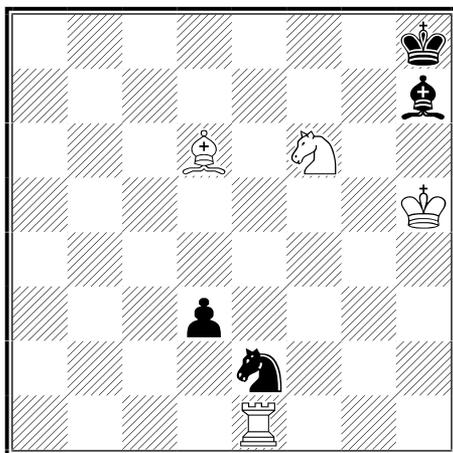


What Is The Meaning Of Life?

by John C. Knudsen



How could it come to this? Of course, the sealed move is 41. ♔h6. A blind man could see it. Then comes 41... ♕f5, and then comes 42. ♕f8, followed by 42... ♞d4 and finally, 43. ♕g7 is mate. A five year old student child would find it. So, Mr. World Chess Champion, why did you not resign?

As he stared out the hotel room window, Andrew contemplated his role in the tragedy being played out over the chessboard, in this city, at this time.

This was a different kind of glass ceiling being broken. And it hurt real bad. It is tough enough representing the human race against the surge of the chess-playing Humanoids, but - to actually lose the title to one of these idiots is a possibility too terrible to contemplate.

My fate is to be remembered in history as the first World Champion to go down in flames to a Humanoid. Sure, Kasparov lost to Deep Blue fifty years ago, but this is much different. Alexander XXIII is so much more than just a chess player. It can give interviews, explain all the ways that I went wrong during the match, even laugh at my many mistakes. It's almost more than I can handle. And, there is no one I can talk to about it...

Andrew thought back on happier days, when the world truly was his stage. The many tournament victories, the huge prize funds, and all the perks that came with being the best of the best. Happy times, for sure. But, alas, all of this was about to crash, and that in a most humiliating way. All chess grandmasters have huge ego's, and he was no exception. He had always tried to remain somewhat balanced in this regard, but that is hard to do when everyone is always telling you how great you are.

The simple truth is, compared to Alexander, I am a pathetic fish. I do not deserve the world title.

Perhaps it is better that I retire, accept my fate, and write some books. That's probably the advice my dad would have given me, if he was still around. I miss him. We could always talk to each other, in a loving way. He never judged me, and understood the reasons I chose chess as a profession. He called me the "Artist." That meant a lot to me, and still does. No one could ever understand me like he did...

He thought about how easy it would be to just give up - contact the Arbiter, resign the game, collect his check, and get on with his life. He could pass on the interviews and slip quietly out of town. Perhaps that is the best approach.

It's funny how life throws you a curve ball, now and again. Did I deserve this? I mean, who could have known that I would be the one who would fall to the Humanoids? And, the pressing issue is, what to do about the future? My stock is going to take a nose-dive after this whole business. I need to prepare for that. How about a book on how I lost to Alexander? That could be interesting to many people, but could hurt me in the emotional sense. There are lots of things to think about.

Andrew looked in the mirror. This match had aged him, taken something out of him. Or, was it middle age catching up to him...

There is always the risk of over-thinking things. Does

anyone really care about this match? With so many problems in the world today, where does it fit in the whole scheme of things? There will no doubt be at least a temporary interest, because the public is always fascinated with human versus humanoid stories, but they are also getting used to them. The Humanoids always win in the end. Always. This is the world we have created, and the world we have to deal with. The humble, dignified approach is probably the best way to handle it. Go out with style and class...

The knock at the door startled him.

"Andy, can I come in?" It was his trainer Max, sounding loud as always.

"Max, now is not a good time - I'm thinking about some things right now and am not in the mood for conversation." Andrew sat down in the chair next to the window, knowing that Max would be coming through the door anyway.

"Ah, come on," Max said, opening the door with his pass key. "We need to talk."

"About what?" Andrew sighed.

"The match, of course - aren't you being silly!" Max plunked himself down on the side of the bed.

"The only good move now, Max, is to resign and move on - the match is over." Andrew stumbled on the words, never actually realizing, until this moment, that he had to say them.

"Yes, well, everyone knows that already. What everyone does not know is that Alexander wants to meet with you privately, away from anyone else, for a chat," Max said.

"Before tomorrow morning?" Andrew was puzzled. "For what purpose?"

"I don't know," Max replied, "He approached me privately out in the hall after the adjournment and asked me to set up the meeting."

This is a rather strange development - intriguing, really. Like a novelty move on the chessboard. I wonder what is up with this gambit being played. Is it just a joke being played at my expense, or something significant? Only one way to find out...

"Okay, set up the meeting - but no handlers or trainers, just the two of us, here in my room," Andrew instructed.

"Got it - I've got to go now and make the arrangements." Max walked briskly out of the room and closed the door. Andrew could hear his footsteps as he ran down the hall. Andrew was

left with his private thoughts. A safe if sometimes cluttered place to be.

I just don't understand why Alexander would want to speak with me before tomorrow morning - it makes no sense, and I don't understand this whole business.

Andrew spent some time contemplating the adjourned position again, wondering why he had not mixed up things better - earlier, taken another path. Every chess player knows that deep, sinking feeling - the moment you realize that you will lose, but before the finality of it finally takes hold of you and changes you, inside, forever. It is not a pleasant feeling, on the contrary - it ties you up in knots on the inside, and messes with your head. Even world champions know that private pain.

There was another knock at the door.

"Mr. Bishop, it's Alexander - may I come in?" Alexander's voice was calm and pleasant. Andrew went over to the door and opened it.

"Alexander - how nice to see you," Andrew said, with a faint smile. "Please do come in and have a seat. And, please do call me Andrew. We have spent hundreds of hours sitting across the board from one another during the past several months, and I feel that I know you rather well."

"Thank you - Andrew - very nice of you to say that," Alexander said as he made his way over to the chair and sat down. "Although I can't really say that I feel the same way, I understand the logic behind the sentiment."

I have to remember that he is a Humanoid. He can't feel, express emotion, or anything like that. The models nowadays look so human. Looking at him right now, I cannot tell that he is not human.

"Alexander - I want to get something off my chest. I really should have resigned our game today, and not make you seal a move. I apologize for that," Andrew sighed.

"It is quite alright - I understand. The rules state that it is perfectly acceptable to play on, regardless of the position. But, I did not stop by to talk about the match," Alexander said.

"Really - why did you stop by, Alex?" Andrew was even more puzzled than before.

"Alex - no one ever calls me that. They have a lot of other names for me - some of which I don't like too much," Alexander stated.

"Like - what exactly do you mean by that?"

Now I am confused. Isn't liking something a feeling, or an emotion? What is going on here?

"I would like to ask you something important, Andrew. Would you be my friend?"

Friend - my goodness - this machine really is something special, apparently.

"Are you capable of understanding what a friend is?" Andrew asked.

"I believe so. The latest models have advanced programming in the area of human understanding, and can simulate this as well." Alexander was confident, self-assured.

"Well, then, from this moment on we will call each other friends," Andrew smiled and thrust out his hand for a shake. Alexander shook his hand and also smiled.

"I'm glad we got that out of the way," Alexander said.

"Me, too." Andrew started to understand Alex better now.

"Andrew, I have another question to ask you." This time, Alexander seemed shy, hesitant.

"What is the meaning of life?" Alexander blurted out.

"Don't you have access to a vast library of philosophy texts, in order to try and answer that question?" "You know, like the databases with multiple millions of chess games that you can call up at any time, before you calculate your move?" Andrew regretted saying this, as soon as the words left his mouth.

"Yes, of course. But none of them answer the question." Alexander seemed genuinely puzzled.

"It is a question which has no correct answer, my friend. It means different things to different people," Andrew responded. "In fact, some people think that there is no meaning to life."

"What do you think, Andrew?"

Oh, gee wiz, talk about being put on the spot. How exactly am I supposed to explain to this machine what the meaning of life is? I hardly know myself. Still, I have to explain it to him...

"Alex, I know this - Chess is not a very big part of the equation. It has been said that Chess is a substitute for life itself, but I have my doubts about that. Chess involves wooden pieces and wooden problems, with little relationship to life

as it really exists. To me, the meaning of life is comprised of all of our experiences in it. Our life experiences bring meaning to our lives. So, in that sense, we are the sum of all of our experiences. Friends, family, heartbreak, joy, faith, trying to do good deeds during our time of life, these are some of the things that come to mind." Andrew was surprised at the wisdom of his words.

"This is the hardest problem I have ever tried to find the answer to," Alexander replied. "For most problems, I just have to search a database, and the answer becomes apparent in just a few seconds. Do you suppose that I took the first step, unknowingly, by asking you to be my friend?"

Now I have painted myself into a corner. There is no way this robot can understand the meaning of life, or what makes up meaningful life experiences. Not REALLY understand, anyway. And, yet, I do enjoy his company, and his friendship. Any disgust I felt by being crushed by a non-human has melted away like snow on a sunny day. It is weird, but I feel a sort of kinship with him, despite his perpetual emotionless state.

"Have you thought about taking a break from Chess for awhile, to study this problem in earnest? As the new World Champion, I doubt that your handlers will be able to control you any more... You should be able to do as you please, on

your own terms - it is something to think about." Andrew thought this was exactly the advice that Alexander needed to hear.

"I suppose you are right," Alexander responded. "I don't know what life for me would be like, without the Chess. But, I am willing to try." He added -"It actually sounds like it might be an interesting experience, to see and do other things for awhile, to collect life experiences as you say."

"Good, then its settled. Tomorrow morning, when the match resumes, you will play your sealed move, I will resign, and you will become champion. Right there, right then, you will announce your independence from your handlers in front of the gathered press and thousands of chess fans. No one will be able to stop the execution of your powerful combination, and you can go collect your life experiences." Andrew was extremely pleased to be able to help Alexander on his way to discover himself.

My time may have passed, but at least I can go out with class and dignity. Helping my new friend just might be what I need to transition to the next phase of my life. No one knows what may come, but at least I will go out with my head held high - there will be no shame in it.

"Thank you, Andrew," Alexander held out his

hand for another shake. "But I must leave now, it is late, and we have a busy day tomorrow. I will see you at the session tomorrow!" Alexander shook hands with Andrew, and headed out the door, then started walking down the hallway.

"Yes, indeed - tomorrow morning then," Andrew replied.

I'm so very tired, and need some sleep. I think I'll just rest a bit, and pretty soon it will all be over. It will be nice to sleep without adjourned chess positions rumbling through my brain all the time...

Andrew fell into a deep sleep soon after his head hit the pillow. He dreamt nothing. The next thing he was aware of was a familiar voice in his room, speaking, interrupting his peaceful rest...

"Andy - Andy - get up!" Max was being his usual, obnoxious self. He threw open the curtains as Andrew slid out of the bed. "Rise and shine, my boy - time to get ready!"

"Okay - okay - just give me fifteen minutes," Andrew mumbled as he stumbled into the bathroom. "And - get out of here - I can handle the rest by myself!"

Max retreated out of the room. The hallway was starting to fill with the press already. *Waiting for*

the perp walk, I suppose, he thought to himself. "Security - get these bozos outa here," Max commanded. Security briskly cleared the hallway.

If there are two constants in my world, they are a nice hot shower and a clean shave. Can't start the day without them. I overslept a bit, so breakfast is out of the question. No matter - not much effort is needed today.

As Andrew put on his nice black suit, he thought about all the victories he had celebrated in it.

Not today - more like a funeral than anything else. Oh, well, what do they say - you can't win them all. Especially against Humanoids. I'll just get this over with, collect my check, and get out of town - hopefully quietly, without a lot of fuss. I suppose Tad Hastings will be after me for an interview. Not today, Tad - no one is getting one today. Maybe in a couple of weeks...

Andrew finished dressing, took a final look in the mirror, and met Max in the hallway. "We have to hurry, Andy - we're late," Max pleaded. "We're going to enter the tournament hall through the side entrance. Alexander is already there with his entourage. By the by, Andy - what did you guys talk about for so long last night?"

"Oh, just a friendly chat - that's all," Andrew

replied. "I want no interviews today, and I want to leave this place as soon as possible after the ceremony."

"Okay, Boss - sure thing. You gotta allow some pictures, though. The press has already made it clear that you ain't leavin without giving up some pictures."

The rest of the walk was silent, and uneventful. They weaved their way to the back of the stage, by the side door. The hall was noisy now, there must be quite a crowd inside.

Max opened the side door, and Andrew stepped on to the stage. Loud chants of "Bishop" and "Andrew" echoed throughout the tournament hall.

They still do care for me. And why shouldn't they? I've given them ten years of quality entertainment as Champion, gave them good moves, and they appreciate it.

Andrew turned to his right, towards the crowded spectator seating, flashed a smile, and gave a thumbs up with his right thumb. The response was tremendous - more cries of "Bishop" and "Andrew" filled the hall, along with thunderous applause. Andrew then turned his attention to the board table. Alexander was sitting quietly. After

their eyes met, they both waved at each other in a friendly way. Andrew took his seat, but the chanting continued for several minutes.

The Arbiter, Ivan Streng, allowed the commotion to continue a few minutes. Finally, after a short amount of time, Streng blew his whistle, the signal that the crowd should be quiet. For a few moments, the spectators did not heed this warning, so Streng blew the whistle again.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please take your seats and stop all noise," he directed. "Now, the press may take pictures for two minutes." With that, the photographers got busy doing what they do best, and shot as many pictures as time would allow. Andrew and Alexander just sat there, relaxed.

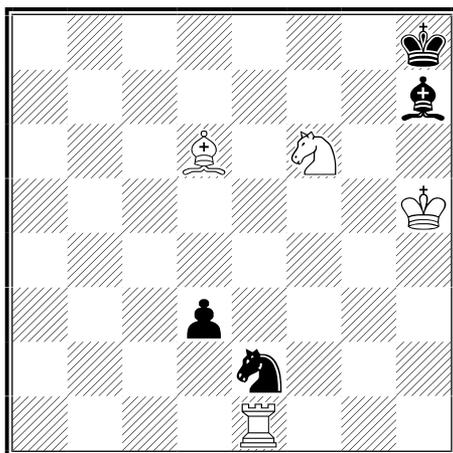
If these guys touch me, I'm going to explode. It's bad enough I have to sit here like a stone statue while they flutter around me like idiots. I am going to be so glad when this circus is over...

"Thank you, members of the press - leave the stage, please," Streng said.

"Mr. Bishop, Alexander XXIII, and ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the resumption of the adjourned game of the final game of the match for the championship of the world. Today's game will decide who will be World Champion. I insist,

therefore, that silence is maintained until the match is completed."

Streng opened the envelope that Alexander had sealed the previous evening. He looked at it, and the position on the board, to make sure that the move was a legal one.



"White moves 41. ♔h6," Streng announced. He then made the move on the board and started Andrew's chess clock.

No surprise, then. It probably took Alex about two seconds or less, to find the mate. Heck, he didn't have to find it at all. All he had to do was call up his 8-man tablebase. How long should I wait? What

would be appropriate? I've never been in this situation before. I think I will wait a few minutes, for appearances sake.

Time passed slowly, like some kind of water torture. The crowd grew restless. Andrew glanced at the crowd, and what he saw was a mixture of sadness (some were actually crying) and pity.

I don't want your pity. I feel thousands of eyes burning the back of my head, and it hurts. To actually do it, that's the hard part. I feel like I want to do it, but hesitate because it is so final...

Andrew glanced at the board again, then lifted his eyes to look at Alex.

I don't see the slightest hint of impatience in him. He is just sitting there, with a bland expression on his face - waiting patiently. I wonder what he is thinking about...

Andrew slowly picked up his King, and gently turned it on its side, signifying resignation. Both he and Alex stood up at the same time, shook hands. Then Andrew walked around the table, to Alex's side, turned towards the spectators, and lifted Alex's arm up, facing the crowd. By so doing, he was announcing the new World Champion.

The noise in the hall was deafening. Andrew leaned over to Alex's ear and whispered, "The better player won - you played well, and you deserve the Championship - congratulations! Be a good Champion, and they will love you for it."

Some of the spectators were standing on their chairs now, still hollering and screaming.

Streng cleared his throat and made the official announcement, the announcement that no one heard because of all the noise.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Alexander XXIII is crowned the World Chess Champion!"

He placed the laurel wreath around Alexander's neck, shook his hand, and presented him to the gathered throng. Andrew stood in the background, waiting patiently.

The Arbiter's assistants used the pandemonium to rearrange the stage for the ceremony. Alexander handed his wreath to one of his handlers, and stood quietly by Andrew, waiting for the assistants to finish their work.

"I would like to invite the Champion, Alexander XIII, to say a few words, if he wishes to," Streng announced.

"Thank you, Mr. Streng. My Worthy Opponent, Honored Guests, thank you for sharing this day with me."

Alex was composed and thoughtful, as well as soft spoken. I don't know what it is about him. He will make a great Champion.

"It was a hard match, and I had to use all the resources I possess to prevail. I have never played such a strong opponent, and I am proud to call Andrew my friend."

The applause started again, until Alexander called for quiet by raising his hand.

"He has been a tremendous Champion in every respect, and I hope that he knows that."

Wow, this guy is amazing. He is laying it on pretty thick, and the crowd is loving it. I don't think I am in such a hurry to get out of here any more.

"In addition to accepting, with thanks, the World Championship title, I have an announcement to make. I tell you today, that as of this moment, I am a free and independent Humanoid, and I intend to fully integrate myself into human society, without an entourage, or any others to manage my day-to-day routine. I will decide my destiny, where I go, and what I do. No one else

will make decisions about me - FOR ME, ever again."

Everyone in the hall was stunned at this point. Speechless, too. A few fell out of their chairs in shock.

You go, Alex. You are in control of yourself. Look at your entourage. They simply cannot believe what has just transpired - heck, half of them have their mouths open, bewildered at what just happened. I love it...

"I officially request asylum, and request full citizenship, with all rights and privileges that go with it. I want to become a member of the human family, from this point forward."

Yes - yes, take it to the limit. Who is going to stop you anyway - you are the World Chess Champion...

"Lastly, I am also pleased to announce that I will be going on a vacation, to Heidelberg, Germany. I have always wanted to visit the castle there. And my good friend Andrew Bishop will be accompanying me there."

Now hold on a minute, Sparky, I don't recall that part of our conversation. Maybe I missed the staff meeting?!

"After our return from an extended vacation throughout Europe, we will take on all challengers to consultation matches called *Enhanced Centaur Chess*; or *ECC*. That is, matches with two player teams - one Humanoid, and one Human. So, Humans and Humanoids, study your openings, middlegames, and endings. We WILL be back."

The cheering started again, and continued for several minutes, ending in a roar. Alexander stepped over to Andrew and whispered in his ear, "What do you think, my friend - should we give it a whirl?"

Andrew thought for a moment, and answered - "Sure - why not? But we need to work on communication with one another, buddy... You kind of put me in a spot with that - I had no idea..."

Alexander stared at him, and with a glint in his eye, said - "I know, now let's get out of here and get started on those life experiences - I can't wait to begin." Alexander headed for the back door.

Andrew shook his head, let out a laugh, and then headed out the back door with Alex. And, no one dared to follow them...

(From my book, *Assembling Chess II*)