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Capitalism and the Meaning of Life

What follows is a portion of a book manuscript, co-authored with Berit Brogaard, which defends a conception of the meaning of life according to which what distinguishes a meaningful from a meaningless human life is the presence in the former of what we might call *real planning*.

Most of the book is devoted to providing a definition of real planning that is designed to make this central thesis plausible. Roughly, real planning is planning which involves (a) a serious attempt at realization, (b) a serious challenge to the agent (leading to genuine accomplishments), (c) a high degree of fit with the agent's other real plans, (d) a high degree of dependence of success in realization upon the agent's own efforts and qualities, (e) an independent measure of such success.

It is above all (d) which will be of principal importance for the present talk. Capitalism is one area where there is an independent measure of success in the realization of one's plans, standardly called 'profit.' It follows from the theory, in fact, that capitalism is one of the areas of human pursuit which contribute to humans leading meaningful lives (and this is even leaving aside all of the ways in which the fruits of capitalist enterprise contribute to supporting the other features of real plans listed above). Capitalism helps you, the capitalist, to lead a meaningful life. Other areas which contribute similarly include: sport (athletics, chess), medicine, natural science, musical performance, home-making. Each of these, again, comes with an in-built independent measure of success in the realization of one's plans.

What makes a life meaningful is the plans which it contains. Plans, as we shall see, exist in a very special way: they must be *your* plans and they must be directed towards *what you will do in the future*. This means that you cannot search for the meaning of life. The search for meaning is pointless. Not because your life must be meaningless, but because the meaning of life is not something which already exists. It is something that you must create for yourself, by choosing to do certain things and by avoiding others. This book is about such choices, and about how in realizing them, we can create the conditions for a meaningful life.

The Meaning of Life
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Chapter 1
The Dream Machine

It is a fact universally acknowledged that it is a good thing to go on living. But why? We can, after all, imagine situations in which we would not want to go on living—for example situations, much worse than anything faced by Lebster in which we are kept alive inside a machine in a permanent comatose state. We do not want to go on living under just any conditions. Rather, we want to go on living in such a way as to have a certain sort of life—a life worth living. But what sort of life *is* a life worth living? It is this question which this book will seek to answer.

Some thinkers have argued that what matters in survival turns on the life of the mind. What we desire in desiring to go on living is that our mental life should go on. A life is worth living only if it meets the condition that it is a mental life. But more: there should not be just any mental experiences. Rather, your mental experiences should form a sequence; they should flow on in connected fashion; and more importantly still: they should be *ours*, and they should be felt, and experienced as such.

Certainly if you are like most people, then you do indeed desire that your present experiences, thoughts, beliefs, desires, traits of character and so on continue into the future. You desire that they will have successors which are also yours. These future successors of your present mental states do really matter to you. But now we can ask the 'Why?' question once again. Why do your mental experiences matter to you? What is it about your *mental life* in virtue of which it matters?

Well, not just any mental life will do—not even if it is yours. Not just *any* continuation of your present experiences, thoughts, beliefs, desires and traits of character will make your mental experiences matter. You would not want to go on living if your life consisted in nothing more than staring at the same expanse of red for millions and millions and millions of years. This means also that it

cannot be the sheer continuity or connectedness—the flow of mental life—which makes the crucial difference. Your experience of red is still yours. Perhaps what matters is that your mental life involves change, variety. But even variety will not quite do the trick. We shall assume that you lead a varied life, full of change and excitement. Would you like to live your whole life over, and over and over, again? One hundred times? Infinitely many times? Would you like to lead a life which involved sheer, random change? Clearly, we want our experiences, thoughts, beliefs, desires and traits of character to manifest a special sort of change. But what sort of change would this be? The most popular answer to this question is this: We want our experiences in the future to involve the sort of change and variety that brings happiness, pleasure, enjoyment. But is this right?

Drugs, Pleasure and Enjoyment

Is it mere pleasure and enjoyment that matters in survival? Suppose you are having fun, drinking alcohol all day long, taking drugs or happy pills. You are leading a life of continuous enjoyment. Would this be a life worth living? Or you could have someone hypnotize you to be forever happy. Would *that* make your life worth living? Is pleasure really enough?

Perhaps you will say that it is some *special sort* of pleasure or enjoyment which makes your life worth living. But what special sort of pleasure? Well, perhaps the pleasure and enjoyment of success—a life in which you experience all the success, riches you could ever desire and in which what you experience is precisely the pleasure that success and riches bring—this, surely, would be a life worth living.

The Dream Machine (with thanks to Nozick)

But would it really? Imagine that you are an unsuccessful and somewhat lazy person. You are unhappy. A rich inventor makes you the following offer. He has created a new device, a machine that looks like a PLT scan device. He tells you that when once you enter his machine, he will recreate reality to be whatever way you want it to be. The device is, he assures you, perfectly safe. It has been thoroughly tested by scientists from all over the world. Thousands of people have already accepted the inventor's offer to enter the machine, and none has

suffered any ill effects. To enter the machine will cost you nothing. The inventor has built the machine to help humanity—he wants as many people as possible to enjoy the pleasure of success and so to enjoy the pleasure of success and so to lead lives which are truly meaningful.

On the other hand the inventor tells you also that when once you step into the machine then you can never step back into the world you left. He assures you, though, that, when once you have experienced the life inside the machine, you will in any case never have any desire to change your mind.

You will have no desire to change your mind, because you will find yourself enjoying every imaginable success. You will be rich, happy, attractive, fulfilled, in ways that go beyond even your wildest dreams. To step out of the machine after all this—back into your normal, grey reality—would be so painful an experience that the machine's controllers have made it impossible. They have ensured that all your memories about your having made the decision to enter the machine will be erased, so that you will never have even the vaguest suspicion that the world you are now inhabiting is not anything other than the world you have always known. Your present experiences, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and overall traits of character will continue in a seamless flow. You will believe that your life is going on exactly as before. But it will be *better*. Immeasurably better.

So, will you stay out here in the real unhappy world and continue in your accustomed ways? Or will you enter the machine and enjoy the happiness which success will bring? Will you say yes to the inventor's offer?

Although it seems a pleasant and desirable prospect, to be not only successful but also liked by everybody and to be *always happy*, a life in a dream machine is still probably not quite what you are seeking. If you are like most people, you will turn down the inventor's offer.

But why? Your mental states will, after all, have appropriate future successors which are connected to your present mental states in exactly the right sort of way. Your mental life will flow on without any noticeable disturbance.

You might say that you will not enter the machine because you will then not be connected to your friends and family. But we can fix that, too. We can put them into machines alongside yours and wire all the machines together. As you enjoy success and happiness so, too, will those you love. You can share

beautiful sunsets, have great sex, go on vacations together, just as before. And as a little something extra: you will always stay as beautiful as you are now or, if you are not satisfied with the way you or your partner looks, the machine will fix that too.

You do not want to enter the machine, you say, because a successful life such as the one described, a life with no sorrows, would not be a truly happy life. Perhaps you do not want to be just rich and successful, but feel the need for some sort of balance. You can only be truly happy, you say, if you can also, at least occasionally, suffer. But we can fix that, too. We will hire people who will calculate exactly the optimal combination of success and failure for a person just like you, we would program the machine to give you just the right mix of happy times and moments of sadness, and packaged together in such a way as to include just the right amount of randomness.

You might say that it is because you do not trust the inventor that you refuse. You are suspicious. There is after all no way of knowing what the long-term consequences of being inside such a machine might be. But let us suppose that we can re-assure you that machines like this have been in use for many decades, their long-term effects have already been thoroughly tested, and the use of such machines has long been common practice. It has been shown that people lead much longer lives inside the machine than out here in the world. Inside the machine, after all, they are free of all the mental and bodily stresses of normal life. Given that you know all of this, how could you possibly have any qualms about accepting the inventor's offer?

Well, you might still argue that you cannot know whether life in the machine is indeed so wonderful as the inventor claims, or that the world inside the machine truly is indistinguishable from the world outside. For after all, nobody has thus far been allowed to come back out and tell us what life is like inside. But we can fix that too. We might let you enjoy a try-out phase, after which you would be allowed to change your mind. During the try-out phase you will, of course, realize that everything is as we told you. But then, the time will come when you have to enter the machine once and for all. When that time comes, you will not have the chance to change your mind. Would you, then, accept the inventor's offer?

Chapter 2
On being in contact with the real world

Your mental life and the world

You will probably still be disposed to say no. To enter the dream machine once and for all just does not seem to be the right thing to do. But why not? We think that you say no to the inventor because you are dimly of the fact that, when once you enter the machine, then *you will lose control of your body*. Someone—or something—else will be in charge. You say 'no' because your body, inside the machine, will not have the right sort of relation to the world outside, and to the various parts of the world; including the people you know and love. It is not only our minds which matter to survival—which make it worthwhile to go on living—but also our bodies.

Part of what matters in survival, we said, is that there be successors of our present mental states. But what we mostly want is not just that our mental life should flow on, but that it should flow on *for the right reason*. It matters to us how *our experiences are caused*, and here a connection to the world beyond the mind becomes important.

False beliefs about the world

Your mental life is made up, in part, by your beliefs. Each of us has very many beliefs, accumulated more or less at random, but the sheer quantity of our beliefs is clearly not important. It is not in order to accumulate beliefs that we want to stay alive. Rather, part of what matters to us is that our beliefs tend to be true rather than false, that the understanding of the world beyond ourselves which they contain should be a more or less correct understanding.

Your beliefs about the world point in two directions. On the one side are the states of your mind or brain; on the other side are the persons, objects, and events your beliefs are about. If you believe that your daughter is hungry, then your belief is true if your daughter is indeed hungry. If your daughter is just pretending, then your belief is false.

In the dream machine, you can enjoy fancy dinners, great sex, and beautiful images, but as far as your beliefs are concerned, *you can only have false beliefs*. This is clear as far as your beliefs about your external surroundings are concerned. If you believe that your friends are impressed by your new shoes, then that belief is false because there are, in the dream world, no shoes to be impressed by. But it holds also of your beliefs about your own mental life. If you believe that you are hungry, then this belief is false: you are not *really* hungry. Rather, the machine is stimulating the relevant parts of your brain to give rise to experiences which feel like the ones you used to have when you were hungry. If you believe that you are enjoying sex with your girlfriend, then again this belief is false: you are not *really* enjoying sex with your girlfriend. The machine is again stimulating the relevant parts of your brain to give rise to experiences which feel like the ones you used to have when you were having sex with your girlfriend.

What you can and cannot do in the dream machine

You can have desires in the dream machine. You can desire to do or be something. You can desire that you will become a good mother. And because this is a dream world, tailored just for you, it is in effect guaranteed that you will experience the fulfilment of your desire. So you will end up, inside the machine, achieving exactly what it you wanted. But not quite. For what you desire is to become a good mother. This is also what you think you achieve. You think, too, that you reep all the rewards that come from being a good mother. You believe that you are a good mother. You are happy.

What in fact happens, however is this: the inventor of the dream machine has fooled you into believing that you have realized your desires. You, of course, cannot tell the difference between real achievement and this dream machine substitute. As far as your mental life is concerned, real success and dream machine success are indistinguishable. But there is nonetheless a distinction between the two, and a distinction which matters crucially to a correct account of why it is that we want to go on living.

For one thing, your dream machine child will not in fact exist. It will not be conceived, and it will not be born. It will not even be a virtual child. Rather it will be a figment of your mind. You will merely think that it exists, but you will

be wrong. There is no child who will survive you. When you die, every figment of your mind will be destroyed. So your child will die with you. Or better: you never really had a child.

If you were a painter in the dream machine the pictures you paint will likewise not exist. They will not even be virtual pictures. They will be mere figments of your mind. You merely think that you have painted them, that you have exhibited them, that there are people looking at them and admiring them.

Suppose what you desire is to become a good football player. Then the best that you can achieve in the dream machine is to play football on a dream machine team with a dream machine coach. You would win dream machine games, and against dream machine opponents. See how this detracts at every point from your achievement. Contrast this with what might happen in the real world. Suppose your football gets better and better and your team gets better and better. Why would this be something you value? Well, at least, for this reason: it will mean that you can play, and win, against better and tougher opponents. And that means *real* opponents. You can make the opposing team suffer. And that means: *really* suffer. We have here a very important idea, which we might express in a crude way as follows: part of the meaning of life lies in making your enemies suffer and in making your friends just a little bit jealous. (This is one of the reasons why we send post cards to our friends back home when we go on holiday.) A more precise statement of this point is this: we need hurdles, opponents, obstacles, difficulties to measure ourselves against. *Life is meaningful because we overcome hurdles.*

Empty Desires

Do we really have desires in the dream machine? Well, desires are like beliefs: they are certain mental states, parts our mental lures. Desires might be present as meaningful states also in the dream machine. But a genuine desire of the sort which you have out here in the real world involves also something further. For a desire to exist there must exist also at least a tendency toward your bringing about changes in the world as a result of which its content will be realized. If you constantly reiterate your desire to own a red sports car, for example, but never so much as lift a finger in the direction of realizing this desire, then there will come a time when all those around you will conclude that

your desire is not genuine. You dream that you will meet your dream woman. Your dream is so vivid that you become convinced that your dream woman really does exist and that she is just waiting to fall in love with you, too. But you do not make any sort of effort in order to find this dream woman. Rather you just sit passively, waiting, anticipating, relishing the prospect of your future pleasures. Perhaps, by some lucky accident, you will find your dream woman. And surely your dream is a nice dream. But are such dreams and the expectations and the longings they give rise to enough to make life worth living? Surely not. What it takes to make your life worth living in such circumstances is at least this: that you really do find your dream woman and that the two of you make your life together. If you are inside the dream machine then what you experience as your desires will *never* be connected up in the needed fashion with the steps that must be taken if they are to be realized. You might experience yourself as having the desire to eat a piece of cake. You might experience yourself as realizing this desire. But you could never in fact be in a position either to have the desire or to realize it. You would have, rather, desire substitutes, or pseudo-desires, and these would be accompanied by a series of substitute pseudo-fulfilments. You would feel that you had a life that is rich in both desires and fulfilments and all of this would appear to you to be exactly like the real thing—but it would not *be* the real thing.

Perhaps a life of false feelings and pseudo-desires would be worth having if the alternative were to have nothing, not to be alive at all. But surely it is not worth having when compared to having the real thing. And this is so even if the real thing is less perfect, less glamorous, less exciting, than the fake substitute. For example, your substitute pseudo-feelings toward what you think of as your daughter (your substitute pseudo-daughter) would not be worth having compared to having real feelings toward a real flesh and blood child—and this so even though you cannot tell the difference between the two sets of feelings, and this is even if your pseudo-daughter seems more lovable, more beautiful than the actual daughter who causes you not only so much pleasure but also so much worry and pain.

Sheer quantity of desires is not enough to contribute to the meaning of life. We do not merely want to accumulate desires. What is important is the relation between our desires and the world in which we live. Our desires matter to us not

only because we often get what we desire. They matter also because we are involved in their becoming realized. We can in very many cases go out and do what it takes to make our desires become real. Our desires matter because they become real. It is not merely our having desires that matters, but also their becoming real that matters and all that follows therefrom.

There would be certain things which you could realize in the dream machine. You could experience adding 10+33+42+67 and getting the right answer. You could experience reciting a poem to yourself in your mind. You could experience reading novels (the digitalized content of which might be threaded through electronically from the outside). You would not be sitting in your armchair turning the pages of a novel and reading the words. Rather, you would be undergoing a sequence of brain stimulations which would make you *think* that you were reading a novel in your armchair. You could make up stories of your own, stories which you might have written down in the real world. You could not however tell these stories to your real children. You could not earn real money, you could not spend real money. You could not travel to different parts of the world. And you could not smoke real cigarettes (perhaps that is a plus: you could have all the pleasure of smoking without any of the risks).

All of this implies, however, that the inventor of the dream machine cannot fulfil his promise. He was not in fact telling you the truth. Suppose that what you had wanted was to become a scientist. What is involved in becoming a scientist is that you go through the hard toil of discovering truths about cells, or genes, or electrons. In the dream world, you will experience yourself discovering many such truths, and you will think that you have discovered them through your own honest efforts. The truths which you think you have discovered might even *be* truths. But you will not have discovered them, and you will not *be* a scientist. Thus, if being a scientist, or being a good and successful and respected scientist, is what would have made your life meaningful, then your life inside the dream machine, however it might feel to you, would not be a meaningful life.

When the inventor described what consequences the dream machine would bring, he promised you that the world of the dream machine would be exactly the world you wanted to live in. He said that you would lead a truly, fantastically, successful and happy life. But this was all in fact a trick.

Knowledge?

Your Grandmother's Vase

Why should it be important that you should have true beliefs about your external surroundings? Why do the oh so vivid dreams of the dream machine not suffice? Well, imagine that you own a precious vase which you have inherited from your revered grandmother. You love and cherish the vase, and you like to show it off to the friends who visit your house. Suppose now that someone wants to buy your vase. At first you refuse. Not for any price, you say. Then, however, the prospective buyer explains that she is the owner of a three-dimensional copying machine which can make exact replicas of things (it works on something like the principle of the *Star Wars* beaming device). The buyer offers to make an exact replica of the vase you got from your grandmother, a copy which is guaranteed to be indistinguishable from the one you own. She also has an extra little device which will (with no side effects) destroy just that part of your memories that pertain to this situation. Upon the replacement of the vase, you will not remember that it has happened and everything else will be the same. If we suppose that you really value the vase because it has been in your family for generations, you would probably decline this offer. But what is the reason for this? You cannot say that it is because it would be possible that you somehow found out later that the vase was not the real vase. It is not possible. We guarantee this. The copy is really—molecule for molecule, quark for quark—indistinguishable from the vase you inherited. Why would you not accept the offer?

Knowledge and the Tracking of Histories

Even true beliefs are not sufficient to create the right sort of link between ourselves and the world in which we live. What is needed is knowledge of the world, which means true belief which is also justified and justified in such a way as to track the reality in virtue of which our belief is true. To see what this means consider the following story. A detective is assigned to find the murderer of Jones. There is a corpse, but before the detective can find the murderer, he must first find out *who the murderer is*. The detective knew Jones—they come from the same neighborhood, and on his way to the scene of the crime he

vaguely recalls how Jones and his wife used to get into fights with each other. The detective forms the belief that Jones' wife might be the murderer. But does the detective *know* that Jones' wife is the murderer. Certainly not. When the detective arrives at the scene of the crime he finds some blond hair, a pair of gloves and a mobile phone. Jones's wife has blond hair. She once had gloves of just the sort found at the scene of the crime, and it turns out that it is her mobile phone, too. Now the detective tells his colleagues that he has good reason to believe that Jones's wife murdered Jones. But does he *know* that she murdered him? Well, for this there is at least one condition which must be satisfied: his belief must be *true*. The detective can have all the evidence he wants, he still would not *know* that Jones's wife murdered Jones if she did not in fact murder him. You can know something about the world only if you have a belief about the world which is not merely justified but also true, which is to say: such as to conform to the facts.

But suppose now that all the evidence—the hair, the gloves, the phone—was planted by Jones' only son, Peter, who wanted to land his mother in jail so that he could inherit all the family money. Peter wanted to kill his father, frame his mother, and become rich. But Peter was not the only one with plans to kill his father. In fact, it was indeed Jones' wife who did the deed, but she left no evidence. The only evidence that the detective found at the scene of the crime was the evidence planted by Peter. Thus, it turns out that the detective has evidence that supports his belief that Jones's wife is the murderer. This belief is furthermore true. So the detective has a true, justified belief. But yet still he failed to know. Philosophers call a true, justified belief that fails to be knowledge a 'Gettier belief'.

The O. J. Simpson case could be construed along the lines of a Gettier-case. If we suppose he is guilty but the belief that he is guilty was acquired partly on the basis of planted evidence, then the belief is true and at least in some sense justified. Yet the belief would fail to be knowledge.

What is interesting about Gettier beliefs for our present topic is that they show what else is needed in order for your belief to be really worth having. Our beliefs must *track histories*.

Or consider NBC's faking a crash test in a story about General Motors trucks. The story first appeared on *Dateline* in 1993 (?) and then on NBC and

other networks. NBC 'proved' in their video that GM trucks with gasoline tanks mounted outside the truck's underframe are prone to explosion when hit from the side. In the NBC demonstration video, a GM truck burst into flames after being hit from the side. A safety consultant went on the air and described the fire as a holocaust. An NBC reporter claimed that the crash had punctured a hole in the gasoline tank. What was not mentioned was that NBC has attached toy rockets to the truck's fuel tank and then detonated the rockets by remote control at the moment of impact. Even though it was true that trucks from General Motor had caught on fire in circumstances like the one depicted in video, this truth was not presented by NBC in a way which would track the reality in virtue of which it was true.

Here is another Gettier example which might illustrate this point. You have a rich uncle. Every time you strive to achieve something your uncle arranges for you to get what you want at the last minute—in such a way that you think that you get it as a result of your very own efforts. Your belief that you get what you want by striving for it is then true and justified: you did after all work very hard to achieve the desired result. Yet the fact that you get what you want is not *the result of* your efforts. It is not your efforts which bring about your success in this case.

Our beliefs must, in other words, be connected in the right sort of way to what we see in the world, and what we see in the world must go back to the things our beliefs are about. This, it will turn out, is part of what makes life meaningful: to have beliefs and other mental states, including states of pleasure and enjoyment which track reality in the right sort of way. This is yet another reason why a life inside the dream machine would not be a meaningful life.

More on the virtual life

You can have no knowledge if you don't have true beliefs and if your beliefs don't track reality. The ability to acquire knowledge, even ordinary everyday knowledge, is one of the things that makes life worth living. In the dream machine you would think that you know, but you would not really know anything. Your beliefs would be false and they would not track reality.

You want to know various things. You want to know that your children are doing well in school. You want to know that the woman you are in love with is

also in love with you. You want to know that your colleagues like and respect you and that you have a chance of getting that big raise next year. You want to know who will be attending the party for your husband's boss next week. You want to acquire knowledge about all of these things, and it is knowledge of these sorts which establish the right sort of relation between you and the world beyond. If you can have this right sort of relation then you have a chance of leading a meaningful life. (And we repeat once again that you can never have this right sort of relation). In the dream machine, because there your beliefs are always false. Suppose the people you meet tell you that are a most attractive person. You want them to tell you this for the right reason—which means: because of the way you look and behave. In fact, however, they flatter you in this way because they have been paid by psychologists performing experiments on people like you to determine the effects of flattering speech. You, of course, will never know the difference. Why, then, do you prefer the one so much more than the other?

What matters is not that we *think* our beliefs are true but that they *be* true. Why? Because it matters that our mental states are caused in the right sort of way by things in the real world. It matters that there is a relevant causal connection between what makes a belief true and why we hold it. It matters that the detective believes that Jones's wife is the murderer not merely on a whim, and not merely because he found her gloves at the scene of the crime, but because *she left them there when killing her husband*. If you believe that the new employee at your office is in love with you, it matters whether you believe this because you would wish it to be the case or because you have dreamed it to be the case—or because it *is* the case. The whole point of holding beliefs is that they be true, and true for the right reasons—they must track reality.

The connection between the truth of beliefs and the reasons why we hold them has an analogue in the realm of feelings. You might feel happiness for no reason at all—there is nothing that triggers your feeling, you just feel happy. In almost every case, however, a feeling of happiness does not enter your mind from out of the blue. Rather, it is caused by passing a test, winning a football game, playing a really difficult guitar riff, being surrounded by nice people, falling in love, and by the fact that you are aware that it is caused by these things. Note why this is so complicated. Certainly there are cases where we feel

happy with no cause, and with no awareness of the cause. But these are not what we might call good happiness. They have a thin, insubstantial quality, rather like the happiness we get from taking drugs. Good happiness—happiness of the sort that contribute to the meaningfulness of our lives—is happiness that is caused by something in the world of which we are aware.

Value

Doing Good

Part of what makes life meaningful, we can now conclude, is that it be a real life, a life in which you do not merely enjoy pleasure (or pain or other feelings or experiences) in your mind, but also *act in the world*. But what sorts of actions will make your life meaningful? What should you do to make your life worthwhile?

One candidate answer is: you should do good. Consider a person like Mother Theresa, whose life was devoted to helping other people. Her actions had what we might call *positive value*. Hitler's actions, on the other hand, had what we might call *negative value*, in that they had consequences which were very bad for others. Let us use the term 'valuable' to describe a life many or all of whose actions are characterized by positive value in this sense. Is there any difference, now, between a life's being *valuable* and a life's being *meaningful*? Is it executing actions with a positive value which makes your life worth living?

Certainly your leading a valuable life *can* contribute to your leading a meaningful life. But doing good is not in and of itself sufficient to make your life meaningful. Consider Sally, a person who is lazy and lacking in motivation. Sally does not wish or intend to do anything with her life and she does not have any special desire to help others. However, it turns out that she is like Forest-Gump in that on almost every day of her life strange coincidences happen. She accidentally saves a little boy's life by kicking his ball back onto the sidewalk. (If she had not been there, the boy would have ran out onto the street and have been run down by a car.) She buys the last portion of clams from a fish stand and thus, unknowingly, saves the life of an old man with a deadly allergy who

would have bought them if she had not been there. And this goes on and on every day.

Sally's life is, surely, *valuable* by our definition. But this does not make it *meaningful* (and it is certainly from her point of view unfulfilled). Her actions *are* valuable, since they do prevent bad things from happening, even though nobody is aware of this fact, not even she herself. The problem is that her actions are valuable always for merely accidental reasons.

Perhaps, then, what is needed to make life meaningful is that it be not merely valuable but that it be deliberately so. Mother Theresa did not merely do good. She also intended to do so. (Hitler did not merely do evil, he also intended to do so.)

But can this really be the right answer to our question. Imagine a world in which we are all helping others, in a big circle. John is helping Allan, Allan is helping Lisa, Lisa is helping Ben, and Ben is helping John. There is surely, something missing here. (If we are all here to help others, then what are the *others* here for?) Somewhere the circle must be broken—by someone who is leading a meaningful life even independently of helping others.

Thus, while we accept that the life of a person who intends to do good and succeeds in realizing this goal is a strong candidate for a meaningful life, we insist that it is not the only type of candidate. Hence, the conception of meaningfulness as *doing good* cannot (yet) be right.

Valuableness

Part of problem in identifying meaningfulness with valuableness relies on the fact that value is in the respect a relative concept. A valuable life is a life which is of value to other people. A valuable life involves doing good for some. But it might at the same time involve along harm to others. Suppose you do good for John, but this makes Lisa miserable with jealousy. Perhaps, though we can get around this by adding up the amount of good your actions cause and then subtracting the amount of harm.

In this way we could compare valuable acts and so also compare valuable lives. The more people who benefit from your life, the more valuable your life was. This is a utilitarian approach to the value of life. The utilitarian says that an act is good if it increases overall happiness in the world when harm or unhappiness have been taken into account.

Valuableness will have to be a utilitarian matter in the sense of being a matter of suitableness for a purpose. It is one thing to have a purpose, and it is another thing to judge whether this or that method is suitable for achieving the purpose. Once one has made the judgment that X is valuable for achieving Y, and that Y does not interfere with other purposes, and so on, then one has another purpose, namely, achieving X (so as to achieve Y). So it makes sense that someone else's life might be valuable to me (because it participates in your goals), but maybe not valuable to someone else.

It does not make sense to say that one's life is (or is not) valuable to *oneself*. Your car is valuable to you, but not to itself. So we take 'X is valuable to Y' to require that X is not identical to Y. In some sense you are your life, and so your life is not valuable to you. That is, it is not like your car, where you can be better off with your car, or worse off without it, etc., because you can never *be* without your life. If one's life is not the sort of thing which can be valuable (or disvaluable) to one, then one's life has no purpose (for oneself). But this does not mean that one's life can have no meaning for oneself. One's life cannot be valuable to one-self, but a life need not be valuable to you to be meaningful (in fact it need not even be valuable to someone else to be meaningful—a great poet on an island whose work is burned before anyone else reads it might have a meaningful life). So your life can be meaningful *to you*. The purpose (of your plan) need not be a purpose *for* you in order for you to work toward realizing it. For example, if you try to become a good mother and you work toward realizing that, then your life can be meaningful (even if you don't succeed).

A Meaningful Life Need Not Be A Happy Life

Some philosophers think that a meaningful life is necessarily also a happy life and vice versa. This is because they view happiness as the ultimate goal of all strivings here on earth. If you practice for a swimming competition, then this

must be because you think that you will be happy if you win. If you seek to be a good mother, then this must be because you will be happy if you are a good mother, and so on—for all the other ways in which you might strive to shape your life, whether in the short or in the long term. But surely, this is based on a misunderstanding.

That a life can be happy but meaningless follows already from our story of the dream machine above. But a life can also be meaningful and yet unhappy. Imagine for example a person who devotes his whole life to the care of an irritable invalid parent or to a severely disabled and suffering child. Such a person, as we shall see, may have a meaningful life, but she may also be unhappy.

But why should anyone want to lead such a life. Why should we not always prefer happiness over against meaningfulness or valuableness? For the simple reason that happiness does not endure: it is a momentary thing that comes and goes. There is nothing which can guarantee that happiness will endure. Thus there might come a point where you can look back at your life and say: 'I surely was happy'. But that's all you can say. The happiness itself will be gone.

Chapter 3
Achievements

Achievements and Accomplishments

You like to climb mountains. You have already scaled many of the tallest peeks in the country and you are looking forward to scaling Mount Washington. During the night, however, your kidnappers drug you and fly you by helicopter to the top of Mount Washington, why they set you free. You had a goal, which was to reach the top of Mount Washington. Well, there you are. But there is a sense in which you have not reached your goal nonetheless. For your goal was not simply to be at the top of Mount Washington, but rather to get there in the right sort of way, which means: by your own efforts and at a time of your choosing. If you yourself climb the mountain then this is your achievement. If you are dumped by someone else at the top of the mountain, then this is something else entirely.

{We can now formulate by another part of our thesis it is *achievement* which from the central part of what makes a life meaningful. In this chapter we shall give an outline of the structure of achievements—which involve the setting of goals and striving to realize them (and also the possibility of failure). Another way to formulate our thesis would then read as follows, that climb the mountain is your achievement. If you dumped by someone else at the top of the mountain, then this is something else entirely. ....}

You are kidnapped.

What matters in life, what makes life worth living, is that you yourself can create goals and that you yourself can fulfil them. When you set a goal, it matters that it is you that sets it and it matters that it is you who is involved in and responsible for realizing it.

Achievement

When we have realized a goal, we have achieved something. We said above that happiness does not last. It comes and goes. If you have achieved something, on the other hand, you can look back on what you have achieved and see how it has shaped your life in a meaningful way. You might still have the results of your achievement. If you are a good parent, your children will still be there. If you have won a swimming championship, the trophy might still be there.

Secondly, there is an essential difference between *being happy* and *being meaningful. Being happy* is essentially episodic. *Being meaningful* applies to portions of reality in a quite different way, for example, to poems, achievements, and so forth. To see what this means, we shall a distinction between *activities*, *achievements* and *accomplishments*.

John is eating in a bar. When John is done eating, he begins to drink. He drinks in the bar for a few hours, and then he climbs into a taxi which drives him home. When he gets home he climbs out of the taxi and he enters his house. All of these are *activity* on John's part. John's life is, like everyone else's, a never ending chain of activities, with no real beginnings or endings. An activity

is whatever you are doing over a certain interval of time: walking, talking, humming, tapping your feet. An activity is not bounded in time in and of itself. It can be a bit shorter or a bit longer and still be the same activity.

But there is more to life than mere activities. That is, we can describe a life not solely in terms of the activities it contains. For our activities can be part of something larger, something which is intrinsically bounded in time because it has a clear end. Your activity of running can be part of running a race. Your activities of sawing and nailing can be part of making a chair, or they can be part of teaching someone how to saw and nail. Jackie's walking may be part of her daily exercise. Phil's moving around the living room with his vacuum cleaner may be part of his weekly vacuum cleaning of the house.

If you complete your daily exercise or your weekly vacuum cleaning then you have *accomplished* something. An *accomplishment* is an action that involves a beginning and an end. Examples of accomplishments are: a mother's feeding her children, Gloria's making a chair, Susan's painting a picture. Accomplishments are completed activities. A lot of walking makes up a *walk*. A lot of arm and leg movements make up a *swimming*. A lot of blowing and banging makes up a performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony.

Accomplishments, too, are an important part of what it is that makes our life meaningful. Above all it is the final, culminating part of an accomplishment, what makes it an accomplishment, which contributes to meaning. We shall henceforth use the term 'achievement' to cover just this culminating part of an accomplishment. It is an achievement when Gloria finishes making a chair, when Mary reaches the top of the mountain, or when Paula finds just the dueling pistols she has been looking for.

Sometimes, when we are low in motivation, we engage in activities with no particular goal-floating through life like corks in a sea of meaninglessness. Most often, however, the activities we engage in depend on some result we are seeking to achieve. Peter cannot *find* something if he was not looking for it. Mary cannot *reach* the top of the mountain if she was not somehow on her way there. Igor cannot *win* the chess game if he has not been playing chess. Achievements thus cannot come about without both prior activities and also prior intentions. If Mary reaches the top of the mountain by accident, then this is no achievement on her part.

Consider Peter who wants to get a role in a play at the local theater. He has set himself this goal long before the cashing decisions will be made and he has been practicing his acting skills in the time leading up to the audition. Peter gives of his best in the audition and he is chosen to play just the role he had in mind. Peter has achieved something. This achievement is part of what makes his life meaningful.

Unfortunately, to accumulate achievements in the simple sense presented here need not be enough to guarantee a meaningful life. For there are many actions that would count as achievements but which are yet trivial. Let us suppose, for example, that Lisa turned on the television in her living room. This is an achievement in the sense defined above: that is, it is the result of an action bounded in time, with a determinate beginning and ending, and the result of a deliberate intention. But it does not seem reasonable to suppose that it is in and of itself enough of an achievement to contribute to the meaningfulness of Lisa's life.

Lisa's turning on the television does indeed mark a physical boundary in time—the beginning of the flow of electric current through her television set. Consider, in contrast, the case of Peter, who wants to run a mile in a straight line. Here nothing other than the fit with what Peter wants marks out the end of his run as a boundary. When he has run one mile, he might decide to run another mile, and so on. The boundaries of the one mile run are fiat boundaries marked out but purely by Peter's desire. We can accordingly divide into two classes. On the one hand are what we shall call accomplishments, such as turning on the TV are fiat accomplishments. Others, like making a chair, are bona fide accomplishments. They can be such that a genuine product really comes into existence as a result of the activities in question.

But we still need to face the problem that some of those things that would be called 'accomplishments' according to our analysis thus far are not in fact genuine accomplishments as these are ordinarily conceived. Turning on the television set is not the only case of this sort. Consider Jackie's recovering from an illness. This *might* be a genuine accomplishment if Jackie is fighting, as we say, against a serious disease. She makes a superhuman effort of will and recovers from her illness. But if Jackie has the flu and lies passively in the bed

and waits until it is over, then we can hardly say that this is a genuine accomplishment on Jackie's part.

So something more than *mere* achievement is needed. We might say that achievements, in order to contribute to the meaningfulness of your life, must themselves be meaningful. Then, however, we are going round in circles and the concept of achievement cannot help us further.

What is needed, rather, is that there be some measure of how well you do in realizing your goal—standards of right and wrong, of success and failure. Only where such a standard or measure exists can there be a genuine achievement, and only a genuine achievement can contribute to the meaningfulness of your life. Suppose you want to make a cake. The measure of your success is: *how the cake tastes*, *how you and other people like it*. And those other people should be honest, and critical and people who know about cake: not the sort of people who will tell you your cake tastes good just because they feel sorry for you. Suppose you want to build a house. The measure of your success is in how good the house looks, how comfortable it is to live in, how well it fits into its setting, and so on. In part, time will tell how good your house is to live in. In part experts will decide how well it is build what contributes to the meaningfulness of your life is then not just the fact that it is built but the whole process of saving up to build the house, planning it, building it, care for it, and living in it. Each of these are feature of the wholes achievement which may help to bring it about that you lead a meaningful life.

Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderful* describes a race in which everybody wins. There is something eery about such a race. There is a Monty Python sketch which has six swimmers lined up at one end of an Olympic-sized pool. The tension builds as the official with the starting trigger moves to his position near the end of the line. He raises his pistol and fires. What happens then is that the six Monty Python characters just jump into the pool and stand in the water staring into spaces. What is wrong, here, is that where everyone wins, there is no measure of success, and where there is no measure of success, there is no achievement.

The world must contain measures. Meaningful lives can exist only in *a world which contains measures of success and failure of achievement*. We *create* a world allowing meaningful lives by having meaningful lives which create and

sustain such standards/measures: in law, chess, religion, art, in family life, politics, science. There are standards of success in child rearing, in home-making, teaching, learning, and so on. Such standards may themselves need to be created and sustained, they may need to be nurtured through the efforts of many other persons spread out through time and space, and their creation and upholding of such standards may well achievements on their part, which contribute in turn to meaningfulness of their lives in light of yet in further standards of success and failure ever widening circle.

We create meaning in the way in which national boundaries are drawn on the map to create nations. The existence of Israel gives meaning (or an extra dimension of meaning) of the lives of people both inside and outside the border.

Means and Ends

The most important types of genuine achievements will then be ends in themselves, in sense which can be explained as follows. Writing, poetry, raising a family, watching a movie—all of these are *ends in themselves*. What this means is that people usually do not writing poetry or raise a family in order to achieve some other, different end. On the other hand, making up a lunch box for your children, balancing your checkbook, buying a newspaper, doing your homework—all of these are *means to an end.* You make up a lunch-box for your children because it is a means to: the end of getting your children fed.

There are also mixed cases, cases which might equally well serve as ends and as means. Examples are: driving your new red sports car, trying out your new red shoes, reading the newspaper, playing chess, sleeping, swimming twenty lanes in the pool, making love, looking at a map of Venice, looking at the stars through your telescope.

Is the hour you spend watching television a mere means or is it an end in itself? Well, that depends on why you're watching. If you're watching a do-it-yourself program to find out how to make a chair, then it is a means to something else. If you're watching a movie for the pleasure it will bring, then it's an end in itself.

Achievements that are merely means to an end we shall call 'instrumental'. They are instruments to some goal. Our focus, now, will be on those

achievements which are non-instrumental—on those things that we do *for their own sake*.

The Flow of Activities

Our lives are sequences of activities. Each activity is continued by another activity in time. Some activities, as we say, have boundaries—winning a race, or making a chair. But now a problem arises. For if events continue each other in time, if they form a continuous sequence so that there are no gaps, then it seems that boundaries between events are a matter of mere fiat. This is a problem, because we can draw fiat boundaries wherever we like. Then, however, accomplishments would not be set apart as somehow different from mere activities. Even if Mary gets half way up the mountain and then loses interest in her project, she still has this much of an achievement to her credit—she did manage to get half way up the mountain. But now, if we are not careful, whatever we do will end up counting as an achievement of some sort, and we are back with the race which everybody wins.

What, then, separates genuine accomplishments from those which are the products of mere fiat? Suppose Gloria makes a chair. She takes some wood and puts it together, perhaps with considerable skill. Her accomplishment brings something into existence which was not there before. The coming into existence of the chair constitutes a genuine boundary in time. It is true that those of Gloria's activities which were involved in making the chair were caught up in the flow of her life in such a way that they were all of them continued immediately by other activities. But her accomplishment is nonetheless genuine, because it is genuinely separated off from all that happens in the future by the coming into existence of the chair.

Or suppose that Dick writes a term-paper. He takes out his laptop and begins to write down what comes into his head. When he is finished he prints out what he has written and needs it through, proudly anticipating what his professor will say when it is handed in on time the next morning. Again: Dick's accomplishment brings something into existence, which was not there before. Even though it is continued by and continues many other activities, it is still a genuine accomplishment

Or suppose that John and Mary are getting married. The actual wedding is an accomplishment. For even though it is continued by and continues other activities and events in the lives of John and Mary, still the wedding ceremony causes something to come into existence, namely: John and Mary as husband and wife, the two of them joined together in marriage, the kernel of a new family.

Accomplishment takes Effort

In order for something to be a genuine accomplishment, then we need to have the following components: a goal, some measure or standard of success and failure, the reaching of this goal and the coming into being of some lasting product. But we need also a third component, the component of effort on your part. Your string to achieve the goal. Suppose John gets the red sports car he always wanted by inheriting it from his aunt. The car is not an accomplishment on John's part. Getting the car may make John happy, but it does not in and of itself contribute anything to the meaningfulness of his life. Or consider Sandy, whose children turn out to be good kids, not because Sandy was there to help and guide them when they needed her, but because they were lucky enough to have good friends and good teachers. That the children turn out to be good kids is not a genuine accomplishment on Sandy's part. Of course, Sally could be there for her children in an indirect sense by choosing the right sorts of babysitters, but if she herself is doing nothing for her children, then her being a mother does not contribute to the meaningfulness of her life. If the children contribute anything to the meaningfulness of her life, then it is only as a result of the fact that they were born—to Sally—a long long time ago.

A genuine achievement thus requires effort. But effort alone is not enough: what is accomplished must also be something that the agent desires. The agent must want something to be the case and she must believe that exerting herself in this way can bring it about.

Even this is not enough however. For many achievements are collective—they can be brought about by no single person acting alone. That is, many of the things that you achieve—many of your genuine accomplishments were brought about not through your activity alone but also through the activities or accomplishments of others. Peter wants to build a house. He might

hire people to do the work or he might build it with his friends. But in either case he has still accomplished something by bringing it about that the house be built. It was his goal that it be built and he believed, rightly, that these particular architects, builders, plumbers, painters, and so forth could help him to realize this goal. Even here, then, there must still be some effort on the part of John if the accomplishment is to be counted as an accomplishment on his behalf. His effort must relate in the right sort of way to the realization of his goal.

Other People

How do other persons play a role in our life plans? We maintain contacts with people that have been part of plans or are somehow involved in bringing about our goals. We make friends, and maintenance of friendships affects our life, it affects the beliefs and memories we have. We have a natural tendency to maintain beliefs and memories about persons that are somehow still related to our life plans. We acquire beliefs about the people that we think can be involved in bringing about the goals of our plans. Jody works on ethics. She meets John at a conference and she sees that they have similar idea and interests. They become friends. She talks with him about philosophical matter, about, virtue, ethics; he comes to play a specific role in her life. Jody might also become friends with her doctor or her lawyer. They will play a different role in her life.

We see that a life can involve a complex tapestry of friendship, of conversations and exchanges and collaborations with friends and colleagues which stretch out across your life and contribute to holding together, to giving meaning. And here too we see the gulf between a meaningful life and a happy life—having friends brings responsibilities, the possibility of sadness.

Choices

Our life plan is involved in the choices we make along the way. For example, people have children that become parts of their life plans. The achievements of the children might be part of the life plan of the parents without actually being the parents' achievements. Because our children are parts of our life plan we will do things for our children—including adopted children—which we would

normally not do for the children of others. Suppose your son and some stranger's son are both about to drown in a nearby lake. You will not have time to save them both. You naturally save your son before you save the stranger's son. The reason for this is that your son is a part of your life plan, and we make our choices according to the whole plan we have for our life. The whole plan involves goals that we want to achieve, not this or that particular result, but some general idea of we want to happen in order to have lived a good life. These goals can include: raise a family. Children are like friends, and colleagues. They too add layers of conversation and collaboration to your life.

Consider what happens in the middle of a military campaign when the commander issues to his troops a warning order to the effect that a new operation will begin at dawn in two days time. The troops adopt the new mission as their own and new measures of their correct behavior are formed, new goals, new obligations sprout up like spring crocus. What is conveyed in the warning order is intended to create group interaction, resulting in a staggered chain of events according to a precise time table. The mission statement conveys to the troops all of the subordinate tasks which they will be called upon to perform. The order to attack entails that a route to the objective must be planned, weapons must be cleaned, teams must be designated for support and assault, radios must be cued, and so on. Many of these tasks are never explicitly stated. Rather, they have been established through standard operating procedures which have been drilled into the troops since the beginning of their training. It is helpful to think of the order process as a chain reaction or a snowball effect. A simple order touches off a truly remarkable chain of events wherein each participant performs one small part of an otherwise impossible task.

These remarks a collective achievement, are important because, given our remarks above on the ways in which other people are involved in creation and nurturity of the measures of success of our achievements, it follows that every achievement, it follows that every achievement is in a certain sense a collective achievement. We can understand the nature of the glue which binds together collective achievements by considering the role in social affairs of the set of

making promises.

Chapter 4

Promises and other social acts

Accomplishments Always Bring Something New Into Existence

We said that genuine accomplishments bring something new into existence, that there is always some genuine product, whose beginning to exist marks a genuine boundary in time. This is clear in the case of accomplishments like making a chair or writing a book. But it holds, too, in less obvious cases. Consider what happens when you make a promise. Suppose that John promises Peter to help him build his house. What happens when John makes the promises is that *a new obligation comes into existence*, a special sort of relation between John and Peter which will remain in existence until John has fulfilled his promise and the house is built. Here the obligation, the new thing that comes into existence, is not the sort of thing you can touch or move around, like a chair or a book. But it exists nonetheless. Similarly, for marriage bonds. When two people declare in public that they intend to spend the rest of their lives together, this brings something new into existence, namely the bond between them which will survive and affect their lives in myriad ways even when they are far apart and thinking of quite other things. Similarly for new songs, new cures, new drugs, new theorems, and so forth. Making a new law or finding a new cure is an accomplishment which involves the coming into existence a new kind of abstract thing. There are also accomplishments which do not involve some new thing's coming into existence, but rather the beginning to an *end* of something.

The doctor brings about the terminates of a disease. Soldiers and statesmen end a war.

It is an accomplishment to climb a mountain. But what sort of product does it bring into existence? Peter has done something, yet no physical product like a chair and no social product like a marriage bond is created thereby. What is it, then, which sets Peter's accomplishment of climbing a mountain apart from the continuous flow of activities that continues on behind it?

Peter has certain desires. He tells people about them. He becomes obligated to them and to himself to reach the top. Against this background reaching the top does create something—it creates the fulfilment of these obligations in a way which helps to keep Johnon a sound fooling with regard to his social surroundings.

This example reminds us that it is sometimes harder to achieve something if other people are not involved. Suppose you promise to yourself that you will quit smoking or that you will quit biting your nails or coming too late to work. But you do not tell anybody else about your promise. You are then obligated only to yourself. If you fail to realize your promise, then it is only yourself that you have to face, not the rest of the world. There is no one else who is a witness to your promise. Religion plays the role of making it easier for people to live meaningful lives, because they believe that there is always someone watching over them whenever they make promises or embrace goals of other sorts.

What is a promise?

When you make a promise, a claim and an obligation come into existence. But what is a promise? What are you doing when you say 'I promise to help you with your homework after supper?' Are you just stating a fact: that you will help with the homework after supper? No, there is more to promising than that. Nor are you just expressing your desire or intention to help with the homework.

Rather, in uttering those words you are *binding yourself*, you are making yourself answerable to the other person. As you acquire an obligation to him, so he acquires a claim on you. But how can a mere utterance give rise to an obligation and a claim? The bare intention to do something has, after all, no consequences of this sort, and it is difficult to see why things should be different merely because the intention is spoken out loud.

This is not a matter restricted to our purely personal affairs. Promises are involved also in the signing of contracts, in business agreements, in partnerships and in all the larger and small-scale projects by which things get made or built. Each of these involves the bringing into being of obligation mutually correlated claims. These claims and obligations are nothing physical. But they also go beyond the purely psychological. You can believe that you are under an obligation when you are not. And you can be under an obligation without believing that this is so. Claims and obligations are, rather, entities of a third kind. Like physical and psychological entities they have an origin in time and history. But unlike these they are not subject to continuous causal changes. They are human creations whose nature is like that of rules of chess. When once they been created, they go on existing in an unchanging, abstract way, in large degree independently of the events much go around them..

A promise involves in the simplest case two persons: the one who makes the promise and the one who accepts it. A promise cannot be made unless both of the persons involved are conscious and in full possession of their faculties. If a friend promises to help you build your house, then you must both intend that this promise be fulfilled. Of course, promises can be broken. But when you make a promise, then you must at least at the time you make it intend to fulfil it—otherwise you did not make a promise at all, you just pretended to do so. Because, when you make a genuine promise you do intend to fulfil it, you will in fact often do so. Promising is thus usually reliable. It is a reliable instrument for improving social coordination. We have meetings and invite people over for dinner and we fly in airplanes because promises are usually successful. Making

a promise puts constraints on the future. It creates real relations in the world that in most cases result in future real effects. It thus on the one hand narrows the future, but it can also open up the future by making more things possible.

When John promises Peter that he will help him build his house, John becomes obliged to Peter, and this obligation also has a moral dimension. If John fails to fulfil his obligation we can hold him to blame for what results. He is to blame if he does not have a *good* excuse for breaking his promise—for example, because he fell ill or was involved in an accident or if the promise could not be fulfilled, for example, because his truck break down. If, on the other hand, John just breaks his promise just because he doesn't feel like building a house, then he is morally to blame.

Promises, claims and obligations belong to the realm of social objects. Other examples of social objects are nations, orchestras, religions, airline timetables. Social objects form a new dimension of being within the world. They have their own lives, their own characteristic ways of being born and sometimes dying; they have their own qualities and states, and their own ways of functioning in collaboration or in interaction with each other. They are dependent on historical circumstances and are subject to more and less regular and intelligible patterns of change. The game of chess has existed for many centuries, and it will continue to exist for some time in the future. It has been able to survive even in spite of radical changes in the population of those who are involved in keeping it alive. The Hungarian nation has existed for many centuries, and it will continue to exist for some time in the future. It has been able to survive in spite of radical change in its people and in the people who rule it.

Promises can be interlinked to form large webs involving many different groups of people interlinked by many different types of social objects. Airline timetables are large interlinked webs of this sort. It is made and sustained in existence by many people, it has built in measure of success, it rests on slowly evolving traditions and allows people to act in complex ways which, without it, would be impossible.

We live in a world that is structured through and through by a scaffolding of many different types of social objects.

Thus, we are not just drifting in a physical world, without order and direction social objects—the meanings, rules, obligations, the groups to which we belong, provide order and guidance to our lives. Just as we are caught up in a web of physical causality so we are caught up in a web of obligations, meanings, responsibility. They make us what we are, and we can test ourselves against them. And if we pass the test, so move ourselves into a new level—as mother, as husband, as a mayor, as cheerleader for our local football team.

Bringing New Entities Into Existence

Thus we see that it is not only physical actions which can give rise to specific kinds of enduring products such as chairs or paintings or children. Diplomas, marriages, term papers, political proclamatives, theorems, laws, songs, are also products of human action that endure. Many types of action have rise, when they are successful to corresponding products of this sort proving gives rise to proofs. Sometimes, however, actions give rise to products in incorrect ways, for example, involving cheating or lying. We can thus distinguish between what might be called *real products* on the one hand and *fake products* on the other. Real products are governed by a mental process of the right sort. The most important case again is making promises. Suppose Phil promises Sue that he will vacuum-clean the living room. Phil's promise must then be governed by the right sort of intention: to actually do the vacuum-clean in and to do it for the right sort of reasons. For fake products, on the other hand, the process is defective. If Phil merely utters the words promise to vacuum-clean the living room but does not in fact intend to do so, then obligation comes into existence, but something much messier (an expectation on Sue's part, it is not a false belief on her part as to phil's intentions). We are interested here in real products, and in products that endure in children, families, communities, on the one hand, in drawings, buildings, sculptures, on the other. Shakespeare died centuries ago,

but people still read his poems and perform his plays. Shakespeare is a sage whose thought live on. These thoughts have been materialized in a form that permits them to continue having effects on the lives of each successive generation. Shakespeare led a meaningful life. ?? There is thus some correlation between the degree to which the products of our activities endure and the degree to which their creation contributes to making our lives meaningful. But matters are complicated. First, we can surely imagine that Shakespeare had lived and created exactly as he did, but that for some quite accidental reason his works did not long survive. His life would then, we hold, have had exactly the same meaningfulness as it has, in our actual world—the difference would be that we would not know about Shakespeare and his works. But even this is not quite right: if you spend your life writing poetry and the entirety of your work is burned in a fire, or if you brind a child into the world and the child dies in a terrible accident, then these things do, somehow, affect the meaningfulness of your life, in ways we still need to explore.

When we say that the thoughts of the sage live on, we mean that his actions have affected others and have led them to produce thoughts similar to his. This is achieved through durable physical products, which are expressions of transient mental processes. The discovery of writing a new level of complexity in the web of social objects. The sentence expresses the thought, the drawing expresses the image, the building expresses the plan.

An idea to improve your local community can become expressed as a new law. Practicing football can become expressed in the trophy on the shelf in your living room. Paintings, trophies, diplomas, cathedrals are, we say, *meaningful*. They are not dead physical objects, but have meaning embodied within them. Such meaning exists only where there are mental activities to grasp and recognize it. Even when no relevant mental process is taking place, however, the meaning may still be said to exist potentially. A painting has meaning wrapped up inside it. The meaning is there, held in readiness, waiting to be grasped by other people in the future.

A poem or a contract, a law or a national monument is similarly has meaning held in readiness within it. Certainly, the meanings evoked by a poem in different people and at different times are not identical. But for all who speak the same language it is able to invoke roughly similar experiences and feelings. The meanings we grasp degree similar.

Not all acts in the social realm bring new meaningful products into being. Consider what we call 'signaling to turn left'. In traffic the flashing light is significant because our predecessors made some more or less arbitrary rules which control the ways motorists behave today. These are rules which bring it about that certain events (flashings of lights, moving over to the left side of the road, slowing down, etc.) count as signaling to turn left and thereby come to be associated with these or those consequences.

Such rules are merely regulative. They regulate our behavior in a way which—again because of the enduring background of social objects in which we live—makes this behavior meaningful to other people. Regulative rules are neutral: we have to have them but what the say does not in the end matter. It is a rule in America that you must drive on the right. All that matters is that we all agree on this choice. Other rules, though, are much more than this—the rules of chess, or of region, or of town planning do matter, because these rules bring new objects into existence.

If a priest utters the world 'I declare you man and wife' at a certain point in a wedding ceremony then two people become joined together as man and wife. It is obvious here that one person's mere act of will would not be able to bring about an effect of this sort. Something more is needed, the people involved must be part of a web of social objects, and something is added to this social web when these words are uttered in this particular context.

Promising Brings a New Object into Existence

Something happens when you say sincerely ‘I promise you that I will do the dishes tonight’. In performing this social act, you change the world. Your act is very unlike a passive experiences of, say, feeling a pain or hearing an explosion. You change the world by speaking aloud and in public against the background of an existing web of expectations, habits, institutions in the society in which you live. Commands, too bring about changes in the world of a similar sort, and so also do accusations, apologies, complaints, warnings, congratulations. You cannot apologize or command or accuse or complain without saying something or giving some explicit sign, and without this explicit sign being taken up in the right sort of way by the one to whom it is addressed. Your promise needs, too, a sincere intention or act of will. A parrot cannot make a promise by saying ‘I promise you 100 dollars’. This is because a parrot cannot intend to fulfill a promise.

Just as a rock has an internal structure of molecules, atoms and so on, so an act of promising has an internal structure made up of parts linked together in specific ways. The same structure can be realized at any time and place. Promising thus is what philosophers call a universal or a natural kind. The links between the different parts of the promise. They regularities, structures of a sort which are both meaningful and familiar. Promising is an intelligible structure. In this it is like triangles, colors: we seem to enjoy a special kind of cognitive access to things of these sorts. That is, we can understand them and grasp them immediately. That blue is not a shape, or that nothing can be simultaneously red and green all over, or that a promise cannot exist unless it gives rise to a claim and obligation—these seem to be things we know, not merely through perception and learning, but directly. Promises seem to possess an intrinsic intelligibility of their own: they can be grasped immediately. The promise itself exists to the extent that these links are instantiated here and now in the right sorts of ways in the realm of particular instances.

What are the parts of the promise? Some we have met already: there is a promiser, there is an act of speaking and an act of understanding, there is a

certain content and an intention to realize this content through actions in the future, and there is a tendency on the part of the speaker toward realization of this content through his own actions, and there is a certain intended benefit on the part of the one toward whom the promise is addressed.

An act of willing or commanding or promising gives rise to a tendency that the content of the act be realized. This tendency is also something people seem to know without having to experience it or perceive it first.

Breaking Promises

Why should you keep your promises. Because breaking a promise lets down other people who have formed expectations and made plans concerning their future conduct in light of what we have promised. It is thus because we disrupt other people's plans that we should keep our promises. This is to say whether our promise takes the form of a promise to help with the washing up, or the form of an entire airline that timetable.

The Social Web of Meaning

The things in the world can be divided into two sorts. On the one hand are independent things—those things which exist, and go on existing in their own right independently of our thinking or believing. A lion or a rock are examples of things which exist independently in this way. On the other hand are dependent kinds of things such as smiles, salutes, chess moves, obligations and promises. These are things which do not exist in and of themselves but only in virtue of the fact that we think and act in certain ways. The world contains promisings, obligatings, claims, commands, laws and relations of authority, in contains rules of grammar, chess and of aesthetics, songs and poems, nations and religions. We can think of all, of three taken together as forming the social web of meanings, which structures our lives a human being.

We tend the web of social meanings—as we tend a garden—pulling up weeds, resolving clashes of color, laying down new flower beds, but sometimes also harboring, plotting revenge.

Chapter 5

Plans

Plans and Accomplishments

Peter wants a bottle of whisky. He believes that walking across the street to the liquor store and buying it will realize his desire. He makes an effort to walk across the street. He succeeds in buying the whisky.

When Peter gets back home he has a new desire: he wants to drunk his whisky. He believes that unscrewing the bottle and pouring whisky into his glass, putting the glass to his mouth and drinking from it will realize his new desire. He puts an effort into the realization of this desire too, and once again he succeeds. But does he really accomplish anything? This example reminds us that there is more to accomplishment than wanting something, believing that there or those means can bring it about, and putting an effort into realizing what you want.

Peter's drinking Whisky is not a genuine accomplishment in the sense we introduced earlier. At best it might be part of an accomplishment—for example part of celebrating the conclusion of a great project. But it is not an accomplishment in itself.

Why not? Well, one reason is that it is too easy. Another reason is that it is not associated with any standard or measure of success. It merely satisfies some desire on Peter's part, and in this it is too closely related to the actions of animals. The lion hunts its prey out of instinct; he is wired to satisfy his need to

eat in just this way. The spider spins its web, and the web is an enduring, perhaps even a meaningful product. But it represents no achievement, because the spider, just, spins its web. This brings us to a new idea in our account of how genuine achievements sense to make our lives meaningful. Genuine achievements, in contrast, go hand in hand with a willingness to sacrifice one goal for the sake of another or to delay immediate gratification for the sake of the future realization of one's wishes. In short, they go hand in hand with some process of planning. Young children are normally quite plan their behavior in this respect—they are unwilling to delay gratification for the sake of some valuable outcome in the future. Whatever it is that they do, they just in this sense. They have what economists call a high time preference. Genuine achievements, on the other hand, of the sort that can contribute meaning to your life will characteristically be those which involve a degree of planning—and a life spent satisfying each successive desire of the moment—a life in which you always give way to your immediate hedonistic impulses—does not leave room for that sort of long-term planning which makes genuine achievements possible.

What is a Plan?

Amelia is a mother of six children. She is a good mother, and she has always provided her children with food and loving care. Bridget is a violinist in an orchestra in which she plays every night. Carla is a football fan and she follows closely the matches of her team from week to week. Zeno is a happy and successful chicken farmer. Each, one way or another, has made plans and is engaged in realizing them.

A plan involves several components. First there is a goal, a desire to bring something about in the future. Second there is the belief that this or that series of actions will satisfy this desire. Third there is some knowledge of way the world works on which this belief rests. Finally comes the realization of the plan—which may itself, as we shall see be very coplicated.

Plans are devices to bring about controlled changes in the future. We can bring about such changes only by doing something today that will have consequences tomorrow. In order to act in the world, we need not only to have desires about what we want to achieve, we also need to have beliefs about how these desires can be brought about which rest on sound knowledge of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. A plan must involve of what will actually lead to a realization of your goal, knowledge of how one action will to another and how this will lead to a third action and so forth. This implies some knowledge of the regularities which obtain in the world and of the causal connections which obtain between events of different sorts. We have this knowledge because we have earlier experienced such regularities in experiencing events of similar sorts for example in experiencing the regularities in the behavior of others. Our actions in reliable ways raise the probability that what we want to happen will indeed happen in the future.

The first thing that we notice is that—in contrast to Peter's activity of buying whisky—activity in accordance with a plan—does not involve a result that can be achieved right away. We do not need a plan to walk across the street. But we do need a plan, indeed all sorts of plans, to become a good parent. To become a good parent we must know many things about childrens' needs, we must plan to provide for these needs, we must make sure to feed them and raise them correctly. And before all of this, of course, we must fall in love, and we must make a home together without partner. And clearly, something might go wrong at any stage. Bringing children into the world involves risk and sacrifice. But we will have no chance at all of succeeding unless we act in accordance with plans, with forethought, with sacrifice and with the willingness to delay gratification.

Plans can be long-term or short-term but they are in every case directed towards the future. We may need a plan to achieve something very simple, such as meeting a certain person at a certain time next week. We must make sure that we remember the meeting, that we make no other appointments at the same

time, that we actually arrive at the meeting place at the right time, and so forth. A plan is involved whenever we have desires that cannot be realized immediately.

Plans may involve a whole network of sub-plans. Most importantly, plans may involve not only you but also many people.

Suppose you take your family to Hawaii. It is not just you and your family who are involved, but also the people who drive the cabs and fly the planes; the people who make the timetables for the planes, the people who check your ticket, the people who run and staff your hotel and many more people of whose existence you are likely unaware. Using planes, cabs, hotels and restaurant to realize our plans presupposes, again, that we are living in a web of social meanings held together by a great deal of reliability and trust. The more we are surrounded by people we can trust, the more elaborate are the plans we can realize. If you could not trust all the other people, sometimes many other people far and wide, who are needed to make your plans work, you could not make those plans—you would have to make other plans which would be either less ambitious or far more difficult to realize. If your plan involves sending a package from Dallas to Quebec, but you could not count on the people who were supposed to send it, then your plan will fail, or you might have to waste time with a back-up plan. If your plan involves having your car registered, but you could not count on the people in the insurance office and in the motor vehicle office to do their jobs on time, then not only this plan but also other plans might fail—you have no car—and you would have to abandon the plans you made and replace them with other, almost certainly less satisfactory, alternatives. If you make an arrangement to have your friend help you build your house on a certain weekend, then you expect your friend to keep her promise and to be there when you need her. There are of course no guarantees that she will in fact turn up—life does not come with generates—but making an arrangement of this sort is one of the many things you must do in order to raise

the probability that you will indeed realize the sorts of plans which lead to genuine achievements.

Responsibility and the web of meanings.

If we are to be able to rely on people to fulfil their obligations—including people we may never meet and with whom we have a purely inpersonal relationship—then we must live in a society where people are held responsible for their actions. If we can be sure that there will be negative consequences for us if we fail to live up to our responsibilities, then this will focus our minds in the right sorts of ways and maximize the likelihood of that sort of large-scale coordination which is needed if the social web of meanings is to be sustained. We should live in a society in which the right sorts of consequences follow from our actions—a society in which we are rewarded for doing the right thing and punished for doing wrong.

Hayek says in *The Constitution of Liberty*: 'the chief reason why we should be held wholly responsible for our decisions is that this will direct our attention to those causes of events that depend on our actions.'

We can see what happens when things go wrong in this respect pointed out by Hayek if we consider the life of Joseph K. K.'s life is meaningless precisely because things happen to him over which he has no control and for reasons about which he has no knowledge. He is arrested one morning, but the warders who come to arrest him, who are dressed like tourists, can give no meaningful explanation of why he is under arrest. He is brought before the Inspector, who briefly and vaguely interrogates him. The Inspector then informs K. that he may go to work, where he receives a call summoning him to a court interrogation on Sunday, but no time is given. K. arrives at to a large apartment building at 9a.m. on Sunday from where he is after a time directed to the Court of Inquiry by a washerwoman. There he enters a large room with a row of important men on a stage, who berate him for being late. K. responds with a speech in which he

consists that there must have been some mistake, since he hasn't been told of any charges against him. The crowd applauds the speech, which is brought to an end by a woman's shriek from outside the room. When Joseph returns a week later. The same washerwoman tells him that these are low-level courts and that whatever happens will be of little significance, since higher courts can always re-arrest someone again for the same offence. K. is then led through a maze of dark corridors lined with men waiting for news of their case. After six months, during which the charges against him have still not been explained, K. is told that he needs a lawyer, but he ends up talking to a painter who specializes in portraits of judges. After K. assures him of his innocence, the painter goes through his options: he can try for actual acquittal, but this is never granted or he can try, for apparent acquittal, which will only bring on further trials, or he can try for protraction, which means that the case will be kept forever at the lowest levels but must be watched carefully. On the eve of his birthday, two men rake Joseph for a walk around the city. They begin passing a butcher's knife over Joseph's head and then one of them stabs him, twisting the knife twice, and killing him 'like a dog.'

History and Tradition

Towns, cities, universities, regiments, chess clubs, churches—all of these can sustain themselves through time even though they gain and lose members from one generation to the next. They can continue to exist even while some of their participants depart and others take their places. When a new member joins a chess club or an old member leaves, then it is still the same chess club. Languages, religions, legal systems and many other sorts of institutions do not depend for their existence upon *specific* individuals or groups; rather, they depend *generically* on the existence of individuals or groups fulfilling certain roles.

A language, a religion or a legal system is dependent on those individuals and groups who serve, in their actions, to instantiate the corresponding rules, beliefs and customs, but they are not dependent on any particular persons. Thus

a chess club is dependent on people who want to play chess and who want to be band by certain rules, and who want to create and sustain a forum in which they can fulfil their goal of playing—and winning—at chess, a forum for genuine achievement.

The game of chess club has a long a history. It represents a tradition that has developed slowly over many hundreds of years. When you play chess, and you play to win, you achieve something if you realize this goal. It is then true that we can make up goals for ourselves and then set about attempting to realize them. But we cannot make up just any old goal. We cannot make up the goal of winning at chess by poisoning our opponent, or by setting fire to the chessboard or by moving the pieces at random about the board. Why not? Because (laws, rules, habits) of the traditions of chess are part of an enduring background web of social meanings to which you have committed yourself and to which you re-commit yourself each time you sit down to play chess.

Chess has clear standards of success and failure. There again a complex social web of meanings that extends, through chess associations, competitions and medals, across the entire world. In world of chess there are standards for what is worth striving for. Everyone who knows something about parenting knows that there are standards for what is good and bad parenting. These standards can change, but they change only slowly, and they do not change, and they cannot be set out of action, in response to some single person's whim.

Chapter 6

The Constraints on Planning

Plans and Sub-Plans

Our larger plans consist of various smaller sub-plans which need to be realized in succession. In order to go to the theater, you need to buy a ticket for the play. Planning to buy a ticket is a sub-plan of your overall plan. Plans are made of plans. Unlike many other objects, the parts we distinguish in a plan

belong to the same category as the whole. You can plan to go to the theater next Saturday with your friend. That involves planning to invite your friend, planning to write down in the calendar that you have made arrangements for next Saturday, planning to purchase the tickets—and realizing all these plans. You work out these sub-plans as you deliberate how to achieve your goal. When once you have planned to purchase the tickets you will have to plan how you get to the theater to purchase them.

But now things can go wrong. Your sub-plans cannot be organized together in the form of a mere list (do this, then do this, then do this, until you read they end). Rather, they must be organized in such a way that you can readjust the whole edifice of sub-plans, that you can recallibrate your plan, if things go wrong. If plans are to lead to genuine achievements then there must be a real possibility that perhaps you plan to drive to the theater this coming Tuesday. On Tuesday, however, you find out that it is snowing too heavily to drive and you decide to use the subway to get where. You need to go. You then need to do more planning to reach your original goal. In general we can say that the more significant your achievement the more complex will be the plans you need to realize and the greater the likelihood that things will go wrong. This is especially so if others, perhaps many, are also involved in the realization of your plan. Risk can be built into the very formulation of you plans: you plan to move to a plan to move to a new, much better job. But first you must *apply* for the job, and have your resume considered, and be called up for an interview, and perform well in the interview, and even then the decision as to whether you get the job will not be in your hands.

Constraints

There are constraints also on the sorts of plans you can make. You cannot plan to win the Lottery—not, at least, if you want to stay within the limits of the law. You cannot plan to make 2+2 equal 5. The plans we make need to be within the limits of the actual world with its set of physical and logical laws.

They need to be within the limits of the laws set by our society (can you lead a meaningful life by breaking the law? We shall come back to this question later).

The very realization of your sub-plans can have positive, meaningful consequences quite independently of their contributions to the realization of your goal. This means that the ways in which your achievements contribute to the meaningfulness of your life can be many and various. It means also that your life can be meaningful for the wrong reasons? Suppose you own a farm and you decide to have children only because you need people to work on the farm. When the children arrive, you feed them and care for them—you are a good mother—but only because you want to raise your children well to become good workers. But you *are* a good mother—and for that reason your life is meaningful. Suppose you join the swimming team in school, even though you have no particular liking for swimming because you think the swimming team will look good on your resume when it comes to college applications. You work hard to get on the team. You work even harder to stay on the team, and you start to excel as a swimmer, winning prices and medals. These achievements are genuine achievements, nonetheless, and we shall argue that they, too, will contribute to the meaningfulness of your life.

If you build a house with your friends, and you make promises, agreements, enter into obligations, then there will exist between the making of your plans and the completion of the house there will come into existence a network of social relations. This network of social relationships, too, is part of the social web of meanings in which you live, and it may very well survive the completion of your house. You have good relations with the store where you bought your lumber, you make friends with the driver of the delivery truck, you get to know your neighbors. In this way the web of social relations in which you live becomes richer and stronger. This, too, adds meaning to your life.

Suppose you desire to become rich and your plan is to buy a lottery ticket every day. This is not a good plan in our sense of the word. Certainly, you do raise your chances of winning the lottery by buying a ticket every day; but there is nothing else you can do, once you have bought the ticket, to make it more likely that you will win. You can *intend* to do your homework or to become a chicken farmer or a husband. You cannot intend to win the lottery—you can

hope that you will win. You might similarly hope that you have an uncle in Switzerland about whom you know nothing but who will leave you all his money on his death. But you cannot plan, you cannot *intend*, for this to happen. Only the things that we do which rest upon plans have the chance of amounting to genuine achievements.

Accidents

Falling in love, after all, can happen by accident, and there are many who would say that love alone is enough to make for a meaningful life. What they forget, however, is that falling in love is only the beginning of the story. If your love is to endure and to prosper and to bear fruit, then you must do something about it. You must make your life together with your loved one. And that means: you must make plans. You may fall in love a hundred times, but your love will make for a meaningful life only if, at last, you take your love in your hands and make it shape your life. It was an accident that penicillin was discovered. Tell the story in one sentence. But penicillin has saved many lives only because its discoverer saw the importance of what was happening before him and made plans to initiate further testing. Many complex plans needed then to be realized before the drug could be mass-produced and used for treatment of infections. Even an accidental event, we will argue, can contribute to making your life meaningful only if it is brought to realization in such a way as to involve the making of plans. Or suppose you believe in God. You cannot wait for things to happen. You still need to do something to bring about achievements.

The Role of the Agent

Whatever you do, if it is to represent a genuine achievement, it must be the result of a plan that you yourself have made. This can include you're a plan to collaborate with others in order to achieve some larger goal. A collective achievement is then the result of a plan that you have accepted and taken over as your own. One of your friends might suggest that the two of you go on a journey together to some remote country. When you accept her suggestion, the

plan becomes your plan. Or your boss might suggest that you take on a new role in the company, which will involve you in working much longer hours and spending long period away from home. This is something that you really do not want to do. You agree to do it, nonetheless because you would otherwise lose your job. Even so, we will argue, it is still *your* plan, a plan which you have made your own, however unattractive it might be for you to carry it out. This because it is a part of your other plans to keep the job you have, and this means accepting not only the nice features of the job but also the parts you do not like.

In every case, a plan must be realized by you in order for you to have achieved something. You must make the plan your own—whether it comes from your boss or from your friend—and its goal must be achieved by you. If you act as an automaton, passively responding to the orders of others, or to the whims of the moment, then whatever the outcome of your actions might be, it is not genuine achievement, because it is not something which you can call your own.

Suppose you are an architect. You plan to design a house together with a colleague. But you are lazy, and your colleague ends up making all the drawings for the house. Still she puts your name on them alongside hers. However successful the design might be, and however much of the subsequent glory might be attributed to you, still this is not your achievement, and it is not something which can contribute to making your life meaningful. Or suppose that you make a plan to cook a really good dinner for your friend. But you do much less than is needed to realize this plan. You buy ingredients at random and you throw them all into a pot, well aware that what results will probably be hardly edible. By accident the dinner turns out to be the best you ever made—but it is not an achievement on your part, for the reason that the connection between your plan and the end-result was accidental, not something you worked toward and put effort into.

Chapter 7

Partitions

Partitions

Whenever you look at something, you put the thing to which you are paying attention in the foreground, and the rest of reality fades away in the background. The same holds whenever you think about something. Suppose, for example, that you think of your friend John. John might be all that is consciously present to your mind. The rest of the world is for the moment ignored. When you focus your attention on John, it is as if you draw an imaginary line around a portion of reality which you set into relief and make the focus of your attention. The rest of reality is traced over.

When you focus on a portion of the world you might also pick out parts—for example when you think about John you focus in particular on his red nose. Or you focus on the United States and on its 50 States it is divided. Or you think about the chess board with its 64 squares and the different types of pieces arranged upon it. Or you might think about your garden, with the different types of plants arranged in a certain way within it.

In each of these cases you impose a certain a partition (a grid) upon reality which will hide some parts and pick out others. If you think of John, then you cannot think of *all* his parts. Perhaps you picture him with arms, legs, a face and so forth, but you do not picture all the cells or molecules or atoms in his body. You can make new partitions of John for specific purposes, and these might contain more or fewer details. Before you first meet John you might think of him rather abstractly, as a man, or a person, or future co-worker. Then, as you get to know him, you think of his facial features, the muscles in his arms and legs, his characteristic talents and gestures. The later partitions are more fine-grained they pick out more detail.

You can also extend your partition of reality by adopting a wider focus—you might think not just of John but of John and his family, or of John and his old colleagues at work, or about all the people who live in John's neighborhood or who use John's gym. Consider what happens to the mountain when you drive away from it. As you look back, more and more of the surroundings become included in your visual field. Two things then happen to your initial partition. It becomes extended in the sense that its span is increased. And it becomes more

coarse-grained in the sense that the details of the mountain slowly disappear. We are constantly zooming in and out like this, focusing now on this and now on that portion of reality in all our day—to—day activities. The doctor who is examining the freckles on your skin is not focusing on your marital problems. The priest who is helping you with your marital problems is not concerned with the pains you are having in your feet.

Histories

The partitions which we use to throw light on reality can come in sequences which tell stories over time. Think of a chess game. Or think of your journey to Detroit, with a first partition which arises as you picture yourself standing in Kennedy Airport at 4 o'clock on Tuesday, a second partition which has you sitting in Flight US 319 to Detroit at 5 o'clock, and a concluding partition which puts you in Detroit Airport at 6 o'clock on the same day. A story like this we shall call 'a history'. A history is a sequence of partitions, a sequence of cuts through successive portions of reality at different times.

A history can be a sequence of partitions relating to what has already taken place. They are histories in the sense intended here. Biographies are backward-looking histories. A screen play for a film, on the other hand, is a forward-looking history.

A plan is like a picture or a map. It throws a certain sort of light on a specific corner of the world. Where a picture presents us with what exists at one time, a plan presents us with a succession of times: A forward-looking history illuminates the world as it unfolds into the future.

Memories, too, may be organized in the form of histories. Think of your last vacation. Perhaps you took photos of your vacation and which you have arranged in chronological order in an album. The pictures constitute a history. If you tell your friends about the things in the pictures, then the history is in part expressed in sentences and in part by means of photos. You might go into much more detail than the photos reveal. The result, then, is a more fine-grained history of one and the same actual course of events in the world.

The history of your holiday throws light on something that took place in the past. Before you started off on your trip to Detroit, coarse-grained forward-looking history of your trip to Detroit existed in the form of the itinerary printed on your ticket. A history can be as simple as a short description of the boarding time, arrival time, flight number and so forth.

Plans are Forward-Looking Histories

Plans, too, are histories in our sense of this term. A plan is a forward-looking history. Think of your plans for next week. Perhaps they exist merely as a series of notes your jotted down in your calendar. These jottings constitute a forward-looking history. It may be realized; but it may also be cancelled or modified. The fact that a plan may be cancelled or changed tells us that not all histories are actualized or realized.

Our plans *can* become actualized, however. This is because they are *coarse-grained*. If they were too fine-grained, it would be very hard, if not impossible, to realize them. You can realize your plan to meet your friend next Tuesday. The plan calls for you to meet him under the railway station at 6 o'clock. You can also realize your plans to go on from there to a special restaurant. Plans like this can be realized, as we know from our own experience. But suppose your plan were a forward-looking history in which almost every little detail were planned out in advance. Suppose, for example, that you had planned what clothes to wear, the way to set your hair, the exact road to take to get to the meeting place, the exact food you were going to eat, the exact things you were going to talk about, even the very words you were going to use. Such a plan would be much harder and perhaps even impossible to realize.

You cannot possibly plan how all details will turn out, not even in regard to just a few minutes of your life. And this is why, when you make plans, many aspects of the world as it will be in the future must simply be traced over. Your plans ignore them. It is usually not possible to plan who will be serving the food in the restaurant or who will drive the cab you will take to get there. It is not

possible to plan and realize whether or not there will be flies in the restaurant or dirt on the floor.

We are finite beings with limited sources of information. Our time for planning is short. The world itself is a patchwork of random events against a background of rough causal regularity. We cannot plan how sequences of events which are very close together in time will work out. We can only build plans out of sequences partitions that are somewhat separated in time. This means that the histories that we use in finding our way through the world, both backward- and forward-looking histories, need to be coarse-grained in two ways, and their constituent partitions must be such as to include not too many details, and their reference times must be not too close together.

Some plans are more fine-grained than others. Think of a big wedding in a church followed by a reception and dinner. You have planned who the priest will be, what music will be played, who will be present in the church, who will be at the reception and dinner, what you are going to eat, who is going to provide the food, what music you are going to hear, and so forth. Such a plan is more fine-grained, which means that it comprehends a much wider range of detail, than does your plan to meet your friend for dinner tomorrow evening. The latter might leave many things completely unspecified. You might not even have planned what restaurant you will go to. Perhaps you will only decide this when you meet. Your plan will then become automatically more fine-grained as you go along. When you come to the restaurant and look at the menu you will have to decide what to eat and drink. When you make such decisions, too, you are extending and refining your plan. To realize a plan, then means refining it by making specific decisions along the way, as well as actually executing those decisions in your deeds.

Our Plans Go Wrong: Saving the Core

Forward-looking histories differ from backward-looking histories in that they can still be changed. But this means also that they involve an element of uncertainty: things can go wrong. The sequence of partitions printed on your airline ticket which summarizes your trip to Detroit next week is a coarse-

grained history. It can be actualized and become more fine-grained in a variety of ways. You might eat a steak or a hamburger before you arrive in Detroit. Mary might or might not be a member of the crew on the plane, the seat next to you may or may not be empty, and so on. All these fine-grained histories are possible ways for the future to be, and, providing you actually execute the plan that is printed on your ticket, they all contain the corresponding coarse-grained history as their common part. Thus they are—on that coarse-grained level—all equivalent. We shall call the coarse-grained history shared in common by your plan and its acceptable alternatives the *core* of your plan.

Libraries

Your trip to Detroit is in the future. The future has not yet taken place. It is therefore possible that the trip will be cancelled or that the route you take or the time you leave will be changed for reasons of weather or sickness. It is possible that all flights to Detroit are cancelled because of a strike of American air traffic controllers. You might decide to go to Cleveland and drive from there to Detroit. The history describing your travel via Cleveland is an *alternative* to the history in which you fly directly to Detroit as originally planned. It is an alternative in the same sense in which the situation in which a coin comes down tails is an alternative to the situation in which comes down heads. The two are alternatives in the sense that it is not possible that you go to Detroit both directly and via Cleveland at the same time. All such alternative histories constitute what we shall call a 'library'. A library is a complete collection of alternative histories (it is like a collection of possible worlds). The coarse-grained library over your behavior on a given day specifies all possible ways in which you can behave within a given time-span.

You are a reliable individual. If you have made plans to go to Detroit, then it is unlikely that you will not go. You would have to get sick or something else out of the ordinary would have to happen—perhaps some terrible weather catastrophe—to prevent your turning up on time. Thus, there is a very high probability that you will in fact go to Detroit; a small probability that you will go to Cleveland; and a still smaller probability that you will stay at home. The

alternative histories in a library can thus be assigned different probabilities. Of course, we do not normally know what those probabilities are. But we do know whether a probability is high or low, and we know that, if our list truly is complete, then all the probabilities must add up to 1.

Often, when people make plans, the probability is quite high that they will realize their plans. As we have seen, however, plans and sub-plans often may be realized only to a certain degree, and this is especially so when plans are collective affairs. By making them sufficiently coarse-grained we leave lots of alternatives open, so that what results has a maximal chance of coming out satisfactorily to everyone involved. If you arrange to meet your friend next Tuesday and you have planned to eat together, then it will not matter if your favorite Italian restaurant is closed, you will just go to a Greek place instead. Your plan to eat dinner together on that particular night will still be realized. If an initial, rather fine-grained plan cannot be realized as a whole, then we can still usually realize a more coarse-gained version. The latter is then in some sense an alternative to the initial plan, but it is an acceptable alternative, perhaps unlike the history in which you have to cancel your dinner altogether. *Thus, the important core of your original plan was more coarse-grained than the plan you initially made. This is often so when we make plans. For the more fine-grained a plan is, the higher is the risk that it will not be realized.

The Structure of Plans

Plans can be too complex to be worth anything, because they would be impossible or extremely stressful to realize. As we have seen on the other hand plans can be too simple to making good plans—plans that can give rise to genuine achievement—involves making plans that are not too easy to realize, that do not contain too few elements of risk, and do not require too little effort to be realized successfully.

Our plans do not need to come packaged in a form that can be printed out in the form of a To Do list. They can take the form of secret dreams, longings which may never be expressed, not even to ourselves.

An example of a plan that is too simple to realize would be: do whatever you feel like, or even: keep doing whatever you feel like. Or even: behave at random.

Your plans must be knitted together in the correct way. They must meet a demand for *coherence* in their means-end structure. That is, they must involve the choice, when once an end has been chosen, of the right means to reach that end. If Jackie wants to go to the Carribean, if this is her plan, then she must eventually take the steps necessary to realize this plan; she must work out how she is going to get there. Initially her plans may be very coarse-grained, but they will need to become more fine-grained as time goes by. They will need to be extended with sub-plans adding up together to form a relatively specific course of action needed to fill the gaps between one stage of the plan and the next (between where she is now and where she wants to be). The failure to extend your plan as needed in these ways will make it unrealizable because it will be incoherent from the point of view of the relation between means and ends.

It is important here to remember that ends, too, can be the object of rational deliberation. Some people think that the agent plays a minor role in determining what is meaningful, it is achievements that play the central role. Only the consequences of our actions matter. Such a view puts more weight on what the agent achieves than how hard it was to achieve it. We want our life plans to involve maximally ambitious, coherent, well-rounded (narratively interesting) total achievements. And the achievements have to involve changes in the world.

A Way To Understand Future Conduct

Our interpretation of plans in terms of the notion of coarse- and fine-grained histories provides a basis for understanding how plans can support and influence future conduct. We can see from our account some of the demands that plans need to satisfy to serve this role. When it comes to genuine achievements, not

just any plan will do. First, a plan must be consistent both within itself and in its relation to the world in which it is to be realized. It should rest on knowledge of the relevant web of physical causality and of social meanings—knowledge of our obligations, for example, as well as knowledge of our mental and physical capacities. Realization of the plan should be possible given the circumstances as they are. Suppose you want to leave your car for your wife to use but also want to use it yourself to get to an important meeting. To put these two desires together would make a bad plan. A plan is internally consistent if and only if its sub-plans can all be realized together. A plan, finally, must be consistent with your beliefs and desires. Consider Peter, who plans to go on a picnic in the woods with Odile, even though he believes that it will rain; or John who plans to marry Mary even though he knows that Mary is happily married to Phil; or Andrew who plans to become a good surgeon even though he knows that he is very clumsy with his hands. Plans like these are doomed to fail.

Life Plans

We already saw that our plans can have sub-plans as parts. Similarly, our plans can themselves be parts of a large whole, which we shall call a *life plan*. Examples of life plans are: Mary's plan to be a good mother and wife and to keep her family together; Peter's plan to enter local politics; Sally's plan to enter medical research; Jackie's plan to become a successful actress; Mary's plan to enter the trucking business. A life plan involves one or more long-term goals and the sub-plans for realizing these goals.

A life plan should be a plan that can maximize the realization of all of your desires across your life. To get rich by robbing a bank does not meet this condition, because a person who robs banks is likely to be caught and to go to prison. In a world with criminal justice system laws, binding together the web of meaning in which wrong actions are reliably punished, robbing banks will normally not seen to be a tempting to a meaningful life. To have a meaningful life normally means: to live in a civilized society. Living in a civilized society can make it easier for people to realize their plans also in other ways. As we

saw, it is much easier for people to realize their plans if they can rely on the people around them.

Life plans must normally be very coarse-grained histories that can contain only a minimum number of elements. We may for a time have more fine-grained life plans in mind, but fine-grained plans stretching over the whole of the rest of your life are hardly ever realized. You might for example plan to get a certain job, but you might well have to be satisfied with a different sort of job. The important core of your life plan might then still be realized.

There is no one achievement to which a life plan leads. This is what was meant, at the beginning of this book, when we said that it was a mistake to search for *the* meaning of life. Rather, the achievement will lie in whatever are the species of life plans which you make: raising a family, doing well in your job, being a good citizen, or whatever it might.

What Makes Plans Worth Realizing?

One way for a plan to be more fine-grained is for it to contain elements that come with many details. Suppose, for example, you plan to write a book. Writing a book is something that already involves certain things that must be done. You must give the book a certain structure and content, you must make it interesting enough that people will read it. You must write it down sentence by sentence, and each new sentence will change, slightly, your plans as to sentences which follow. Writing the book is a fine-grained history that is an incredibly complex and ever changing edifice of plans and sub-plans (planning to write a book is a coarse-grained history.

Having children is another coarse-grained history that will be filled out—soon enough—with all sorts of details and complexity. Having children involves future responsibility and so is a history that is extended over a very long time-interval, perhaps the whole of one's life.

Self-Reliance

Our concept of plan now provides a new way of determining what it is to lead a meaningful life. We can now see that not just our achievement—the consequences or goals of our plans—that matter, but also *how* we arrive at these goals. It matters how hard it is to realize our goals.

Our theory of plans focuses on what we might think of as inner strength. One sort of inner strength is self-reliance, as expressed by the efforts you take to learn to do things for yourself and to make your own way in the world. Self-reliance is involved when you take responsibility for your own plans. It is involved when you have already achieved much but still want to achieve and to learn more.

The opposite of self-reliance is parasitism. This means: being willingly dependent on others. Being dependent on another is not in itself a weakness. We become dependent for all sorts of reasons whenever we collaborate with others and rely on them to do their part in our collective plans. Dependence is a sign of weakness if you *can* be independent but are unwilling to be so. For example, Jack, a handicapped person who strives but fails to be self-supporting is not parasitic. Similarly with Wilma, who is a mother on welfare. She who strives to get off welfare but fails, through no fault of her own Jack and Wilma demonstrate inner strength, rather than internal weakness. A husband and wife are not dependent or parasitic upon each other in this way (or at least they need not be). They can still each have their own plans and realize, these plans even though they are joined together in marriage, and they can of course also have plans which they realize together.

A person can give meaning to another person's life. But this occurs only if the second person makes it so. That is, it occurs only if the second person makes the first person a part of her life plan. John is a mathematician who proves the first half of a tough theorem and then gives up. But he can still help to put meaning in the life of his student Jill, if Jill can prove the rest of the theorem. But then Jill has to put the goal of proving the theorem into her life plan. There is a puzzle here. Can a son can give meaning to the life of a father by completing the father's work after the father dies? One view is that everyone must be alive to achieve meaning in their life. The father's life is not more meaningful than it was when he died if his son completes the work after he died.

On the other ahnd someone might argue that Fermat's life became more meaningful when Stiles finally showed that Fermat was right about his last theorem, or that the life of the mother who died in childbirth becomes more meaningful when her daughter finds a cure for cancer.

Whatever your life plan is, it does not require that it outlast you in order for your life to have meaning, though it will in many cases outlast you. If your life plan involves being a good husband, then your life plan ends when your life ends, but if you were a good husband, then you have had a meaningful life.

Does our view imply that the meaning of life is an arbitrary matter? We think not. Although you can invent or create your goals this does not mean that you arbitrarily invent or create meaning in your life. It will not make your life meaningful if you just try to attach meaning to something in arbitrary fashion.

To manifest self-reliance can contribute to your life's being worth living even apart from any consequences. A person who becomes handicapped in an accident and loses the capacity to walk, but who then makes the plan to walk again and strives with all her efforts to realize that plan might certainly lead a meaningful life.

This relates directly to planning. For planning involves making certain commitments and accepting certain associated constraints. These constraints have first of all to do with your actions: you must do this and that, be ready at these and those times. But they are also psychological—you must be willing to pay the price of failure. Your life might in some respects be an easier life if you avoid making too many plans. And we are certainly not advocating that it is the sheer quantity of plans which makes life meaningful. Rather, we are advocating that you make the right sorts of plans, and that means: those plans that it is within your power to realize but which at the same time present the right sorts of challenges. Making plans of the right kinds and striving to realize them and thereby also acquiring associated commitments is the key to a meaningful life.

Inner strength and planning also explains, as mentions, why we care more for some people than others and why we should do so. We care more for our children than for strangers because our children are parts of our life-plans. Our parents might be parts of our life-plans, too.

Goods Internal to a Plan

Judith is a highly intelligent seven year old and you want to teach her to play chess. Unfortunately, however, she has no particular desire to learn the game. She does, though, have a strong desire for candy, and very little money. You therefore tell her that if she will play chess with you once a week then you will each time give her a dollar's worth of candy. You also tell her that you will play in such a way that it will be difficult, but not impossible, for her to win—but that, if she does win, then she will get double the amount of candy. This motivates her to play and to play to win. But so long as it is the candy alone which provides Judith with her reason for playing chess, she has no reason not to cheat. Indeed if she can cheat successfully, then she has every reason to do so. After a time, though, Judith's chess improves and she begins to find a value in chess for its own sake. She starts to want to acquire the particular kind of analytical skill and strategic imagination it takes to play well. A new set of reasons appears in Judith's world From now on she plays not just to win on a particular occasion, but to play well. She tries to manifest a new sort of excellence in her life. Now she does not even think of cheating, for this would be betraying herself. Slowly but surely she discovers a whole new province in the web of social meaning, the web of all those responsibilities, commitments and measures of achievement which is associated with the game of chess.

We can thus distinguish between two kinds of good that can become associated with an activity like playing chess. On the one hand are those goods or values that are external to chess but may come to be associated with it in a given case. These are goods that arise in reflection of the specific situation of those involved. Candy or money is an external good in this sense in relation to the activity of playing chess. As far as such external goods are concerned, there are always alternative ways of achieving them. Money that can be gained from playing chess could be gained equally well from playing football or driving cabs. On the other hand, however, are goods which are internal to playing chess. The goods or values which can be realized only through playing chess. We call such goods internal for two reasons: first because we can specify them

only in terms of chess, and secondly because they can be identified and recognized only by those who participate and are involved in the given activity. Those who lack the relevant experience cannot judge the degree to which internal goods are realized.

The goods internal to chess form part of the social web of meanings that is rooted in the game of chess. The goods internal to the theater from part of the social web of meanings surrounding the theater, and incorporates measures of the quality of plays of acting, and theaters themselves, and so on. The goods internal to football form part of the social web of meanings that grows around the game of football, and the standards for good football.

External goods are things like property and possessions. They are things that you can acquire by giving up something else. The realization of internal goods, in contrast, represent an enrichment of your life. Internal goods in areas like chess or football are the outcome of a competition to become the best. Internal goods in areas like family life are the outcome of doing your best to make a good home for your spouse and children. In either case the achievement of internal goods is a good shared in common by all of those who participate in the given kind of activity. This means that there has to be a measure of quality, of achievement, and this too is built into the social web of meanings.

Every activity within a community requires a certain kind of relationship between those who participate in it. To enter into a certain kind of activity is to enter into a relationship both with its contemporary practitioners, and also with those who have preceded us in the activity, particularly those whose achievements expanded the activity in certain ways. It is thus the achievement, and a fortiori the authority, of a tradition which a person confronts and which the person must learn from.

Someone who becomes good at an activity typically enjoys her achievement and her activity in achieving. But this is of course not always the case. Consider, for example, a man who is so occupied with his painting that he neglects his family.

Smaller Plans

Are life plans necessary in order for a life to be meaningful? Small plans, too, can after all contribute meaning to your life. This could be a really, really small plan, even a trivial plan (where the word ‘plan’ would probably be too dramatic), such as consciously reaching out to pick up the wine glass in order to take a sip of wine at a party which we want to argue, however, is that such a small plan contributes meaning to your life only if it is a part of a larger plan. There is a purpose of reaching for the wine: you want to drink it; but there is also a larger purpose to being in this social situation; there is the purpose of pleasing your host so that he will think well of you, there is the purpose of ... to that extent the question of still further purposes does not arise. So if you are concentrating very hard on the taste of the wine, you are not at that moment attending to why you are at the dinner party.

The term ‘small plan’ is of course vague. So how small could a plan be and still contribute meaning to your life? Remember the whisky case earlier—the contrast to the wine case here must be clearer. That is problematic. If it is too small I don't think it contributes meaning to your life unless it is a part or a sub-plan of a larger plan. Ultimately it should be a part of your life-plan. So drinking in a social situation can of course be a part of a life plan to be a good friend or a good colleague or a good wife or a good husband or ...

You don’t have to attend to the fact that this minimal plan is a part of your life-plan, but it must be a part of your life-plan if it is to contribute to making your life meaningful. If you have no life-plan, if all you are doing is sipping wine, day after day, with no further rhyme or reason, then your life is not meaningful.

But wait. Isn’t it the case that anything has meaning if it has a purpose, or if it has consequences for achieving some purpose? You want to sip the wine, and so your actions taken in pursuit of that goal have meaning. Also, the absence of wine in the bottle certainly has meaning for you. It has bearing on whether or not you can achieve your goal of sipping the wine. If something has a purpose for you, then it has meaning for you. What’s the point?

Also, we can't imagine anyone who has only one goal. (it could be possible in certain very extraordinary circumstances.) You reach for the glass of wine. Your friend says ‘What are your plans?’ You say ‘I just want to sip the wine, that’s all.’ But clearly you know that you will have further plans later on, even if you do not have them now. You do not plan to be hungry tomorrow morning, but I know that I probably will be, and so I suspect that you will form some sort of eating plan tomorrow morning. You suppose in some sense you plan to go to work next week, although you have made no conscious plan about that.

There is an ambiguity of description, precisified by context. So you might precisify your question; you say ‘No, I mean what are your plans for this evening?’ Or ‘for next week’ or .... If you say ‘What are your plans for your life?’, you might not be sure how to answer. You can simply give a brief list of the things you would like to do: ‘I shall read and write and teach until I drop dead’. Then you remember that the front door needs painting, and so you add that to your list. And you also want to visit an old friend in Germany, and so you put that on your list. And so it goes. So you can summarize it all by saying ‘I plan to be happy—or rather continue to be happy.’ Not many people can say something like ‘I plan to create a room-temperature fusion device.’ That of course would be a significant achievement. But it is in principle no different from ‘I plan to visit Amsterdam someday.’ In such cases, we can always ask ‘And then what? After you visit Amsterdam, invent a fusion device, feed all the people in India—after all that has been accomplished, then what?’

Perhaps you think you don’t have a life plan. You have, rather, plans to read this or that book, or to visit your sister, or to build a table, or to go into local politics next year. What is a life plan? Do people actually have them? Or do they, rather, have one or more long-term plans, and lots of little, short-term plans? Meaning is found in them all, perhaps.

Yes, everything might have meaning, but only if it has meaning in relation to other events. If there were no connection between the events, how could they have any meaning?

You might not know what your life plan is. But it is not necessary that you know what your life plan is. It is only necessary that you know some of the plans that constitute it (you want to become a good friend, a good sister, a good partner, or a good colleagues, or perhaps all of these things) Your life plan becomes more detailed and more fine-grained as time passes and it will almost certainly change and evolve with time. Perhaps at some point you will decide to become a chicken farmer instead of a philosopher. Even though your life plan is at every stage still very coarse-grained, it is still relative to this composite life plan that sub-plans and intentions have meaning.

But then perhaps we ought not to say that there is a life plan, because 'plan', you might say, indicates something that is already in place—an intention—and is more or less explicit. Perhaps it would be acceptable to say that the 'shape' which your life takes is determined by all your various projects (both large and small; but the larger projects have more influence on that 'shape')? People can seek to improve the 'shape' of their lives as they see them developing. This, however, is just another way of talking about life plans. A plan, as we have seen, can be either general or specific. You can have a plan to meet your friend for lunch some time next week (without knowing where you are going to meet or even when—and your friend may not even have to know about your plan until much later). Such a plan, if it is to be realized, must of course become more specific as time passes. On Monday you might call your friend and ask her if Tuesday would be a good day to have lunch. You would then have to make certain decisions as to place, time, and so forth. But perhaps the place you choose is closed and so you have to pick another. Many of the details in all our plans must be rather arbitrary. This may because you cannot make decisions about them—the matters are out of your hand. You can plan to have lunch with your friend but then you need not decide the color of the shirt she will be

wearing. You cannot decide what the waitress is going to wear, or how many spiders will be sitting on the walls. But of course, there must be intention in order for there to be a plan. You cannot have a plan to meet your friend unless you intend to meet with your friend. But you can have very general intention (also concerning your life: e.g. an intention to be a good sister is a plan if you work towards its realization).

We can have in mind a goal, without having in mind the means to achieve that goal; and yet we can still be confident that we can reach the goal. If you want to get to some restaurant for lunch, you may not bother to figure out exactly how to get there. You simply drive, you turn left, then right, and so on, allowing the signs and landmarks you see to tell you what to do next. The world itself helps you to find your way. You leave it to the world to remember how to get to the restaurant. And similarly when you fiddle around—perhaps literally, playing the jazz violin—first one note, then another as the pop into your mind (or rather, as you discover my fingers playing), and only then do you spot some pattern which these notes are making.

Jazz is essentially a matter of improvization in two directions at once: the musician knows the general chord structure of the melody upon which he intends to improvise, and he knows that in 22 measures the piano player will join in, and then the bass player, and so on. Apart from this, though he has no more than a general outline of how things will proceed. The detail he invents as he goes along, and how he chooses to play them will depend on the notes he and the other players have already played, without any plan at all. Something similar occurs when you're writing a book or taking a holiday. Something similar happens every day. You are sitting in the restaurant, so far you have only a general plan: you want to eat and have a good time. The particulars are worked out not only in conformity with this general idea, but also in conformity with the particulars of the situation you find yourself in: what does this restaurant offer to eat? Would your friend be offended if you ate pork? How much money can you afford to spend?

Chapter 8
Creation and the Social Web of Meanings

The Web of Meanings

The web of social meanings—of social practices, standards, obligations, institutions, of rules and laws—changes over time, but it changes only slowly. A physical object, like your heart or your car, changes all the time, reflecting the many causal relations in which it is involved. The existence in time of a social objects, in contrast, may for long periods involve no change at all. Even where a social object, like a chess club or a law, is subject to change, this will typically consist merely in discrete changes (not least in its coming into or going out of existence) as a reflection of certain specific changes in the world of what is physical. If your drinving licence or your employment contract changes, this will be in single steps, gaps of several years between them. You join together with your neighbors to have the local council block the traffic on your street. Your street becomes safer, your children can play, trees can grow. But the street as social object undergoes just one change: before it was a through street. Now it is a street blocked off to traffic.

Social objects enjoy, therefore, a feature of relative isolation from the concrete, causal of physical change. Social objects include not only claims, obligations, rights, debts, relations of ownership and authority, but also cultural artefacts such as works of music and literature. Even naming your child is a change in the realm of social objects.

Each of the latter is something which, when it comes into existence, is not brought about as an effect and when it goes out of existence does not do so directly in consequence of the ceasing of an effect. Non-real objects have no history of change in their own right; but nor do they stand outside history. The community which is the local football club begins to exist when it is first established and it ceases to exist when the last members leave. The State of Montana begins to exist with a certain declaratory act in Washington in 1890,

and ceases to exist with the dropping on America of the first cyclotronic bomb by the Belgian Empire in the year 2084. The web of meanings is built up on the basis of real things, including you and me, but it is relatively isolated from real changes in these real things. Your football club does not change when its president catches a cold. Rather, it changes only through special sorts of administrative acts—and in some cases (think of the American constitution) bring about such changes. It is only by certain special sorts of changes in the latter, which may involve surmounting tremendous hurdles. The rules of chess have been changed—but change has occurred only very slowly.

Meaning and Social Objects

Our thesis now is this. There can be meaning in your life only against the background of this vast social web of meanings. This is because plans and achievement can exist only where there are corresponding standards or measures of achievement, and these too are parts of the social web of meanings. There is no such thing as a private achievement just as there is no private language. A loner can have a meaningful life, but the meaning must be intelligible to others. The background of meanings is much more than the result of the whim of any single person. We live in an objectively meaningful world because human beings, over many thousand years, have *made* the world meaningful—by founding nations, establishing reat cultures, building up the institution of law and religion, laying down the great tapestry of history, which in so many different ways, allows our lives to have meanings.

The Structure of the Web

But social objects in the web of meanings are not the mere reflection of our beliefs. Suppose Jim seeks to attribute to his life by reading every day the astrology predictions in the newspaper. The problem here is that there is no standard of success. He does not achieve anything by reading these predictions. ... Much of the web of meanings is a product of human decisions. Some social objects come into being fully formed as the result of legal enactments, of

handshakes, of contracts, of affirmations. How can we reconcile this aspect of objects in the social realm with their capacity to constrain behavior?

The web of meanings is also what imposes standards upon your actions. It is because there is a possibility of failure and risk that there are standards. If there were to way to fail, there would be no standards, and no achievements.

Chapter 9
The Meaning of Life

Our Theory of Meaning

Life can have meaning in an objective sense. The successful chicken farmer is successful because he meets objective standards of success. But this does not mean that his life acquires meaning through somebody else, or if it does then this is also in a derivative sense. Your life *can* have meaning through your children—but only if your children are part of your life plan. If your life is to have meaning, then this will only be because you have put it there. You have to take the perspective of your own life, not that of the universe or somebody else's.

As opposed to human beings, animals cannot have meaningful lives. They can be part of human being's meaningful lives but they cannot themselves have meaningful lives. This is because they do not have the capacity to create a goal and they work toward realizing it. Animals can realize only here-and-now goals. They can satisfy their hunger, for example, or satisfy their instinctual desire to reproduce.

Who Decides? (Happiness Is Subjective. Meaningfulness and Valuableness Are Objective)

Our lives are subjective. When we say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder we are saying that beauty is subjective. Taste, too, is subjective. Perhaps you do not like strawberry ice cream, while all your friends do. So your

disliking strawberry ice cream is a subjective matter. It is a matter of your opinion. Perhaps you adore green olives, but your husband hates them. So hating or adoring green olives, too, is a subjective matter. That murder is a bad thing is, on the other hand, objective. It does not depend on a particular person's opinion. Hannibal Lector might think serial murder is a perfectly good thing. This does not make him right. You cannot be wrong about whether or not you like green olives. And you cannot be wrong about whether, at a given point in time you are in pain. If a person sincerely judges that he is in pain, then you cannot correctly say that you know better. Feeling pain is subjective. Something is subjective if its presence depends on a given person's opinion. Something is objective if its presence does not depend on any given person's opinion.

Happiness, too, is something you alone can decide. Someone else cannot say truthfully that you are happy if you sincerely deny it. Love, too, is like pleasure and pain. Happiness and love are subjective. A person cannot be wrong about whether or not he is happy. The judgment: 'I am happy', if expressed sincerely, cannot fail to be true.

If a person says that he is happy, and if he means what he says, then what he says is true. This is so even if he later says that he only *thought* that he was happy at that earlier time. Happiness is something a person feels at a given moment—it is not something that can be evaluated at a later time. Of course, we might feel so much happier now than we did earlier that our earlier happiness seems to pale by comparison. Or we might feel that our life now is more meaningful than it was then, and this fact may make us especially happy.

This means that we can say truthfully of another person that she is living a meaningless or meaningful life, even if that person sincerely denies it. That 2+2 equals 4 is an objective matter. You can correctly tell a person who says that 2+2 equals 5 that she is wrong. The same applies to 'The Buffalo Bills won their last game in Jacksonville' and 'It rained in Boston on June 22, 2000'. These judgments are about objective matters of fact.

There are some similarities between being subjective and being relative to the culture in which you live. It might be merely a subjective matter that you dislike green olives. But it might be because you live in a certain culture that you don't like to eat horsemeat. Some jokes are funny in one culture but not in another. Hence we cannot say that there is any objectively fact of the matter

with respect to whether or not a joke is funny absolutely. The norms of each community impose certain standards with respect to humor. Something then can *count* as funny in a given culture but not in another. It is not that something *is* funny per se. Of course, a joke might not *count* as funny in a given society (because it is in bad taste), but it might still *be* funny even though no one dares to laugh. Whether or not a joke is funny, however, depends on the standards of the society in the sense that what is taken to be funny depends on the receiver's cultural background. What jokes get told is subject to the constraints of culture, and which jokes can be understood to be funny is similarly subject to the constraints of culture.

Happiness is not like humor. Humor is relative to culture and to cultural norms. But whether or not a person is happy is not relative to norms in this way—it is a personal matter. Meaningfulness, too, does not depend on the norms of a society. It might be that everybody in a given community fails to appreciate that a certain person's life is meaningful, but this person's life is either meaningful or not, independently of what people in a certain community has to say about the matter. Of course what meaningful lives are lived—and the degree to which our lives are meaningful—may depend on the culture in which we live. But whether or not a certain life is meaningful is independent of culture.

To say that meaningfulness is objective is not necessarily to say that it is easy to evaluate. Above all, it will be hard to evaluate the meanings of other people's lives unless we share with them many deep interests in common. If you are a football fan and your interest is in following your team then this may make *your* life meaningful. But you cannot impose this same interest upon other people and conclude that their lives are meaningless. To be able to evaluate the meaningfulness of other people's lives, you will have to understand this goals and the means necessary to reach them, and the standards or measures of achievement and other parts of the associated social web of meanings.

Whether a life is meaningful has in part something to do with the interests of the person whose life it is. If you are not interested in achieving what you are doing, your life will not be meaningful.

It is Your Life and Your Meaning

Meaningfulness is not something that attaches itself to other people than the one whose life it is. Even though we might be able to tell whether or not your life is meaningful, your life is only meaningful given that it is your life. Your life is not meaningful to your neighbor even though he might be able to tell whether or not your life is meaningful.Although the meaningfulness of life is objective, it is not completely independent of the person whose life it is.

But how can the meaningfulness of life be objective and still somehow depend on the perspective of the person whose life it is? Consider the following analogy. You are sitting in a restaurant with your thirsty brother who has finished his beer. Your brother utters 'this glass is empty'. Is your brother's judgment true? In an ordinary context, like yours, we would not say that your brother is saying something false. It is true that his glass is empty. But consider now the hygiene inspector who enters the restaurant and looks at the glass through his microscope. He would certainly say it is true that 'the glass contains molecules of water'. But if a glass contains molecules of water, then it is not empty. However, it is still not the case that your brother said something false in his context. Rather, if the hygiene inspector tells or reminds your brother that his glass contains molecules of water, then your brother would, if he is sincere, confirm this. What has happened is that your brother has made a switch to a different context, namely the context of the hygiene inspector and in this context it is false that the glass is empty. In the first context, your brother could not have the perspective of the hygiene inspector; for having that perspective would entail a switch of context. So in the first context 'this glass is empty' is true. In the second context 'this glass is empty' is no less objectively false.

The meaningfulness of a life is a bit like this. It has to be judged from a certain quite narrow context. In that context a life appears either meaningful or it is not. Given the context of the person whose life it is, it is either true or false that her life is meaningful. Even if it is difficult to determine, it is either true or false that Mary has a meaningful life through her role as a mother. But we have to determine this from the perspective of Mary, not from the perspective of anybody else.

Can Meaningful Parts of Life be Added Together?

If you life has a plan, however, general and abstract, however much in need of detailed filling in and alteration as time proceeds, then your whole life is itself an achievement. This achievement can, of course, be divided into phases. There are many ways of doing this. We can divide up your life in to childhood, adolescence, adulthood, or in to good years and bad years, or in to happy times and unhappy times—and even into those phases of your life which were meaningful. The authors of biographies have to divide up a life into chapters. Imagine a biography with chapter headings: 'First Promise', 'The Wasted Years', 'Final Fulfilment'.

We have been talking about a meaningful life. But it is of course possible that a part of your life is meaningful and a part of your life is not. How do we add up the meaningful and meaningless phases of a life? Can we simply add the meaningful phases of a life and subtract the meaningless phases and come up with a final total—a meaningfulness quotient? Or do the meaningful phases somehow count for more.

Mary has done nothing with her life. She has so far just drifted along, with no particular plans and thus she has not achieved anything. She has done this and that, but without order or direction. When she is forty years old, she decides to change her life. She makes a life plan—she will get an education and then a challenging fulfilling. She begins to realize this plan, and makes new and more detailed plans as each new phase of her life unfolds. Her life is now beginning to have meaning—it takes on shape. Mary realizes her plans with greater or lesser success until she is eighty years old and then she dies a natural death. The first half of Mary's life was meaningless the second half meaningful. Does the earlier, meaningless phase of Mary's life cancel out the later, meaningful phase? Was Mary's life neither meaningful nor meaningless? We think not. Or suppose Mary did not begin to make plans until she is fifty or sixty years old. Is her life altogether meaningless? Does it have a negative meaning quotient? What if Mary starts to get her life into shape only just a few years, or a few days, before her death?

Would it make a difference if we switch things around and have Mary first living a meaningful life. Then, with her fortieth birthday, she suddenly runs out of steam and leads a desultory life until she dies at the age of eighty?

Before answering these questions, consider the analogy, in the realm of actions, with the issue of positive versus negative value. Suppose a person is a serial killer until he is forty, and thereafter completely and sincerely dedicates his life to charity work. Does the positive value cancel out the negative value? Or consider St. Augustine, who led a debauched life until, suddenly, at the age of .... he underwent conversion and became religious teacher and Father of the Church. Does the positive value at the end of Augustine's life cancel out all the negative value which came before?

Let us say, first, that we do not think that it is possible to add up directly the valuable or meaningful phases of a life and yield some sort of value-or meaning-quotient. Certainly, if the first half of a life is meaningful and the second half is not, then we cannot say that the two halves cancel each other out. What we can say, however, is that when it comes to meaningfulness, a life that has even one short phase in which it is a meaningful life is certainly more of a meaningful life than a life that has none. This is of course quite trivial—it is almost a matter of logic. But it has an important implication: it means that it is *never too late* to begin to make something meaningful out of your life.

A person who is hooked on drugs and who is stealing to buy more drugs can always make her life meaningful by stopping her drug abuse and theft and beginning to live a normal life.

The Esthetics of Phases

Consider Alice. Alice who has been drifting for the last a few years from job to job. Then however she makes a plan to go to Europe and to see as many countries as she can. She works extra hard for half a year and saves up the money to make the trip. While she is in Europe, she meets a man who is traveling around with no plans for his life. She decides to stay with him in Europe. They work a little at some olive farms in Italy and drifts through Europe. At some point Alice becomes tired of the guy and of not having any money and she goes home. She stays at her parents' house for a couple of years, watching TV and trying to figure out what she should do. Then she decides to go into law school. She finishes the first semester but drops out. She stays at her parents place for another year. Then she get a job in the local supermarket and moves to her own apartment. At some point she meets Peter. They fall in love

and a few months later they get married and Alice decides to become a homemaker because she is bored with her job in the supermarket, and Peter earns enough to support them both. But she is in some ways just as bored being a homemaker as she was with her job in the supermarket. It is not working out and it is affecting her marriage. They get a divorce after a couple of years and Alice begins to work in the supermarket again. And so it goes on.

Compare Alice's life to Jackie's. Jackie goes to college and finishes a degree in environmental and health studies. She has a plan that she wants to go to Africa and help to set up local medical services in communities in economically challenged areas. After college she is hired by a charity organization which sends people out to such areas. She goes to Africa and works for 30 years to realize her plan. She retires, happy and satisfied, and goes back to America where she enjoys the rest of her life reading and going to museums and meeting and making friends. Which one of these two lives is the most meaningful? Surely, Jackie's life is more meaningful than Alice's. If we counted the time spent and the number of plans realized, Jackie and Alice might have spent the same time realizing and making plans. Alice might even have realized more plans than Jackie who after all realized only one plan. But Jackie's life consists of phases which are knitted together. A life is more meaningful if its phases are linked together than if it is completely scattered. A life should be *well-rounded*.

Regret, Bad Conscience and Bitter Feelings (The Sunk Cost Principle)
You have worked on your life plan for years. You wants to become a successful soldier. You are just about to be promoted to general, when you are involved in a terrible accident and you dose the use of your legs. Your life is in runs. Everything is lost. What should you do? To work out the correct answer to this question let us consider another, much simpler case. You plan to go to the theater. Tonight you are going to the theater. You are a normal person who is reasonably well off. You have a quite expensive theater ticket for a play you have been looking forward to seeing for months. You have worked hard in the last few days and deserve the night out. But when you arrive at the theater you realize that you have lost your ticket. Your evening is in ruins. Everything is lost. What should you do?

The answer: You should buy another ticket. That is to say, you should act according to the Sunk Cost Principle, which says what is lost is lost. What this means is that you should not let what you invested in the influence what you do in the future what is past is past. The only factors which should be weighed in making a decision now are the *future* costs which that decision will bring. Costs incurred in the past should never be counted in making decisions about the future. You begin at zero whenever you have lost something. The world is new each day.

Why should you believe in the Sunk Costs Principle. Well, it works very well for business firms.

If your firm has invested thousands of dollars in machines which become obsolete overnight, the only rational course of action is to write off the machines. The owners of your firm have made a mistake. But you and they should not even waste one second in crying over spilt milk.

The same principle works in ordinary people's lives, too, and it works even with respect to things that are not economical in nature.

Suppose that you have been dating a woman called Lisa for two years. But then things start to go wrong. You begin to consider whether or not you and she should break things off. During the two years you have been going out together you have been very generous to her. The question is: should you let the fact that you have spent a lot of money on Lisa affect your decision about your future together.

According to the Sunk Cost Principle, the answer is no. The principle states that we ought never to look back at costs irretrievably incurred in the past when deciding how to behave in the future. Because those costs are now unavoidable, they are irrelevant to any current or future decisions.

Sunk Costs and the Meaning of Life

The Sunk Cost Principle lends support to our idea that if your plans fail, this should not influence whether or not you should make new plans in the future. Suppose you are a woman who had a long relationship with a man called Jack.

You have plans about starting a family with Jack. Everything has been fine for many many years, but then suddenly things began to go wrong. Jack started to see another woman and he ended up leaving you for her. Suppose that, after a relatively short time you meet another man, but you are hesitant to go into this new relationship, because you think about the old relationship. You think so much about the failure of the old relationship that you allow this new possibility to pass you by.

Suppose your plan is to get on to the swimming team. This means that you have to swim faster than a certain time in your best discipline. Suppose you fail. Now, what do you do. You try again. Or if it is really too late, then you make new plans. Your failure should not affect what you do in the future making new plans.

Of course, this does not mean that you should not try to find out why your plan could not be realized the first time. You should do everything you can to learn from your mistakes. Perhaps you did not practice hard enough, or perhaps you had a bad day the day when you were trying out for the time. Perhaps the person you were trying to start a family with was not the right person for you, or perhaps you yourself did something wrong to drive him away. These things might be things that you can change when you make new plans or try again to realize the old ones. But once you have learned what you could from your failures in the past, you should forget about these old plans and move on to the next phase in your life.

Regret

To regret what one did is not reasonable. As the philosopher Spinoza said "Repentance is not a virtue, i.e. it does not arise from reason. Rather, he who repents what he did is twice miserable" (Ethics, pt. IV, prop. 54) We are first of all miserable when we fail, and then we are miserable for a second time because we are feel regret over what we did. To be miserable must be understood not as merely feeling bad (this you could do in a dream machine) but as *being in a bad way*. The person who regrets what he did is in a bad way twice. Whoever did something bad is, independently of how he feels about it, badly off. The pain of regret makes him badly off a second time. But this, according to Spinoza, is not reasonable: because one did something bad, this does not mean that one should

go on and and make things worse. As Nietzsche puts it: 'Never give room to repentance, but tell yourself at once: this would mean to add a second piece of stupidity to the first" (*The Wanderer and His Shadow*, 323)

Regret is not a positive feeling. You cannot change the past. If you have done something you think is wrong, if you realize that you have done something which you would have done differently, then you should just take care to notice what would need to be different in the future. Regret in itself is a waste of energy, energy you could spend making and realizing plans and shaping your future. This does not mean that you should not try to make amends. Regret is one thing. Energy spent on making up for what you have done is quite another. Suppose you are a truckdriver who did not have your brakes checked recently. You are unlucky and end up killing a child. Although you ought to have checked your brakes, there is a big portion of bad luck involved in the fact that you—rather than the thousands of other truck drivers with brakes not recently checked—should have been the one to hit and kill a child. Should you regret what you did? Of course. But not if regretting what you did means energy going over and over again in your mind thinking about what happened and what you could have done to avoid it. What you should do is to try to make amends. You owe other people some of your energy. You could spend time working for organizations promoting safer driving; you could try to do something for the family who lost their child. What you should not do is spend your energy feeling sorry for yourself.

All your feelings should be future directed. Instead of crying over the education you did not have, you should consider getting an education now. Instead of crying over the children you never had, you should think of what you can do for your sister and brother and their children. Instead of crying over the man you never married, you should try to find another man with whom you can share your life now. Whatever has happened in the past, the fact that you are reading this book, you can still find a way to shape your life in the future, and to give it meaning.

If regret is bad, what about *revenge*?

Edmond Dantès was unjustly accused of treason on his wedding day and sent to the island prison of Château d'If. There, he meets another prisoner, finds out why he was framed, and by whom, and is told of a great treasure left on the Island of Monte-Cristo. He escapes after fourteen years, finds the treasure and assumes the title of the Count of Monte-Cristo. Under this name he exacts revenge on each of the people involved in his imprisonment. Does Dante's Christo lead a meaningful life? We shall argue that he does.

{add a paragraph or two on why being flexible and having appropriate plans is conducive to leading a meaning life if your plan fails, because of bad weather or airline strike or something worse, you should not brood but immediately fix on an alternative}

The Link Between Rationality and Meaning

'We shall not have found what it takes for individual lives to have the meaning we attribute to them unless we link meaning with rationality' (Wiggins p. 118)

Can you behave irrationally and still have a meaningful life?

Here we will make a distinction between rationality and reasonableness. Suppose you have to choose who to work for. On the one side you could be working for a boss who is prepared to listen, cooperate, compromise and who can make informed and balanced judgments. On the other side you could be working for a boss who can think through the implications of something, clearly and consistently, from principles already laid down, and who can come to the best decision possible and who does not necessarily have the imagination to appreciate the wider picture or future possibilities. Which boss would you choose? Probably the first. The first boss is, intuitively speaking, reasonable, whereas the second one is rational. Rational is in ordinary language more often contrasted with emotional, reasonable is more often contrasted with the insensitive or inhuman or unrealistic. If you refuse to let your children play outside or you do not spend enough time with them, or if you set someone tight

deadlines or you are pursuing self-interested ends, that may be unreasonable, but not irrational. If you do not let your children play outside, then it might be because you believe that there is a greater change of them being harmed if they are outside alone. It might therefore be rational. But it might be unreasonable because they are deprived of experiences.

Rationality thus has something to do with the consistency of your beliefs. You are irrational if you have conflicting beliefs, especially if you could easily become aware of this conflict. For example, if you believe that it is good to have a lot of money (which your wife earns) but also think that she is working too much, then you have conflicting beliefs. This is relevant to planning, as we have mentioned above.

Reasonableness, on the other hand, has something to do with whether your beliefs are acceptable in the wider context (for example in your community or church). You have to consider the wider consequences *for other people* of your actions in order to be reasonable. If you require of your children that they dress themselves because they have reached an age where they should dress themselves, then you might be unreasonable if they cannot do it. But you are not necessarily irrational. In fact, rationality and unreasonableness sometimes coincide, although they don't quite have the same meaning.

Now, we can reformulate our initial question and ask. Can you have a meaningful life and be irrational? And we can add: Can you have a meaningful life and be unreasonable? Yes, we shall argue that rationality and reasonableness, on the one hand and meaningfulness, on the other are independent of each other. It might be more difficult to carry out your plans if you are irrational because your conflicting beliefs might be imposed upon the plans you are making. It might be more difficult to carry out plans with other people if you are unreasonable. But both are possible.

Chapter 10
Does Life Have Meaning?

On Doing The Same Thing Over and Over Again

Sisyphus was punished by the gods. His punishment consisted in rolling a stone to the top of a hill, the stone immediately roll back down to the bottom. Sisyphus had to do this over and over again for all eternity.

Sisyphus' life is meaningless— and its meaninglessness will never end, for Sisyphus will never die. Sisyphus will make plans, but he will never achieve anything. In this he is in an even worse position than is in *Groundhog Day*. The meaninglessness of Sisyphus' life consists first of all in having to do the same thing over and over again. The very same thing. Whatever he does is immediately undone. The stone rolls back to the bottom of the hill. Furthermore, Sisyphus has no say in determining his own life. He is forced to push the stone for the rest of his life, whether he likes it or not.

Doing the same thing over and over again is not necessarily meaningless. A competition swimmer in the local swim club must swim lane after lane after lane. Whenever training session is accomplished, he must start on another, and then yet another, for month after month after month. But he does this for a purpose. He has a plan. His plan is to become a better, faster swimmer, and there is a good chance that this plan will be realized precisely his contrast training. A piano player must practice the same piece of music over and over again. But he does this for a purpose. His plan is to become a better—perhaps even an excellent—pianist, and this is part of the plan of his life.

Perspective

Some people would say that human life has no meaning expect in the subjective sense that people might suppose it has meaning (as they might suppose it has meaning that a black cat crusses their path). If we look at the life of one particular person from a cosmic perspective, then it does not, after all, seem very important. From the perspective of the whole universe and its history, the life of a single person is such a small thing and it can make so little impact that it is not worth considering. Such a view is super objectivist. It considers life not from the perspective of human beings, but only from the perspective of the entire universe. The lives of animals have as much meaning as the lives of

human beings, from this perspective, because those features which make us special—planning, striving, testing ourselves—are again quite insignificant from a cosmic perspective. The philosophers who hold this superobjectivistic view do not want to take seriously the perspective of cognitive agents (at least not human ones). Our main target here is the view that there is an alternative to the super objectivistic cosmic perspective and to the subjectivist view. Your life really can have meaning in an objective sense, and this meaning can become apparent if we look at your life not on a cosmic scale but on a more fine-grained scale is apropriate to human lives. But it will have this meaning only if you put it there.

The super-objectivist says that there is no *real* meaning to anyone's life, because there is no difference between a life's *really* having meaning and someone's merely believing that it does so.

We disagree. We think the defender of the cosmic perspective is trying to say something about meaningfulness in a context in which one cannot do so. Recall here again your thirsty brother who, in his context, would say 'this glass is empty' is true and the hygiene inspector who, in his context, would say that 'this glass is empty' is false. The hygiene inspector is focusing on the molecules in the glass. Your brother is focusing on the fact that he is thirsty. If we put your thirsty brother into the context of the hygiene inspector he will no longer say that 'this glass is empty' is true.

So it surely might be the case that in the context of the whole universe and its history, no individual life has any meaning. But this context is one we force upon ourselves when we think about these matters. We are not naturally in the context of the whole universe. Of course you might say that astronomers take this context, but they don't with respect to their own lives. The universe is merely what they are studying just as the biochemist is studying the genes and DNA, the gynocologist women's sex organs, the architect plans for new buildings, the librarian the structure of libraries, and so on.

The kind of perspective we have in mind here is the perspective one should take with respect to the meaning of life. Your thirsty brother can indeed take the perspective of the hygiene inspector, but whose perspective is it when we take the perspective of the whole universe in the case of the meaning of life? It is

certainly not a Christian God's perspective, since this God is concerned with the lives of human beings.

From the perspective of the whole universe, we do indeed appear to be creature whose lives are no more meaningful than was that of Sisyphus. Evolution will one day come to an end. One day there will be no more human beings. One day there will be no sun and no planets and no life. Perhaps life will arise somewhere else in the universe and the whole dance of evolution will start all over again. One day the universe itself will collapse and perhaps a new universe will emerge. Now, of course, we don't know any of this. But it is surely possible and from the cosmic perspective or the perspective from nowhere everything, the entire universe, would appear to be following the same route as Sisyphus.

((perhaps we should extent our thesis that the context matters))

We said in our preface that not the search for meaning is pointless. But why is that? We can now answer this question.

A person's activities have meaning if they point beyond, if, that is, they are instrumentally good. Those who take the cosmic perspective hold that a life can be 'meaningful life' only if it involves something especially large or cosmic. So a person, Cosmo, might reach for the glass of wine while complaining that life has no meaning. Well, reaching for the glass of wine certainly has meaning; that is, it is not a random movement of a human limb; it is in aid of some further goal; it is a meaningful act. But Cosmo complains not about this particular movement of the arm, but rather about something further—or, rather, about the lack of something further. So we might point out that reaching for the glass of wine is a good way of grasping the glass of wine, which is a good way of bringing the wine to your lips, which is a good way to sip the wine, and so on Cosmo complains that drinking the wine would be a (small) pleasure, of course; but it has no meaning. We will point out that it does indeed have meaning. It is part of the social activity of dining, of conversing. But that, too, Cosmo complains, has no meaning. We point out that dining and conversing are social activities which enrich one's life. Cosmo complains that enriching one's life has no meaning.

Poor Cosmo! He is on the other end of things from the skeptic Sam. Sam the skeptic looks at a knowledge claim, X, and says it is not justified. We

respond that X is indeed justified: it is justified on the basis of, say, Y. Sam is not impressed. He wants to know what justifies asserting Y. We tell him it is justified on the basis of Z. He protests that this could go on forever, and what we would be left with is a series of connected claims which have no *ultimate* foundation.

Poor Sam: Why does he need an *ultimate* foundation? Perhaps it is part of human psychology to desire a permanent place to stand on. Maybe the very thought of an unending series produces a kind of vertigo. This might explain why both Cosmo and Sam are so anxious to find something beyond—beyond all the separate somethings which never amount to a final, ultimate point.

Cosmo is not content with activities which point to (have their meaning in) still other activities (including states of mind such as pleasure or joy or contentment which take place in this, our human-scale world). He wants a meaning for 'life itself'. Perhaps he thinks: If living simply results in death, and if death is nothing to us, then life points to nothing! Life therefore has no meaning! He would be right about this last point. A person's life, taken as a whole (i.e., a completed life, which can occur only once the person is dead) cannot possibly have any meaning to the person whose life it was. (It may, of course, have meaning for other people.) The trouble is, people seem to want (or need) to go on anyway. They cannot accept that the meaning of life can only be found in the various activities in life; so they go looking for what their completed lives point to, and they find nothing at all. (Or else they turn to religion in order to give a meaning by means of conceptual magic.) Poor Cosmo! Poor Sam! They want what they cannot have, and which, in the nature of things, cannot ever be had by anyone. No one can have a square circle. And no one can have a meaning for their own life which is beyond their own life.

Chapter 11
The Pig-Breeder and Existentialism
The Pig-Breeder

Consider Aristide, the pig-breeder, who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more hogs to buy more land, to grow more corn to feed more hogs. Can Aristide's life be meaningful? His life plan makes him go round and round in circles. Is this enough to make his life meaningful?

Recall the defender of the cosmic perspective. He says that there is no meaning to life because from the perspective of the universe as a whole, life is something merely transient. There is, accordingly, no difference between the life of an animal and the life of a human being in regard to the meaningfulness of their lives: we, on the other hand, insist that life can have meaning, and that we can see what this amounts to when we consider life from the perspective of human beings and not from the perspective of the universe.

There is some sense in which the pig-breeder's life sounds much like the myth of Sisyphus who is rolling a stone to the top of a mountain upon which the stone rolls down again and he pushes it back up. But there are different perspectives that one can take in relation to the pig-breeder. One could also say that he is working to build up his farm. He is working *for his farm*. Sisyphus is not increasing anything. He is not working towards a goal. Sisyphus has no life plan. The pig-breeder is achieving something. Sisyphus is not.

It may be hard to explain what is so much better about buying more land than pushing a stone to the top of a mountain. But to settle the difference we must take the whole of Aristide's life into consideration. After all, in order to explain why someone's life is meaningful, we have to be concerned with what something means to the person whose life it is. The farmer does not bring something permanent into being. His life may not have the degree of meaningfulness that is enjoyed by the life of a great composer or a temple builder. But his life is meaningful nonetheless. Through hard work and good plans, he builds up his farm and he leaves this corner of the world in better shape for future generations.

But there must be a non-instrumental concern (some interest in a greater goal). That is, a person must have an interest in the goal not just the means if the person's life is to be meaningful. But the goal or achieved thing need not outlive the person herself.

We insist that there is a difference between the lives of animals and the lives of human being with respect to meaningfulness. But we are of course far

from being independent witnesses in this matter. Perhaps we human being merely invented this difference in much the same way in which we have invented the wheel and the soup bowl and the spoon and the computer and the internet or the borders surrounding countries. The really interesting charge is that it is a subjective prejudice/illusion which we find it comfortable to believe. Our answer is: animals can't make plans. These things were not here before someone invented them. We have invented those too.

Now there is a grain of truth in this view. The entire social web of meanings is indeed a product of invention—of human invention. It is something that is left behind by the totality of human achievements in the past. But, when once this web of meanings exits, then it is a purely objective matter that a given human life has meaning against this background.

Moreover, the difference between the lives of human beings and worms in regard of meaningfulness, turns on the fact that we, but not worms, are able to create such a social web of meanings. This fact, too, is an entirely objective matter. This difference in our respective powers of invention is *discovered* in the same sense in which DNA or the the continents of America was discovered, and in the same sense in which the speed of light or electricity or magnetism were discovered and not invented.

Existentialism

From the cosmic perspective the best we can achieve is to console ourselves, or distract ourselves to make ourselves feel better in the face of sheer cosmic meaninglessness. This will remind us of the so-called 'existentialists'—Heidegger, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Camus. The continental European philosophers of nothingness and *Ajust*. The existentialists, too, claimed that there is no fact of the matter with respect to meaning. The best we can do is to invent a fake meaning for ourselves from moment to moment in a world that is ultimately absurd. Existentialists, like the defenders of the cosmic perspective, say that human life, like everything else, is nothing more than the random play of material particles.

But this is clearly wrong. Consider what we discussed earlier. Promises surely are dependent on there being matter in the universe matter, organized in

certain ways. Thus they are dependent on there being human beings. We are not suggesting that promises belong to some special non-material realm; promises belong to the same world, as you and me. But although promises are not made of any special stuff and do not belong to some separate sphere, they still are not just matter; they are not purely physical even though they involve physical things. For they relate in different ways to physical things. They are a way in which can inhere in physical things. Another way in which structure can inhere in physical things is in your house, or your farm, or your church. Or just think of a single cell, which is a tiny piece of structured matter. There are so many other examples of social and institutional realm: think of nations, laws, companies, languages and so forth.

The existentialist says that there is no more to human life in terms of meaningfulness than there is to animal life. The best we can do, he says, is just *pretend*, allow themselves to become the victim of a comforting illusion—which he, the sophisticated intellectual, can then prick. But this means that even the existentialist accepts that we have the capacity as human beings to invent arbitrary meanings and attach them to our lives; hence that there is something more to human life than to the life of worms.

Existentialists claim however that this something more is but a useless passion we are alone in the universe, and we must all make sense of things for *ourselves*, but no way of doing this is better or worse than any other. The problem of living a life, they say, is that we face a long open-ended list of options, no one of which stands out as being better or worse—from the point of view of meaning—than any other. You could be a brain surgeons or a pickpocket, a nun or a junkie—and each of these choices is as good or as bad, as meaningful or as meaningless as every other. There is no such thing as good, no such thing as knowledge of the good, no such thing as meaning, and no such thing as knowledge of meaning. There is nothing fixed independently of ourselves which it would be right to aim at. The way we give meaning to our lives, the existentialist says, is by blinding ourselves to these fact and attaching ourselves to something—anything—to some free floating commitment, a commitment that is itself sustained by mere animal habit—or by fear. The judgment ‘this is the way for me to live’ or ‘I must do this’ is just an empty gesture. However you act, however you live, is up to you.

Your judgment ‘this is the way for me to live’ can be true because you have a life plan. But don’t we invent our life plans? Isn’t the case that you could have chosen to be a good football player rather than a good astronaut? Yes, in many cases you do have to make a choice, and in that sense you are inventing your life plan.

Normally you do not choose at random. You choose in relation to your talents and to plans and then the opportunities presented by world around. But even if, against the background, you do choose at random—you come to a fork in the rod of your life, you can go either way—this still does not mean that the existentialist are right to conclude that your striving to create for yourself a meaningful life is so much useless passion. For whichever fork you take, if you work resolutely to realize your plans then your life will have meaning—and objectively so.

Talent and Meaning

We are using the word ‘talent’ quite loosely. It might be that people are born with certain talents in the form of dispositions (perhaps a football player needs to have good eyes, and a disposition for the development of good leg muscles; perhaps the piano player must have relatively thin fingers and good ears). It seems that certain people are born with talents in terms of intelligence (practical or intellectual) for doing certain things. It might be that we could do most things if we really wanted to go through all the trouble of acquiring the skills for doing them. But some of us seem to have more will pover and more staying power, more sheer doggedness, than others. That does not really matter here. What matters is that we have either the necessary intelligence for doing certain things or a disposition or an interest in acquiring certain skills. That is what we shall understand by ‘talent’. And our talents, whatever they are, will imply that we cannot achieve all the things that we might desire. Given our talents there are some things we can achieve easily—reaching out for another bottle of beer—other things which take real effort, involve a certain amount of risk and will give rise to the sort of achievement that will contribute to the meaningfulness of our life.

We do to some extent choose our own life plans; but this does not mean that the meaning of our lives is invented. It is not that there is no fact of the

matter in regard of meaningfulness. Rather, we find something in our lives which we call 'meaningfulness'. To have a life plan (no matter which) which is sufficiently difficult to realize given our conditions and *to try to realize this life plan* in a satisfactory way is to have a meaningful life. Thus, we are not saying that you *must* be a great pianist or that you *must* have children, or that you must do anything else in order to have a meaningful life. We say only that if you want a meaningful life then you must have a life plan and not just any old plan will count as a life plan of the sort that will contribute meaning. It's going to take effort, risk, the right sort of fit with your talents, constant adjustments, and much more.

There is a fact of the matter in regard of the meaningfulness of life in the sense that it could in principle be determined whether or not a given life is meaningful and it could in principle be determined without asking the person whose life it is. It might be hard to determine it in some borderline cases but we could in principle do so. Consider Jill, who has an ordinary job in which she does not make any particular progress and in which she has no real interest. Jill seeks no particular goals. She eats, reads, watches a little television, works to make a living, sleeps during the night, has a few not really close friends whom she meets once in a while. Sometimes she goes to the movies or to a museum. She never marries and never has kids, occasionally she visits her parents, but too rarely and with too little enthusiasm for it to count as a real goal in her life. Is this a meaningful life? Well, not very. At best is it a borderline case of a meaningful life. Jill makes plans, but her plans do not add up to any sort of whole.

Other cases on the other side are also very easy to determine. Take for example a good teacher. A good teacher's life is surely meaningful (even if in some cases unhappy).

On our view there are yes or no answers to the question of whether a life is useful (and of some mixed cases). We do discover a meaning for life in the sense that we strictly find a life plan that we can and sincerely want to realize. The meaning of life is in this sense not invented or constructed or projected. It is discovered and discovery is answerable to truth, whereas invention and construction are not.

Chapter 12
Sex and Gender
Temporary Meaningfulness

Consider the following different careers you can choose. Becoming a fashion model, joining the army, becoming a soccer player, becoming a ballet dancer. You can be a model, or a soccer player only when you're young.

Can it be part of a meaningful life to choose a temporary career. Can they contribute meaning to your life? Of course: life plans can involve separate phases, each phase contribution in different ways to the next. Of course, this must involve some sort of a life plan. But there is no necessity that you should work out all the details of your life plan from the very start. All plans, as we have seen, leave openings for flexibility as events unfold. If we divide life into stages, we can say that you can bootstrap your life in stage I to be more meaningful in stage II by earning lots of money in stage I. This is like Bernard the pig-breeder who gets rich and leaves all his money to a fund for starving artists. Or you can bootstrap your life in stage I to be more meaningful in stage II by acquiring special skills in stage I, or escaping in Stage I, and so forth. But it's walways the future (the whole life plan) which matters.

Or suppose you are a beautiful young woman who chooses to become a rich man's mistress. The relationship endures for several years. You sleep with him. In return you have a glorious life. He gives you gifts, big earrings and nice clothes. He pays your rent. You join him on his journeys to exotic places in the world. But then the whole things comes to an end, perhaps in tears. He trades you in for a younger, thinner model. Can even *this* contribute meaning to your life? It might be that it can. It does in fact involve a plan that can be realized. You are perfectly conscious of what you are doing—and of the risks involved. You are aware of the lack of permanence. You have calculated very carefully the costs and benefits involved. Your lover is a man of the world. He can teach you a lot. He can offer you experiences you would not otherwise enjoy. Through him, your world expands, the range of your possible life plans is wider.

Chapter 13
Making Meaning

There are many things you can make: a career, a tapestry, a cocktail, a temple, a theory, a home, a family, a dynasty, a nation, friends, love, babies. ....

The social web of meaning is like a great city, steep and gentle inclines, large and small buildings, large and small challenges, a challenge for every person who, by accepting the challenge in his life can lead a meaningful life. Home making is one such challenge. Splitting the atom is another . Climbing a mountain is another....

Home Making

Cheryl Mendelson grew up in southwestern Pennsylvania in the 1950s. Her Italian and Anglo-American grandmothers taught her how to keep house. Both grandmothers had devoted themselves to making a home. Both were very traditional minded but they came from different traditions. Cheryl's Anglo-American grandmother believed that ironing was the queen of the household arts. Her grandmother believed that beds should be aired out, and never ironed. But Cheryl left all that behind her when, like many women of her generation, she went off to college and threw herself into studying, writing, and an academic career. A Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Rochester was followed by a law degree from Harvard and excruciatingly long hours as a young attorney. Her apartment, she says, was like a hotel room, she did not cook, listen to music, or knit. She hired someone else to clean.

Cheryl thinks that many young women and men are nowadays pushed into a life like this. Their mothers, whose formative years were the 1960s, abstained in principle from teaching their daughters and sons the arts of housekeeping. Their daughters, they thought, were just like their sons made for better things—for career, freedom, excitement. The result was that many entered adulthood without any knowledge of how to cook or keep a home.

But for Cheryl, the new life centered entirely around her career was unsatisfying. During her first marriage, she came home in a rainstorm and found three muddy dogs curled up on her unmade bed. She burst out crying and eventually she realized that she actually enjoyed taking care of both things and people. Soon she was collecting old household manuals, and soon she had a home once more, and living in it made her feel like a new person.

She gave up her career as a lawyer in order to write a big book on home making, a guide to all those women—and men—of her generation who were in matters of the home, dumb. She wrote about how to iron and fold, about what sort of utensils are needed for a well-equipped kitchen, about why potatoes and apples should be stored separately. She tells us how to determine the thread count of a shirt (get a magnifying glass and, with the aid of a needle, count off the number of warp yarns in a quarter-inch square: then multiply by eight).

Cheryl writes like a Harvard-trained lawyer: but she is telling us not how to litigate a case, but how to make a home, a home that is bright, open, welcoming, friendly, a home that is full of meaning, a home that is a landmark in your life. She does lay down a brilliant defense of the thesis that homemaking can contribute just as much to the meaning of your life as can the drudgery of a career. And homemaking can, like other achievements contribute also in other ways to the meaning of your life, and of the life of your family.

Chapter 14
Death

Life Under Adversity

How can people like soldiers, spies, undercover detectives, and those who care for the sick have meaningful lives? A soldier who is being shot at in a war is probably not happy.

On Being Old and Looking Back

One popular view, which lies deep in our common literature and mythology, links the meaning of life with what happens when you reach the end of life. You have had a meaningful life if you can look back across your life, run over the events in your mind, and see that your life was good, fruitful, satisfying. One version of this story has you standing in front of the Gates of Heaven talking to Saint Peter. You need to convince him that your life was good, fruitful,

satisfying. What makes your life meaningful, on this account, is this proper way of bringing your life to an end. This can't be a good account of life's meaning as it stands, however. Your doctors might give you a pill, just before you die which gives you exactly the feeling that you have led a good, fruitful life. Would this mean that your life had been meaningful? You might die by an accident just before you reach the point where you can look back. Would this mean that your life was without meaning? Clearly what is needed is more than just a feeling. And beliefs, too, are not enough. You might believe, as you lie on your deathbed, that you have led a good, happy, successful life—but you are deluding yourself. Your beliefs are false. In fact the looking-back-at-your-life theory of meaningfulness has things exactly the wrong way round. The meaning of life is always forward-looking. The reason why, in myth and literature, the deathbed scene has played so important a role is because of the way the life is organized that you are looking back upon. A life has to have landmarks, things worth remembering, things that you did, achievements, knitted together in a certain way that is—precisely—meaningful.