

What Grasshopper's Utopia Teaches Us about

Meaning in Life

a philosophy talk by Michael Ridge (University of Edinburgh)



Friday, February 17th, 2023 ♦ 3:30pm ♦ Close-Hipp 201

"Readers of Bernard Suits' *The Grasshopper* often find what he describes as "Utopia" deeply dystopian. In Suits' Utopia, there is no scarcity of any kind. Suits argues (not entirely convincingly), that the only intrinsically valuable activity in his Utopia will be playing games. Given that there is no scarcity, there will be no need for any instrumentally valuable activity, so Suits concludes that we would spend all our time playing games – including games that recreate various activities which are now undertaken as work rather than play. Science can become more like doing crossword puzzles. Why do people find this dystopian? They feel like nothing in Suits' Utopia matters – nothing is at stake. In this talk, Professor Ridge argues that this intuition is sufficiently widely shared that it provides a useful litmus test for theories of what meaning in life could be. In short, any theory of meaning which cannot at least make it intelligible that life in Suits' Utopia would be meaningless is to that extent a problematic theory of the concept of meaning in a life. He then argues that Joshua Glasgow's recent elaboration of Wolf's theory, which otherwise might seem very attractive, fails this litmus test and is to that extent not a great fit with our pre-theoretical concept of meaning in life. He then explains why Wolf's original theory is also problematic and proposes an alternative way of thinking about meaning which does much better when it comes to the litmus test, and has several other advantages as well."