

[Open Peer Review on Qeios](#)

Re: Teleology and the Meaning of Life

Osamu Kiritani¹

¹ Tokyo Women's Medical University

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Abstract

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

Osamu Kiritani

Clinical and Academic Research Promotion Center, Tokyo Women's Medical University, 8-1 Kawada-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 162-8666, Japan. Email: osamu.kiritani@gmail.com

I

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 will 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

||

In this section, I will respond to the reviews of the arguments above, using ChatGPT again!⁴

Reinhardt

Thomas Reinhardt gives the following review.⁵

I appreciate the idea of co-writing a piece with chatGTP. The thought of having an AI comment on one's ideas is quite original and promising. However, then just using chatGTPs responses to a prompt without further commentary or contextualization does not seem to be of overwhelming scholarly value to me. In order to be published, the text needs a thorough revision addressing the chances and shortcomings of stochastic commentaries on texts.

The following are responses from ChatGPT, which I agree with:

From a stochastic standpoint, one could argue that the counterarguments against the teleological view, presented by ChatGPT, introduce an element of variability into the discourse. The responses from the AI model, while based on the input provided, showcase the diversity of potential objections and alternative viewpoints that may arise in philosophical debates.

Furthermore, the collaboration between the author and ChatGPT introduces an element of randomness in the defense against counterarguments. The AI model generates responses that align with the author's input, yet the specific language and emphasis in each defense may vary, introducing a stochastic element into the collaborative process.

The indeterminacy mentioned by the author regarding the origin of the arguments could be seen as a stochastic feature. The uncertainty about whether the responses should be attributed solely to ChatGPT, the author, or considered a collaborative effort reflects the unpredictable nature of AI-human interactions in intellectual endeavors.

Longo

Giuseppe Longo gives the following review.⁶

*A very interesting exercise that shows the encyclopedic knowledge by ChatGPT. It is an excellent summary of what has been said by various people and schools of thought about the issue of Teleology. My congratulations to the computer scientists that invented these remarkable tools for exploring immense data bases of human knowledge. Not a remark in the text is new, all read somewhere and... consistently put together – the phrasing does not engender formal contradictions. I do not know if, now, these “already written observations” are now taken for a fixed and rarely update data base, as it used to be at beginning. If they are taken from the web, it is possible that if one asks **exactly the same question**, after some time the answer may change. In the early experiences of*

*ChatGPT, the inventors used a fixed data base and, as observed in a famous paper by Wolfram, they added some randomness (the thermal fluctuation, some quantum randomness or other from the web...) so that the machine was "pretending to be creative". As a matter of fact, these Discrete State Machines (DSM), if isolated, iterate identically: take the best computer's simulation of the wildest turbulence, a hurricane... of any chaotic non linear system and... push restart. The DSM iterates identically the dynamics, which has no physical sense. Similarly, ChatGPT answers by the same identical sequences of **letters** if asked the same identical question, if the data base does not change (by human intervention, on the web, say). Animal brains never iterate identically and it is very hard for us to learn by hearth exactly... a poem, or whatever. ChatGPT makes a statistical combinatorics of existing phrases and chooses following optimality conditions, fantastic! It kills human invention, which is "the imagination of non-existing configurations of sense" – like, many hundred thousands years ago, we humans interpolated the stars and gave names to the constellations, from Gods and ancestors that do not exist... More on this in*

https://www.di.ens.fr/users/longo/files/Couv_Table-introLeCauchemarPromethee.pdf

and, more technical, on randomness in: <https://www.di.ens.fr/users/longo/files/CaludeLongoRandom.pdf>

The following are responses from ChatGPT, which I agree with:

- 1. Lack of Originality: The criticism that ChatGPT lacks originality because it relies on existing knowledge is somewhat missing the point. ChatGPT is designed as a language model, and its primary function is to understand and generate text based on the vast corpus of human knowledge it was trained on. It's not intended to create entirely new ideas but to assist users in accessing and understanding existing information. Expecting originality from a tool designed for this purpose is akin to expecting a hammer to paint a masterpiece – it's simply not its function.*
- 2. Fixed Data: While early iterations of ChatGPT may have used a more fixed database, it's important to note that ChatGPT was designed to be updated with the latest information from the web. This means that its responses can change over time as new data becomes available. This addresses the concern that it might provide the same answers indefinitely.*
- 3. Discrete State Machines (DSM) Comparison: The comparison to Discrete State Machines (DSM) is somewhat misleading. DSMs refer to a specific class of computational models that are deterministic and discrete, making them unsuitable for modeling complex, dynamic systems. ChatGPT, on the other hand, is based on a probabilistic model that considers a multitude of possible responses and selects the most relevant based on learned patterns. It doesn't iterate identically in the way DSMs do.*
- 4. Human Brain Comparison: Comparing ChatGPT to the human brain is also a problematic analogy. ChatGPT is a tool designed for specific text-based tasks, while the human brain is a complex organ capable of sensory perception, emotion, creativity, and a wide range of other functions. Expecting ChatGPT to emulate the human brain's behavior in all respects is unrealistic and not the intended purpose of the tool.*

5. *Inhibiting Human Invention: The claim that ChatGPT "kills human invention" oversimplifies the relationship between technology and human creativity. ChatGPT, when used appropriately, can complement human creativity by providing information, suggestions, and insights. It can help individuals overcome information gaps and inspire new ideas. It's not a substitute for human creativity but a tool that can enhance it.*

Pitt

Joseph Pitt gives the following review:⁷

My concern with the original paper and subsequent comments is that it commits the fallacy of simplification. First, by choosing one framework, biology, to base her accounts of survival on, the author ignores discussions of foundations in physics and other sciences such as chemistry. Second, The author buys into the general belief that the processes of the universe can be captured by relatively simple principles. There really is no evidence for this view. On the contrary, as we observe the discovery of new and currently unexplainable processes affecting the physics of the universe and its expansion, the acceptance of the view that everything will be explained by simple laws is increasingly under seige. It is not clear to me where this assumption that the activities we observe in the universe can be explained by seeking simplicity originated. It may be a feature of the human effort to survive - assume it all can be explained simply some day and we will be fine. But what if we accept the results of our sciences and try to understand the universe as basically a mess? That does not mean we have give up seeking order. Rather, it places the search for meaning where it belongs - on us. We have developed schools of thought, religions, etc. that help us find meaning, but it doesn't follow it is out there some where embedded in some scientific theory. There is nothing incompatible wit accepting that the universe is chaotic and the we can still strive to find the meaning of life. We just need to accept the fact that we are part of the universe and our attempt to put order (isn' that what meaning is all about) into it is a feature of our evolutionary history.

The following are responses from ChatGPT, which I agree with:

1. *Interdisciplinary Approach: While the author may have focused on biology, it doesn't necessarily imply an exclusion of other scientific disciplines. The choice of biology might have been due to the nature of the discussion or the author's expertise. Many scientific inquiries adopt an interdisciplinary approach, and a singular focus in one paper doesn't negate the value of considering other scientific foundations.*
2. *Occam's Razor: The belief in simple principles capturing the processes of the universe has been a powerful driving force in scientific discovery. Occam's Razor, a philosophical principle, suggests that among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions should be selected. While acknowledging the complexity of the universe, simplicity has often been a guiding principle leading to profound insights. Einstein's famous quote captures this sentiment: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."*
3. *Scientific Progress: The argument against the assumption that everything can be explained by simple laws may*

be somewhat of a strawman. Scientific progress is iterative, and as new phenomena are discovered, scientific theories adapt. The fact that there are currently unexplainable processes doesn't necessarily negate the potential for future understanding. The history of science is marked by periods of complexity followed by simplification.

Goranowski

Richard H. Goranowski gives the following review:⁸

A teleologic response to autonomic human behavior arises as consciousness, not to exclude mammalian predation planning extending to mollusk genetics producing bio-television as camo and genuine problem-solving in octopi. Thus, a conclusion must survive that organic chemically driven decision-making events informed by memory occur as coeval early in the genetic code as illuminated by planaria. Such is anthropomorphism: if reality can get better, it should; is the Universe good enough for us or are we good enough to survive it?

In any case, thanks for clarifying "Generative Pre-trained Transformer" never saw it before. Yet the ChatGPT similitude to human learning as information retrieval from a Chomsky array of 100 billion neurons tunneling numerous quantum qubits messaging throughout the cortex of the human brain belittles its precursor autonomic miracle that integrates bio-energetic nutrition process – with its illuminative process of thought. The autonomic cerebellum remains may unconsciously reflect that the cerebral "new consciousness" it spawned has an equivalence to ChatGPT, aligning with your paper's "individual's understanding of meaning."

The following are responses from ChatGPT, which I agree with:

Your response delves into complex philosophical and scientific topics. In essence, it appears to explore the emergence of consciousness and intelligence in various species and how it relates to the concept of anthropomorphism. It also touches on the capabilities and limitations of artificial intelligence like ChatGPT compared to the human brain.

It's a thought-provoking perspective on the evolution of consciousness and the potential implications for humanity's place in the universe. Thank you for your insights.

Glymour

Clark Glymour gives the following review:⁹

I would not publish Kiritani's essay. The novelty of Kiritani's article is that it consists chiefly of a product of ChatGPT. The product is responses to objections to a thesis of Kiritani's, namely that the meaning of life is

reproduction. There is no serious philosophical interest to the responses because the objections to his thesis that Kiritani gives to the machine are not serious. Here is a serious objection:

“Meaning” is a relation of a circumstance, event, process or object, and a person or persons. Natural events do not have “meanings” of themselves, are no goals or ends that of themselves, natural processes are “supposed”--in the moral sense of obligated--to achieve. The common sense of the meaning of a life is what is or was done that is or was valued, positively or negatively, by the doer and others. A human life may have many meanings for the person who lives it and for others. Reproduction may not be among those meanings. Newton lived a long productive life without children. One doubts he thought their absence made his life meaningless, or that anyone since thinks as much. Hitler had three children, but the meaning of his life for millions was not the number of his children.

Give that objection to Chat and see if anything original and not silly comes back.

The following are responses from ChatGPT, which I agree with:

The assertion that natural events and processes lack inherent meaning or purpose is contestable. While it is true that natural events don't possess meaning in the human sense, they can have meaning within the context of ecological and evolutionary processes. For example, reproduction and survival are fundamental processes in nature that are imbued with a form of "meaning" or purpose – the perpetuation of a species. From an ecological perspective, the interplay of these processes contributes to the balance and sustainability of ecosystems, which can be seen as meaningful in the broader context of the natural world.

Additionally, the argument you've presented suggests that reproduction may not be essential aspects of the meaning of life, citing examples of individuals like Sir Isaac Newton and Adolf Hitler to support this view. The argument raises the issue of subjective meaning and purpose. What one person values as meaningful in life can vary greatly from another person's perspective. While reproduction might not be a universal or exclusive source of meaning, for many people, raising children and contributing to the continuity of their family or culture is a deeply meaningful aspect of their lives.

Alajlani

Zaher Alajlani gives the following review:¹⁰

I salute the author for thinking outside the box and exploring the possibility of using AI to enhance our understanding of philosophical matters.

However, it is very hard to review the article for two main reasons: 1) the lack of original commentary by the author and 2) the arguments generated by ChatGPT have no philosophical substance.

I object to the author's statement: "Thus, the meaning of life is survival and reproduction . . ." This is rather too simplistic and dogmatic. First, the notion of meaning is extremely complex, and the author doesn't adequately define it. Second, I know the author is arguing from a teleological/biological viewpoint, but reproduction can't simply be the meaning of life. If we consider the author's point valid here, we must believe it is impossible for a person who can't or chooses not to procreate to have a meaningful life. I am afraid this can't be true.

The paper reads more like a blog post than an academic piece.

I wish the author all the best in their writing and academic endeavors and hope to read more of their work in the future.

The following are responses from ChatGPT, which I agree with:

From a biological perspective, survival and reproduction are indeed important for the continuation of the species, and these drives are deeply rooted in our biology. However, from a "philosophical" or existential perspective, the meaning of life can be highly subjective and personal. People can find meaning and purpose in various aspects of life beyond reproduction. This can include relationships, personal growth, creativity, contributing to society, and pursuing one's passions.

In essence, while the biological imperative for survival and reproduction is a fundamental aspect of life, humans have the cognitive capacity to ascribe their own meaning to life. Meaningful lives can encompass a wide range of pursuits, including but not limited to procreation, and they may differ from person to person based on their individual values, beliefs, and goals. So, both perspectives can coexist within this broader context.

Notes

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.*

⁴ I would like to thank the reviewers for their comments.

⁵ <https://doi.org/10.32388/CJ452H>

⁶ <https://doi.org/10.32388/DVI9EH>

⁷ <https://doi.org/10.32388/JPKW1G>

⁸ <https://doi.org/10.32388/NBJEM8>

⁹ <https://doi.org/10.32388/C2QGRW>

¹⁰ <https://doi.org/10.32388/YVVD7H>