the workings of the world which is what controls all actions and that he calls the Will. The will to life is what makes humans act on and for their own selfish accord and limit their knowledge and wisdom. Schopenhauer also believes that there is hope, like in Buddhism for Nirvana, one can escape the will to life either by extreme suffering or by a leading a saintly life, renouncing all of his desires. In both case they will lead to self-negation and disinterest about themselves.

### An evaluation on Nihilism

The first criticism of Nihilism, is directed to one its premises, the assumption that a predetermined meaning is worth more than one which we assign ourselves, or the fact that some creator, or the one responsible for our own existence, must assign us one. Let's take the example of someone crafting a robot, or cloning a human being if you prefer, for the sole purpose of taking care of the house, by cleaning it, doing the washing and cooking for the rest of the family. Such a creature would have a predetermined meaning, but would it not be better if it could assign himself a meaning, or maybe multiple meanings? What difference would it make to the worth of the meaning itself and yet it would do all the difference to the subject itself<sup>1</sup>. Also a criticism which follows from Nagel's description of how he thinks nihilism is reached as conclusion, is why we should look at the world from outside, or at humanity, the problem is that we cannot do something similar for we are not self-sufficient individuals and we are implanted in our society, so it is only normal if taken individually we can find no meaning, for us ourselves are not individual. We are radically situated in our world many philosophers argue and we mean nothing outside from our society, our ability to co-operate to construct and invent unimaginable things, is the strength of our race. Even the development of a child, is argued is influenced from where he grows up, therefore one cannot be taken out of his context, for this shapes us in every way. Also Schopenhauer's theory has its foundations in the fact that animals, including human beings, are selfish individuals whose lives are centered in killing others for their own survival; however is it like this for humanity still? I think it is possible to say that we have many examples present in our every day's lives and today's society where people act out of pure altruism. Aren't our cities and the world we build an example of our co-operation and of our working together to achieve some greater end? This is the pure evidence against Schopenhauer that human being can co-exist and live altruistically together in big communities, and globalization is the proof that things will tend to better themselves. Does this not discredit then the reasoning of his theory? Another problem with Schopenhauer, is not incoherent for him to be both an idealist and a materialist? If one states that everything is matter and experienceable in life, isn't then incoherent to say that nothing exists, that nothing is made up of simply matter, but they are just experiences and functions of the mind?

## Conclusion

Having examined these two very contrasting views on the meaning of life, my own conclusion is somewhere in between, not only of these two but also of existentialism which I have named briefly in the subheading "the meaning of meaning". What the meaning of life is, I concluded, and what all people should accept simply for the extremely positive consequences. For example proactivity which would lead people to take their lives in their own hands, this is the foundation of existentialism. All the power of leading a good life and be contented with it, is in our own individual hands. One is always confronted with different choices in life, and he and only he can know what the right choice is for him, only he has the weapons and the knowledge about his preferences to always choose right. Every single and little choice in our lives will lead us one way or another. Yes it is very hard to accept, a lot of courage is needed, and this is an important implication, people could live in bad faith and not look for their own goals, to accept that we haven't got the possibility of giving all the consequences and the guilt of our actions on someone else, but this opens a new mentality, one where people will have more faith in themselves and where their will is everything, one where really by changing one own way of thinking can change his world, and one where everyone chooses the life he enjoys the most. Yes life presents itself to us full of obstacles and of people competing against you, but to the first we have now got the possibility of jumping over it and to the second we can only continue to treat people the best we can and in return they will respond positively. Yes maybe humans are in the natural state egoistic and selfish creatures, whose life is short, nasty and brutish<sup>4</sup> however we do not live in a state of nature anymore and we evolved, every day we see people acting on their own emotions and these can be tipped one way or the other by our own actions. Yes, like Schopenhauer says life is full of suffering, for our desiring something and not achieving it leads to our suffering and the human condition is all about always striving for more, but it his conclusion doesn't necessarily follow, something more optimistic like Buddhism can develop from a life of suffering where people will be allowed to escape such an existence. Also to live an happy and contented life we don't have to renounce completely to desires and the will, but the occasional limit which we impose on ourselves is enough to stop our striving nature and to be contented with what we have for some time, to buy time with the arts before the will becomes unbearable again, give in to our desires and then start the cycle again, to do this one must not be a saint. This implies that our reasoning abilities should be dedicated, like Aristotle says in finding that in between, that golden mean, however not between which virtues to develop. Once we have accepted this new view on the human condition, we can see how the real, important golden mean is between setting goals and achieving them and be contented with what one has.

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