

A wide-angle photograph of a majestic mountain range. The peaks are heavily covered in snow and ice, with deep shadows and bright highlights creating a rugged texture. In the foreground, a dirt road curves from the right side of the frame towards the center, leading the eye through a field of dry, golden-brown grass. The sky above is a clear, pale blue.

Fourth Edition

*The*  
**MEANING**  
*of* **LIFE**

*A Reader*

E.D. KLEMKE | STEVEN M. CAHN

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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FOURTH EDITION

# *The Meaning of Life*

*A Reader*



*Edited by*  
E. D. Klemke  
Steven M. Cahn

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To  
DIRK J. SCHOLTEN

*whose wise advice, encouragement,  
and friendship have enriched my life  
and made it more meaningful.*

— E. D. K.



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## *Preface to the Fourth Edition*

*The Meaning of Life* is one of those rare anthologies that appeared long ago, yet remains in wide use. Originally edited by E. D. Klemke, the book was published in 1981 with a second edition in 2000, the year he died. I undertook a third edition in 2008, and the kind reception it has received leads me to offer this fourth edition.

Here are its features. Professor Klemke's introduction remains as he wrote it. Part One has been revised to include essays by Christopher W. Gowans and Henry Rosemont, Jr., on the meaning of life from the perspectives of Buddhism and Confucianism. Given these additions, Part One might now be more appropriately labeled "The Religious Answer," rather than "The Theistic Answer," but I have chosen to retain Professor Klemke's original title. Essays by Louis P. Pojman and David F. Swenson that appeared in a previous edition are not carried over. Part Two is unchanged, except that the essay by Arthur Schopenhauer has been shortened. Part Three omits essays by A. J. Ayer, Kai Nielsen, and John Kekes but now contains one by Christine Vitrano. The most notable change is the addition of Part Four, "The End of Life." Near the conclusion of his original introduction, Professor Klemke asks: "But how can life have any meaning or worth or value if it must come to an end?" This new edition includes reflections on such matters by Thomas Nagel, Bernard Williams, John Martin Fischer, Samuel Scheffler, Harry G. Frankfurt, and Susan Wolf.

When *The Meaning of Life* was first published, it was widely recognized as a remarkably innovative collection. I hope that this new edition does justice to the continuing value of Professor Klemke's important work.

I am grateful to my editor Robert Miller for his support and guidance, to associate editor Alyssa Palazzo and editorial assistant Kellylouise Delaney for their generous help, to production editor Marianne Paul for her conscientiousness, and to the staff of Oxford University Press for support throughout production.

Preface to the Fourth Edition

Let me add that some of the materials throughout the book were written when the custom was to use the noun “man” and the pronoun “he” to refer to all persons, regardless of gender, and I have retained the author’s original wording. With this proviso, let us begin our readings.

New York City  
August 2016

S. M. C.

## *Preface to the Third Edition*

E. D. Klemke (1926–2000) taught at DePauw University, Roosevelt University, and, for more than two decades, at Iowa State University, winning teaching awards at each institution. In addition to his own numerous writings, many of which explored the early development of analytic philosophy, he was a prolific editor, and *The Meaning of Life*, which first appeared in 1981 with a second edition in 2000, is one of his best-known collections.

At the suggestion of Robert Miller, my longtime editor at Oxford University Press, and with the approval of executors of Professor Klemke's estate, I have undertaken a third edition, retaining the book's structure while adding a significant number of essays, mostly of recent vintage, and shortening or omitting others so as not to increase the volume's overall length. With this updating I hope to highlight the continuing significance of Professor Klemke's work.

The introduction remains as he wrote it. A comprehensive bibliography of contemporary books and articles on the meaning of life can be found in the survey article on the subject by Thaddeus Metz in *Ethics*, 112:4 (2002).

I am grateful to Robert Miller for his support and guidance, to Associate Editor Sarah Calabi for her important role in realizing the project, and to the staff of Oxford University Press for its assistance throughout the stages of production.

New York City  
May 2007

S. M. C.

## *Preface to the Second Edition*

Viktor Frankl once wrote: "Man's concern about a meaning of life is the truest expression of the state of being human." Because I agree with this view, I was led some years ago to put together a collection of essays on the topic of the meaning of life. Since that time I have found many new essays on the topic as well as some that I overlooked in working on the first edition.

The selections contained in this revised edition are, I believe, the most important essays (or chapters) that have been written on the topic of the meaning of life. All but two of the selections are by twentieth-century writers, philosophers, theologians, and others. In some collections of essays, the editor provides a brief summary of all of the selections contained in the anthology. I shall not attempt to do that here, for I believe that the readers' delight and stimulation will be enhanced if they turn to the selections and let the authors speak for themselves.

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have helped with regard to the planning and preparation of this book. Among those to whom I am especially grateful are Gary Comstock, John Donaghy, John Nerness, Edna Wiser, William D. Hein, and Charles K. Benton.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Robert B. Miller, Jeffrey Broesche, and all of the staff at Oxford University Press.

Finally, I would like to express my unfailing gratitude to some friends who have helped me find meaning and purpose in my own life. Among these I must especially acknowledge Dirk Scholten, Bruce Hardy, Bryan Graveline, Robert Gitchell, Bryan Walker, Steve and Pattie Stamy, David Hauser, William Hein, Robert and Karen Ridgway, and finally, Tom Zmolek, Jim Moran, Matt Schulte, and all of the great employees at Peoples.

Ames, Iowa  
February 1999

E. D. K.

*The Meaning of Life*



# INTRODUCTION

## *The Question of the Meaning of Life*

E. D. Klemke



In his work “A Confession,” Tolstoy gives an account of how, when he was fifty years old and at the height of his career, he became deeply distressed by the conviction that life was meaningless:

. . . [F]ive years ago, something very strange began to happen with me: I was overcome by minutes at first of perplexity and then an arrest of life, as though I did not know how to live or what to do, and I lost myself and was dejected. But that passed, and I continued to live as before. Then those moments of perplexity were repeated oftener and oftener, and always in one and the same form. These arrests of life found their expression in ever the same questions: “Why? Well, and then?”

At first I thought that those were simply aimless, inappropriate questions. It seemed to me that that was all well known and that if I ever wanted to busy myself with their solution, it would not cost me much labour,—that now I had no time to attend to them, but that if I wanted to I should find the proper answers. But the questions began to repeat themselves oftener and oftener, answers were demanded more and more persistently, and, like dots that fall on the same spot, these questions, without any answers, thickened into one black blotch. . . .

I felt that what I was standing on had given way, that I had no foundation to stand on, that that which I lived by no longer existed, and that I had nothing to live by. . . .

“Well, I know,” I said to myself, “all which science wants to persistently to know, but there is no answer to the question about the meaning of my life.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps almost every sensitive and reflective person has had at least some moments when similar fears and questions have arisen in his or her life. Perhaps the experiences were not as extreme as Tolstoy’s, but they have nevertheless been troublesome. And surely almost everyone has at some time asked: What is the meaning of life? Is there any meaning at all? What is it all about? What is the point of it all? It seems evident, then, that the question of

the meaning of life is one of the most important questions. Also it is important for all persons, not merely for philosophers.

At least one writer has maintained that it is the most urgent question. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. . . .

If I ask myself how to judge that this question is more urgent than that, I reply that one judges by the actions it entails. I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument [for the existence of a god]. Galileo, who held a scientific truth of great importance, abjured it with the greatest of ease as soon as it endangered his life. In a certain sense, he did right. That truth was not worth the stake. Whether the earth or the sun revolves around the other is a matter of profound indifference. To tell the truth, it is a futile question. On the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.<sup>2</sup>

However we may rank the question—as the most urgent of all or as one of the most urgent of all—most of us do find the question to be one that merits our serious attention. Part of its urgency stems from the fact that it is related to many other questions that face us in our daily lives. Many of the decisions we make with regard to careers, leisure time, moral dilemmas, and other matters depend on how we answer the question of the meaning of life.

However, the question may mean several things. Let us attempt to distinguish some of them. The question “What is the meaning of life?” may mean any of the following: (1) Why does the universe exist? Why is there something rather than nothing? Is there some plan for the whole universe? (2) Why do humans (in general) exist? Do they exist for some purpose? If so, what is it? (3) Why do *I* exist? Do *I* exist for some purpose? If so, how am *I* to find what it is? If not, how can life have any significance or value?

I do not mean to suggest that these are rigidly distinct questions. They are obviously interrelated. Hence we may interpret the question “What is the meaning of life?” broadly so that it can include any one or any two or all three of these questions. In so doing, we will be following common usage. Perhaps most of those who are deeply concerned with the question interpret it mainly in terms of question (3). However, there are others who include either question (1) or (2) or both along with question (3). Again, we need not be concerned with specifying one of the interpretations as the “correct” one. Rather let us recognize that all of them are often involved when one asks about the meaning of life.

In turning to possible answers to the question of the meaning of life, we find different approaches or stances:

- I. The theistic answer
- II. The nontheistic alternative
- III. The approach that questions the meaningfulness of the question

These three different approaches are represented by the readings found in Parts I, II, and III, respectively, of this volume. Perhaps a brief summary of each would be desirable at this point.

I. According to the theistic answer, the meaning of life is found in the existence of a god—a supremely benevolent and all-powerful being, transcendent to the natural universe, but who created the universe and fashioned man in his image and endowed him with a preordained purpose. In this view, without the existence of God, or at least without faith in God, life has no meaning or purpose and hence is not worth living. It is difficult to find many works in which this position is explicitly defended from a *philosophical* view. However, it is an answer that is held widely by religious believers, and it is apparent that in many cases it is a basis (or part of the basis) for religious belief. Apart from Tolstoy's *Confession*, the other essays found in Part I of this volume do provide a direct theological, existential defense of this view.

II. The nontheistic (or humanistic) alternative, of course, denies the claim that the meaning of life is dependent on the existence of a god. According to this alternative, since there is no good reason to believe in the existence of a transcendent god, there is no good reason to believe that life has any objective meaning or purpose—that is, any meaning that is dependent on anything outside of the natural universe. Rather, the meaning of life, if there is one, must be found within the natural universe. Some adherents of this view go on to claim that there is no good reason to think life has any meaning in *any* objective sense, but there is good reason to believe that it can nevertheless have meaning in a subjective sense. In other words, it is up to each individual to fashion or create his or her own meaning by virtue of his own consciousness and creative activity. A defense of this position is found in the editor's own essay and in other essays in Part II of this volume.

III. There is yet a third approach to the question of the meaning of life. According to this approach, the question "What is the meaning of life?" is a peculiar or at least an ambiguous one. What kind of question are we asking when we ask about the meaning of life? There are some who think that on analysis of terms such as "meaning," "purpose," and "value," the question of the meaning of life turns out to be cognitively meaningless. However, there are others who reject that claim and take the opposing view. According to them, the various questions that make up the larger question of the meaning of life can be given an interpretation that renders them to be intelligible and cognitively significant. Various aspects of and perspectives on this position are presented in the essays in Part III of this volume.

It is my view that the question of the meaning of life is a significant and important one and that it can be given an answer. I believe that the answer does not rest on any theistic or metaphysical assumptions. Since my defense of this position has been given in my essay "Living Without Appeal: An Affirmative Philosophy of Life," contained in this volume, I will not repeat what I have said there except to say this: It will be recalled that in the passage quoted above, Camus maintains that "Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." The answer I have given to that question is that there is no formula or recipe or slogan to guarantee that life will be worth living; but I believe that it can be worth living. I believe that I shall die, but that in the meantime, I can find a genuine meaning and purpose in life that makes it worth living.

There are some who will object: But how can life have any meaning or worth or value if it must come to an end? Sir Karl Popper has given the best answer I know of to that question. He writes: "There are those who think that life is valueless because it comes to an end. They fail to see that the opposite argument might also be proposed: that if there were no end to life, life would have no value; that it is, in part, the ever-present danger of losing it which helps to bring home to us the value of life."<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1. From L. Tolstoy, *My Confession*, trans. Leo Weiner (London: J. M. Dent, 1905), *passim*.
2. A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. J. O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. i.
3. Sir Karl Popper, "How I See Philosophy." In A. Mercier and M. Svilar (eds.), *Philosophers on Their Own Work*, Vol. 3 (Berne and Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1977), p. 148.

P A R T   O N E

# The Theistic Answer





*My Confession*

Although I regarded authorship as a waste of time, I continued to write during those fifteen years. I had tasted of the seduction of authorship, of the seduction of enormous monetary remunerations and applauses for my insignificant labour, and so I submitted to it, as being a means for improving my material condition and for stifling in my soul all questions about the meaning of my life and life in general.

In my writings I advocated, what to me was the only truth, that it was necessary to live in such a way as to derive the greatest comfort for oneself and one's family.

Thus I proceeded to live, but five years ago something very strange began to happen with me: I was overcome by minutes at first of perplexity and then of an arrest of life, as though I did not know how to live or what to do, and I lost myself and was dejected. But that passed, and I continued to live as before. Then those minutes of perplexity were repeated oftener and oftener, and always in one and the same form. These arrests of life found their expression in ever the same questions: "Why? Well, and then?"

At first I thought that those were simply aimless, inappropriate questions. It seemed to me that that was all well known and that if I ever wanted to busy myself with their solution, it would not cost me much labour,—that now I had no time to attend to them, but that if I wanted to I should find the proper answers. But the questions began to repeat themselves oftener and oftener, answers were demanded more and more persistently, and, like dots that fall on the same spot, these questions, without any answers, thickened into one black blotch.

There happened what happens with any person who falls ill with a mortal internal disease. At first there appear insignificant symptoms of indisposition, to which the patient pays no attention; then these symptoms are repeated more and more frequently and blend into one temporally indivisible

suffering. The suffering keeps growing, and before the patient has had time to look around, he becomes conscious that what he took for an indisposition is the most significant thing in the world to him,—is death.

The same happened with me. I understood that it was not a passing indisposition, but something very important, and that, if the questions were going to repeat themselves, it would be necessary to find an answer for them. And I tried to answer them. The questions seemed to be so foolish, simple, and childish. But the moment I touched them and tried to solve them, I became convinced, in the first place, that they were not childish and foolish, but very important and profound questions in life, and, in the second, that, no matter how much I might try, I should not be able to answer them. Before attending to my Samára estate, to my son's education, or to the writing of a book, I ought to know why I should do that. So long as I did not know why, I could not do anything. I could not live. Amidst my thoughts of farming, which interested me very much during that time, there would suddenly pass through my head a question like this: "All right, you are going to have six thousand desyatíns of land in the Government of Samára, and three hundred horses,—and then?" And I completely lost my senses and did not know what to think farther. Or, when I thought of the education of my children, I said to myself: "Why?" Or, reflecting on the manner in which the masses might obtain their welfare, I suddenly said to myself: "What is that to me?" Or, thinking of the fame which my works would get me, I said to myself: "All right, you will be more famous than Gógl, Púshkin, Shakespeare, Molière, and all the writers in the world,—what of it?" And I was absolutely unable to make any reply. The questions were not waiting, and I had to answer them at once; if I did not answer them, I could not live.

I felt that what I was standing on had given way, that I had no foundation to stand on, that that which I lived by no longer existed, and that I had nothing to live by. . . .

All that happened with me when I was on every side surrounded by what is considered to be complete happiness. I had a good, loving, and beloved wife, good children, and a large estate, which grew and increased without any labour on my part. I was respected by my neighbours and friends, more than ever before, was praised by strangers, and, without any self-deception, could consider my name famous. With all that, I was not deranged or mentally unsound,—on the contrary, I was in full command of my mental and physical powers, such as I had rarely met with in people of my age: physically I could work in a field, mowing, without falling behind a peasant; mentally I could work from eight to ten hours in succession, without experiencing any consequences from the strain. And while in such condition I arrived at the conclusion that I could not live, and, fearing death, I had to use cunning against myself, in order that I might not take my life.

This mental condition expressed itself to me in this form: my life is a stupid, mean trick played on me by somebody. Although I did not recognize that "somebody" as having created me, the form of the conception that someone

had played a mean, stupid trick on me by bringing me into the world was the most natural one that presented itself to me.

Involuntarily I imagined that there, somewhere, there was somebody who was now having fun as he looked down upon me and saw me, who had lived for thirty or forty years, learning, developing, growing in body and mind, now that I had become strengthened in mind and had reached that summit of life from which it lay all before me, standing as a complete fool on that summit and seeing clearly that there was nothing in life and never would be. And that was fun to him—

But whether there was or was not that somebody who made fun of me, did not make it easier for me. I could not ascribe any sensible meaning to a single act, or to my whole life. I was only surprised that I had not understood that from the start. All that had long ago been known to everybody. Sooner or later there would come diseases and death (they had come already) to my dear ones and to me, and there would be nothing left but stench and worms. All my affairs, no matter what they might be, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself should not exist. So why should I worry about all these things? How could a man fail to see that and live,—that was surprising! A person could live only so long as he was drunk; but the moment he sobered up, he could not help seeing that all that was only a deception, and a stupid deception at that! Really, there was nothing funny and ingenious about it, but only something cruel and stupid.

Long ago has been told the Eastern story about the traveller who in the steppe is overtaken by an infuriated beast. Trying to save himself from the animal, the traveller jumps into a waterless well, but at its bottom he sees a dragon who opens his jaws in order to swallow him. And the unfortunate man does not dare climb out, lest he perish from the infuriated beast, and does not dare jump down to the bottom of the well, lest he be devoured by the dragon, and so clutches the twig of a wild bush growing in a cleft of the well and holds on to it. His hands grow weak and he feels that soon he shall have to surrender to the peril which awaits him at either side; but he still holds on and sees two mice, one white, the other black, in even measure making a circle around the main trunk of the bush to which he is clinging, and nibbling at it on all sides. Now, at any moment, the bush will break and tear off, and he will fall into the dragon's jaws. The traveller sees that and knows that he will inevitably perish; but while he is still clinging, he sees some drops of honey hanging on the leaves of the bush, and so reaches out for them with his tongue and licks the leaves. Just so I hold on to the branch of life, knowing that the dragon of death is waiting inevitably for me, ready to tear me to pieces, and I cannot understand why I have fallen on such suffering. And I try to lick that honey which used to give me pleasure; but now it no longer gives me joy, and the white and the black mouse day and night nibble at the branch to which I am holding on. I clearly see the dragon, and the honey is no longer sweet to me. I see only the inevitable dragon and the mice, and am unable to turn my glance away from them. That is not a fable, but a veritable, indisputable, comprehensible truth.

The former deception of the pleasures of life, which stifled the terror of the dragon, no longer deceives me. No matter how much one should say to me, "You cannot understand the meaning of life, do not think, live!" I am unable to do so, because I have been doing it too long before. Now I cannot help seeing day and night, which run and lead me up to death. I see that alone, because that alone is the truth. Everything else is a lie.

The two drops of honey that have longest turned my eyes away from the cruel truth, the love of family and of authorship, which I have called an art, are no longer sweet to me.

"My family—" I said to myself, "but my family, my wife and children, they are also human beings. They are in precisely the same condition that I am in: they must either live in the lie or see the terrible truth. Why should they live? Why should I love them, why guard, raise, and watch them? Is it for the same despair which is in me, or for dulness of perception? Since I love them, I cannot conceal the truth from them,—every step in cognition leads them up to this truth. And the truth is death."

"Art, poetry?" For a long time, under the influence of the success of human praise, I tried to persuade myself that that was a thing which could be done, even though death should come and destroy everything, my deeds, as well as my memory of them; but soon I came to see that that, too, was a deception. It was clear to me that art was an adornment of life, a decoy of life. But life lost all its attractiveness for me. How, then, could I entrap others? So long as I did not live my own life, and a strange life bore me on its waves; so long as I believed that life had some sense, although I was not able to express it,—the reflections of life of every description in poetry and in the arts afforded me pleasure, and I was delighted to look at life through this little mirror of art; but when I began to look for the meaning of life, when I experienced the necessity of living myself, that little mirror became either useless, superfluous, and ridiculous, or painful to me. I could no longer console myself with what I saw in the mirror, namely, that my situation was stupid and desperate. It was all right for me to rejoice so long as I believed in the depth of my soul that life had some sense. At that time the play of lights—of the comical, the tragical, the touching, the beautiful, the terrible in life—afforded me amusement. But when I knew that life was meaningless and terrible, the play in the little mirror could no longer amuse me. No sweetness of honey could be sweet to me, when I saw the dragon and the mice that were nibbling down my support. . . .

In my search after the question of life I experienced the same feeling which a man who has lost his way in the forest may experience.

He comes to a clearing, climbs a tree, and clearly sees an unlimited space before him; at the same time he sees that there are no houses there, and that there can be none; he goes back to the forest, into the darkness, and he sees darkness, and again there are no houses.

Thus I blundered in this forest of human knowledge, between the clearings of the mathematical and experimental sciences, which disclosed to me

clear horizons, but such in the direction of which there could be no house, and between the darkness of the speculative sciences, where I sunk into a deeper darkness, the farther I proceeded, and I convinced myself at last that there was no way out and could not be.

By abandoning myself to the bright side of knowledge I saw that I only turned my eyes away from the question. No matter how enticing and clear the horizons were that were disclosed to me, no matter how enticing it was to bury myself in the infinitude of this knowledge, I comprehended that these sciences were the more clear, the less I needed them, the less they answered my question.

"Well, I know," I said to myself, "all which science wants so persistently to know, but there is no answer to the question about the meaning of my life." But in the speculative sphere I saw that, in spite of the fact that the aim of the knowledge was directed straight to the answer of my question, or because of that fact, there could be no other answer than what I was giving to myself: "What is the meaning of my life?"—"None." Or, "What will come of my life?"—"Nothing." Or, "Why does everything which exists exist, and why do I exist?"—"Because it exists."

Putting the question to the one side of human knowledge, I received an endless quantity of exact answers about what I did not ask: about the chemical composition of the stars, about the movement of the sun toward the constellation of Hercules, about the origin of species and of man, about the forms of infinitely small, imponderable particles of ether; but the answer in this sphere of knowledge to my question what the meaning of my life was, was always: "You are what you call your life; you are a temporal, accidental conglomeration of particles. The interrelation, the change of these particles, produces in you that which you call life. This congeries will last for some time; then the interaction of these particles will cease, and that which you call life and all your questions will come to an end. You are an accidentally cohering globule of something. The globule is fermenting. This fermentation the globule calls its life. The globule falls to pieces, and all fermentation and all questions will come to an end." Thus the clear side of knowledge answers, and it cannot say anything else, if only it strictly follows its principles.

With such an answer it appears that the answer is not a reply to the question. I want to know the meaning of my life, but the fact that it is a particle of the infinite not only gives it no meaning, but even destroys every possible meaning.

Those obscure transactions, which this side of the experimental, exact science has with speculation, when it says that the meaning of life consists in evolution and the coöperation with this evolution, because of their obscurity and inexactness cannot be regarded as answers.

The other side of knowledge, the speculative, so long as it sticks strictly to its fundamental principles in giving a direct answer to the question, everywhere and at all times has answered one and the same: "The world is something infinite and incomprehensible. Human life is an incomprehensible part of this incomprehensible *all*. . . ."

I lived for a long time in this madness, which, not in words, but in deeds, is particularly characteristic of us, the most liberal and learned of men. But, thanks either to my strange, physical love for the real working class, which made me understand it and see that it is not so stupid as we suppose, or to the sincerity of my conviction, which was that I could know nothing and that the best that I could do was to hang myself,—I felt that if I wanted to live and understand the meaning of life, I ought naturally to look for it, not among those who had lost the meaning of life and wanted to kill themselves, but among those billions departed and living men who had been carrying their own lives and ours upon their shoulders. And I looked around at the enormous masses of deceased and living men,—not learned and wealthy, but simple men,—and I saw something quite different. I saw that all these billions of men that lived or had lived, all, with rare exceptions, did not fit into my subdivisions,<sup>1</sup> and that I could not recognize them as not understanding the question, because they themselves put it and answered it with surprising clearness. Nor could I recognize them as Epicureans, because their lives were composed rather of privations and suffering than of enjoyment. Still less could I recognize them as senselessly living out their meaningless lives, because every act of theirs and death itself was explained by them. They regarded it as the greatest evil to kill themselves. It appeared, then, that all humanity was in possession of a knowledge of the meaning of life, which I did not recognize and which I condemned. It turned out that rational knowledge did not give any meaning to life, excluded life, while the meaning which by billions of people, by all humanity, was ascribed to life was based on some despised, false knowledge.

The rational knowledge in the person of the learned and the wise denied the meaning of life, but the enormous masses of men, all humanity, recognized this meaning in an irrational knowledge. This irrational knowledge was faith, the same that I could not help but reject. That was God as one and three, the creation in six days, devils and angels, and all that which I could not accept so long as I had not lost my senses.

My situation was a terrible one. I knew that I should not find anything on the path of rational knowledge but the negation of life, and there, in faith, nothing but the negation of reason, which was still more impossible than the negation of life. From the rational knowledge it followed that life was an evil and men knew it,—it depended on men whether they should cease living, and yet they lived and continued to live, and I myself lived, though I had known long ago that life was meaningless and an evil. From faith it followed that, in order to understand life, I must renounce reason, for which alone a meaning was needed.

There resulted a contradiction, from which there were two ways out: either what I called rational was not so rational as I had thought; or that which to me appeared irrational was not so irrational as I had thought. And I began to verify the train of thoughts of my rational knowledge.

In verifying the train of thoughts of my rational knowledge, I found that it was quite correct. The deduction that life was nothing was inevitable;

but I saw a mistake. The mistake was that I had not reasoned in conformity with the question put by me. The question was, "Why should I live?" that is, "What real, indestructible essence will come from my phantasmal, destructible life? What meaning has my finite existence in this infinite world?" And in order to answer this question, I studied life.

The solutions of all possible questions of life apparently could not satisfy me, because my question, no matter how simple it appeared in the beginning, included the necessity of explaining the finite through the infinite, and vice versa.

I asked, "What is the extra-temporal, extra-causal, extra-spatial meaning of life?" But I gave an answer to the question, "What is the temporal, causal, spatial meaning of my life?" The result was that after a long labour of mind I answered, "None."

In my reflections I constantly equated, nor could I do otherwise, the finite with the finite, the infinite with the infinite, and so from that resulted precisely what had to result: force was force, matter was matter, will was will, infinity was infinity, nothing was nothing,—and nothing else could come from it.

There happened something like what at times takes place in mathematics: you think you are solving an equation, when you have only an identity. The reasoning is correct, but you receive as a result the answer:  $a = a$ , or  $x = x$ , or  $o = o$ . The same happened with my reflection in respect to the question about the meaning of my life. The answers given by all science to that question are only identities.

Indeed, the strictly scientific knowledge, that knowledge which, as Descartes did, begins with a full doubt in everything, rejects all knowledge which has been taken on trust, and builds everything anew on the laws of reason and experience, cannot give any other answer to the question of life than what I received,—an indefinite answer. It only seemed to me at first that science gave me a positive answer,—Schopenhauer's answer: "Life has no meaning, it is an evil." But when I analyzed the matter, I saw that the answer was not a positive one, but that it was only my feeling which expressed it as such. The answer, strictly expressed, as it is expressed by the Brahmins, by Solomon, and by Schopenhauer, is only an indefinite answer, or an identity,  $o = o$ , life is nothing. Thus the philosophical knowledge does not negate anything, but only answers that the question cannot be solved by it, that for philosophy the solution remains insoluble.

When I saw that, I understood that it was not right for me to look for an answer to my question in rational knowledge, and that the answer given by rational knowledge was only an indication that the answer might be got if the question were differently put, but only when into the discussion of the question should be introduced the question of the relation of the finite to the infinite. I also understood that, no matter how irrational and monstrous the answers might be that faith gave, they had this advantage that they introduced into each answer the relation of the finite to the infinite, without which there could be no answer.

No matter how I may put the question, "How must I live?" the answer is, "According to God's law." "What real result will there be from my life?"—"Eternal torment or eternal bliss." "What is the meaning which is not destroyed by death?"—"The union with infinite God, paradise."

Thus, outside the rational knowledge, which had to me appeared as the only one, I was inevitably led to recognize that all living humanity had a certain other irrational knowledge, faith, which made it possible to live.

All the irrationality of faith remained the same for me, but I could not help recognizing that it alone gave to humanity answers to the questions of life, and, in consequence of them, the possibility of living.

The rational knowledge brought me to the recognition that life was meaningless,—my life stopped, and I wanted to destroy myself. When I looked around at people, at all humanity, I saw that people lived and asserted that they knew the meaning of life. I looked back at myself: I lived so long as I knew the meaning of life. As to other people, so even to me, did faith give the meaning of life and the possibility of living.

Looking again at the people of other countries, contemporaries of mine and those passed away, I saw again the same. Where life had been, there faith, ever since humanity had existed, had given the possibility of living, and the chief features of faith were everywhere one and the same.

No matter what answers faith may give, its every answer gives to the finite existence of man the sense of the infinite,—a sense which is not destroyed by suffering, privation, and death. Consequently in faith alone could we find the meaning and possibility of life. What, then, was faith? I understood that faith was not merely an evidence of things not seen, and so forth, not revelation (that is only the description of one of the symptoms of faith), not the relation of man to man (faith has to be defined, and then God, and not first God, and faith through him), not merely an agreement with what a man was told, as faith was generally understood,—that faith was the knowledge of the meaning of human life, in consequence of which man did not destroy himself, but lived. Faith is the power of life. If a man lives he believes in something. If he did not believe that he ought to live for some purpose, he would not live. If he does not see and understand the phantasm of the finite, he believes in that finite; if he understands the phantasm of the finite, he must believe in the infinite. Without faith one cannot live. . . .

In order that all humanity may be able to live, in order that they may continue living, giving a meaning to life, they, those billions, must have another, a real knowledge of faith, for not the fact that I, with Solomon and Schopenhauer, did not kill myself convinced me of the existence of faith, but that these billions had lived and had borne us, me and Solomon, on the waves of life.

Then I began to cultivate the acquaintance of the believers from among the poor, the simple and unlettered folk, of pilgrims, monks, dissenters, peasants. The doctrine of these people from among the masses was also the

Christian doctrine that the quasi-believers of our circle professed. With the Christian truths were also mixed in very many superstitions, but there was this difference: the superstitions of our circle were quite unnecessary to them, had no connection with their lives, were only a kind of an Epicurean amusement, while the superstitions of the believers from among the labouring classes were to such an extent blended with their life that it would have been impossible to imagine it without these superstitions,—it was a necessary condition of that life. I began to examine closely the lives and beliefs of these people, and the more I examined them, the more did I become convinced that they had the real faith, that their faith was necessary for them, and that it alone gave them a meaning and possibility of life. In contradistinction to what I saw in our circle, where life without faith was possible, and where hardly one in a thousand professed to be a believer, among them there was hardly one in a thousand who was not a believer. In contradistinction to what I saw in our circle, where all life passed in idleness, amusements, and tedium of life, I saw that the whole life of these people was passed in hard work, and that they were satisfied with life. In contradistinction to the people of our circle, who struggled and murmured against fate because of their privations and their suffering, these people accepted diseases and sorrows without any perplexity or opposition, but with the calm and firm conviction that it was all for good. In contradistinction to the fact that the more intelligent we are, the less do we understand the meaning of life and the more do we see a kind of a bad joke in our suffering and death, these people live, suffer, and approach death, and suffer in peace and more often in joy. In contradistinction to the fact that a calm death, a death without terror or despair, is the greatest exception in our circle, a restless, insubmissive, joyless death is one of the greatest exceptions among the masses. And of such people, who are deprived of everything which for Solomon and for me constitutes the only good of life, and who withal experience the greatest happiness, there is an enormous number. I cast a broader glance about me. I examined the life of past and present vast masses of men, and I saw people who in like manner had understood the meaning of life, who had known how to live and die, not two, not three, not ten, but hundreds, thousands, millions. All of them, infinitely diversified as to habits, intellect, culture, situation, all equally and quite contrary to my ignorance knew the meaning of life and of death, worked calmly, bore privations and suffering, lived and died, seeing in that not vanity, but good.

I began to love those people. The more I penetrated into their life, the life of the men now living, and the life of men departed, of whom I had read and heard, the more did I love them, and the easier it became for me to live. Thus I lived for about two years, and within me took place a transformation, which had long been working within me, and the germ of which had always been in me. What happened with me was that the life of our circle,—of the rich and the learned,—not only disgusted me, but even lost all its meaning. All our acts, reflections, sciences, arts,—all that appeared to me in a new light. I saw that all that was mere pampering of the appetites, and that no meaning could

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be found in it; but the life of all the working masses, of all humanity, which created life, presented itself to me in its real significance. I saw that that was life itself and that the meaning given to this life was truth, and I accepted it.

## NOTE

1. In a passage omitted here, Tolstoy characterized four attitudes that people have toward life: living in ignorance of the problem of the meaning of life; ignoring it and trying to attain as much pleasure as possible; admitting that life is meaningless and committing suicide; admitting that life is meaningless but continuing to live aimlessly. [E. D. K.]

*The Meaning of Life  
According to Christianity*

In the heyday of logical positivism, philosophical discussion of the meaning of life fell under a cloud of suspicion. When I was younger, more than once I heard the reason for suspicion put this way. The bearers of meaning are linguistic entities such as texts or utterances. But a human life is not a linguistic entity. Hence attributing meaning to a human life involves a category mistake. To ask what a human life means is therefore to ask a pseudoquestion.

In our own postpositivistic and postmodern era, this argument is apt to seem too quick and dirty to produce conviction. It is possible to define with tolerable clarity and precision several concepts of the meaning a human life might possess. Two such definitions are of particular importance in the discussion of religious views of the meaning of life. . . . They are as follows:

- (AM) A human life has positive axiological meaning if and only if (i) it has positive intrinsic value, and (ii) it is on the whole good for the person who leads it; and
- (TM) A human life has positive teleological meaning if and only if (i) it contains some purposes the person who lives it takes to be non-trivial and achievable, (ii) these purposes have positive value, and (iii) it also contains actions that are directed toward achieving these purposes and are performed with zest.

Though I do not know how to prove it, I think the axiological and the teleological are logically independent kinds of meaning, and so I hold that a human life can have more than one sort of meaning. To me it seems possible

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that a premortem human life should have positive axiological meaning and lack positive teleological meaning and possible that a premortem human life should lack positive axiological meaning and have positive teleological meaning; it also seems possible that a human life should lack both sorts of meaning and possible that a human life should have both sorts of meaning. To explicate the last of these possibilities, I propose the following definition:

- (CM) A human life has positive complete meaning if and only if it has both positive axiological meaning and positive teleological meaning.

In this essay, I propose to discuss some Christian views of the meaning of life in these three senses.

What is more, though a human life is not itself a text or an utterance, the events of which it is composed can be narrated, and narratives of human lives are meaningful linguistic entities. The history of the human race is also at least the potential subject of a meaningful linguistic metanarrative. Of course, not all narratives of human lives exhibit them as having positive meaning in any of the senses previously defined. A narrative might, for example, portray a human life in terms of “a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”<sup>1</sup> Or a narrative might depict a human life as lacking positive meaning of the three kinds previously enumerated. Nevertheless, some narratives do present human lives that have these three kinds of meanings. Because Christianity is a religion in which history is important, narratives loom large in its traditions. The gospel stories of the life of Jesus are, for instance, narratives of a human life that has special significance for Christians.

Adopting a suggestion recently made by Nicholas Wolterstorff, I think the gospel narratives “are best understood as *portraits* of Jesus, designed to reveal who he really was and what was really happening in his life, death and resurrection.”<sup>2</sup> And like the part of Simon Schama’s recent *Dead Certainties* about the death of General James Wolfe on the plains of Abraham, what they assert at some points is “not that things *did go* thus and so but that, whether or not they did, they *might well have gone* thus and so.”<sup>3</sup> The importance of the portrait of Jesus thus narrated for his Christian followers is that it furnishes them with a paradigm to which the narratives of their own lives should be made to conform as closely as circumstances permit. The idea that the lives of Christians should imitate the life of Jesus is, of course, a familiar theme in Christian spirituality; it is developed with particular cogency in Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*. Søren Kierkegaard discusses it in terms of a striking contrast between admiring Christ and imitating Christ in his *Practice in Christianity*.

According to Anti-Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *Practice*, “Christ’s life here on earth is the paradigm; I and every Christian are to strive to model our lives in likeness to it.”<sup>4</sup> The demand is stringent because the likeness is to be as close as possible. “To be an imitator,” he tells us, “means that your life has as much similarity to his as is possible for a human life to have.”<sup>5</sup> The Christ who is to be imitated is not the glorious Christ of the

second coming but is instead the crucified Christ of human history. Hence the imitator of Christ must come to terms with Christ in his lowliness and abasement.

One thing this means is being prepared to suffer as Christ suffered. Anti-Climacus says that Christ freely willed to be the lowly one because he “wanted to express what *the truth* would have to suffer and what the truth must suffer in every generation.”<sup>6</sup> Imitators of Christ must therefore be willing to endure suffering akin to his suffering. Anti-Climacus explains what this involves: “To suffer in a way akin to Christ’s suffering is not to put up patiently with the inescapable, but it is to suffer evil at the hands of people because as a Christian or in being a Christian one wills and endeavors to do the good: thus one could avoid this suffering by giving up willing the good.”<sup>7</sup> Since the Christian is not supposed to give up willing the good, however, he or she must willingly suffer evil precisely because of the endeavor to do the good.

Coming to terms with Christ in his lowliness and abasement also means being “halted by the possibility of offense.”<sup>8</sup> Anti-Climacus wittily describes how respectable people of various sorts might have been offended if they had been Christ’s contemporaries. A sagacious and sensible person might have said: “What has he done about his future? Nothing. Does he have a permanent job? No. What are his prospects? None.”<sup>9</sup> A clergyman might have denounced him as “an impostor and demagogue.”<sup>10</sup> A philosopher might have criticized him for lacking a system and having only “a few aphorisms, some maxims, and a couple of parables, which he goes on repeating or revising, whereby he blinds the masses.”<sup>11</sup> And others might have scoffed at him and reviled him in other ways. Yet Anti-Climacus insists that no one can arrive at mature Christian faith without first confronting the possibility of offense. He says that “from the possibility of offense, one turns either to offense or to faith, but one never comes to faith except from the possibility of offense.”<sup>12</sup> Thus imitators of Christ can also count on being found offensive by those who have chosen to turn to offense rather than to faith.

Imitators of Christ should, therefore, anticipate suffering evils for trying to do good and expect to be found offensive. To join Christ as a follower, it is necessary to have a realistic awareness of the conditions on which discipleship is offered. According to Anti-Climacus, they are “to become just as poor, despised, insulted, mocked, and if possible even a little more, considering that in addition one was an adherent of such a despised individual, whom every sensible person shunned.”<sup>13</sup> If any imitators of Christ are not subject to such treatment, it must be the result of good fortune they cannot count on or expect. No mere admirer would want to join Christ on these conditions.

What is the difference between an imitator and a mere admirer? “An imitator *is* or strives *to be* what he admires,” Anti-Climacus says, “and an admirer keeps himself personally detached, consciously or unconsciously does not discover that what is admired involves a claim upon him, to be or at least to strive to be what is admired.”<sup>14</sup> The difference is to be seen most clearly in their contrasting responses to the stringent practical demands of discipleship.

The mere admirer is only willing to pay them lip-service. According to Anti-Climacus, “the admirer will make no sacrifices, renounce nothing, give up nothing earthly, will not transform his life, will not be what is admired, will not let his life express it—but in words, phrases, assurances he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christianity.”<sup>15</sup> Unlike the mere admirer, the imitator, who also acknowledges in words the truth of Christianity, acts decisively to obey “Christian teaching about ethics and obligation, Christianity’s requirement to die to the world, to surrender the earthly, its requirement of self-denial.”<sup>16</sup> And, Anti-Climacus adds wryly, mere admirers are sure to become exasperated with a genuine imitator.

Not all Christians will accept this radical Kierkegaardian view of the demands of discipleship. There is, however, a lesson to be learned about the meanings of a distinctively Christian life if we take it to approximate the most demanding interpretation of what is involved in the call to Christians to conform the narratives of their lives to the portrait of Jesus embedded in the gospel narratives. There seems to be no difficulty in supposing that the life of a successful Kierkegaardian imitator of Christ, devoted to willing and endeavoring to do the good, will have positive teleological meaning, despite the suffering it is likely to contain. But there is a problem in supposing that every such life will also have positive axiological meaning if it terminates in bodily death, because some of these lives appear not to be good on the whole for those who lead them. But, of course, the earthly life of Jesus, which ended in horrible suffering and ignominious death, gives rise to the very same problem. It is part of traditional Christian faith, however, that the life of Jesus did not terminate in bodily death but continued after his resurrection and will continue until he comes again in glory; hence it is on the whole a good life for him. Like the life of Jesus himself, the lives of at least some successful Kierkegaardian imitators of Christ will on the whole be good for them only if they extend beyond death into an afterlife of some sort. Hence survival of bodily death seems required to secure positive axiological meaning and thus positive complete meaning for the lives of all those whose narratives conform as closely as is humanly possible, as Kierkegaard understands what is involved in such conformity, to the paradigm or prototype presented in the gospel narratives of the life of Jesus.

Christianity also tells a tale of the destiny of the human race through the cosmic metanarrative of salvation history. It begins with the creation of humans in God’s image and likeness. The Incarnation, in which God the Son becomes fully human and redeems sinful humanity, is a crucial episode. It will culminate with the promised coming of the Kingdom of God. Christians have been divided over some questions about the details of salvation history. Will all humans ultimately be saved? If some will not, did God predestine them to reprobation? But the broad outlines of the story make manifest God’s loving concern for humanity and the providential care in which it is expressed. The story’s emphasis on what God has done for humans also makes it clear that they are important from a God’s eye point of view.

The narrative of salvation history reveals some of God’s purposes both for individual humans and for humanity as a whole. Christians are expected

to align themselves with these purposes and to act to further them to the extent that their circumstances permit. Such purposes can thus be among those that give positive teleological meaning and thereby contribute to giving positive complete meaning to a Christian's life. We may safely assume that every Christian and, indeed, every human being has a meaningful role to play in the great drama of salvation history if Christianity's view of its shape is even approximately correct.

But what are we to say about those who refuse to align themselves with God's purposes? Mark 14:21 quotes Jesus as saying, "For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." If it would have been better for Judas not to have been born, then his life is not on the whole good for him and so lacks positive axiological meaning. This will be true of Judas on the traditional assumption that he dies fixed in his rejection of God's purposes and so suffers everlasting in hell. On the universalist assumption, however, even Judas will eventually turn to God, align himself with God's purposes, and be saved. Were this to happen, even the life of Judas would ultimately have both positive axiological meaning and positive teleological meaning. In that case, it would not be true that it would be better for Judas not to have been born.

In a stimulating discussion of the meaning of life, Thomas Nagel argues that from a detached, objective point of view human lives lack importance or significance. He says: "When you look at your struggles as if from a great height, in abstraction from the engagement you have with this life because it is yours—perhaps even in abstraction from your identification with the human race—you may feel a certain sympathy for the poor beggar, a pale pleasure in his triumphs and a mild concern for his disappointments."<sup>17</sup> But, he continues, "it wouldn't matter all that much if he failed, and it would matter perhaps even less if he didn't exist at all."<sup>18</sup> Christians would do well, I think, to resist the seductions of this picture of the objective standpoint. For them, the objective standpoint is the point of view of an omniscient and perfectly good God. Their faith informs them humanity is so important to such a God that he freely chose to become incarnate and to suffer and die for its sake.

The snare Christians need to avoid is assuming that humanity is the most important thing or the only important thing from a God's eye point of view. Such assumptions would bespeak a prideful cosmic anthropocentrism. Nagel claims that "the most general effect of the objective stance ought to be a form of humility: the recognition that you are no more important than you are, and that the fact that something is of importance to you, or that it would be good or bad if you did or suffered something, is a fact of purely local significance."<sup>19</sup> Christians have reasons to believe that facts of the sorts Nagel mentions are of more than purely local significance, but they should have the humility to recognize that such facts may well have less cosmic significance than other facts of which God is aware. Within a balanced Christian perspective, in other words, facts about what it is good or bad for humans to do or suffer have some cosmic importance because God cares about them,

but Christians would be unwarranted if they supposed that God cares more about such facts than about anything else that transpires in the created cosmos. Human lives and human life generally are objectively important. Their importance should, however, not be exaggerated.

Nor should Christians exaggerate the certainty about life's meanings to be derived from their narratives. The gospel narratives permit, and historically have received, diverse and often conflicting interpretations. When reasonable interpretations clash, confidence in the exclusive rightness of any one of them should diminish. What is more, other religions have reasonable stories to tell about life's meanings, as do some nonreligious worldviews. Confronted with the twin challenges of reasonable intra-Christian pluralism and reasonable interreligious pluralism, Christians ought to adopt an attitude of epistemic modesty when making claims about life's meanings. They can be, I think, entitled to believe that Christian narratives provide the best story we have about life's meanings. But claims to furnish the complete story should, I believe, be advanced only with fear and trembling. When Christianity secures life's meanings, it should not offer Christians so much security that they acquire the arrogant tendency to set their story apart from and above all other sources of insight into life's meanings.

## NOTES

1. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* V. v. 26–28.
2. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 259.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
4. Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 107.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 216.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

*Judaism and the Meaning  
of Life*

## I

Religions—which differ in much else—differ in substance according to their experience and understanding of the meeting between the Divine and the human: whether, when, and how it occurs, and what happens in and through it. In Judaism, the fundamental and all-penetrating occurrence is a primordial mystery, and a miracle of miracles: the Divine, though dwelling on high and infinitely above man, yet bends down low so as to accept and confirm man in his finite humanity; and man, though met by Divine Infinity, yet may and must respond to this meeting in and through his finitude. . . .

As a consequence of the miracle of miracles which lies at the core of Judaism, Jewish life and thought are marked by a fundamental tension. This tension might have been evaded in either of two ways. It might have been held—as ancient Epicureanism and modern Deism, for example, do in fact hold—that the Divine and the human are after all incapable of meeting. But this view is consistently rejected in Jewish tradition, which considers Epicureanism tantamount to atheism. Or, on the other side, it might have been held that the meeting is a mystical conflux, in which the finite dissolves into the Infinite and man suffers the loss of his very humanity. But this view, too, although a profound religious possibility and a serious challenge, is rejected in Jewish tradition. Such thinkers as Maimonides, Isaac Luria, and the Baal Shem-Tov all stop short—on occasion, to be sure, only barely—of embracing mysticism. And those who do not—such as Spinoza—pass beyond the bounds of Judaism. The Infinity of the Divine, the finitude of the human, and the meeting between them: these all remain, then, wherever Judaism preserves its substance; and the mystery and tension of this meeting permeate all else.

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In the eyes of Judaism, whatever meaning life acquires derives from this encounter: the Divine accepts and confirms the human in the moment of meeting. But the meaning conferred upon human life by the Divine-human encounter cannot be understood in terms of some finite human purpose, supposedly more ultimate than the meeting itself. For what could be more ultimate than the Presence of God? The Presence of God, then, as Martin Buber puts it, is an "*inexpressible* confirmation of meaning. . . . The question of the meaning of life is no longer there. But were it there, it would not have to be answered."

II

In Judaism, however, this "*inexpressible* confirmation of meaning" *does*, after all, assume expression; and this is because the Divine-human meeting assumes structure and content.

First, it is a universal human experience that times of Divine Presence do not last forever. But this experience does not everywhere have the same significance or even reality. Conceivably mythological religions—for which the world is "full of gods" (Thales)—may find divinity even in the most worldly preoccupation with the most finite ends: this is not possible if the Divine is an Infinity and radically other than all things finite. Mystical religions, for their part, may dismiss all such worldly preoccupations as mere appearance, and confine reality to the moment in which the human dissolves into the Divine: this is not possible if the moment of Divine-human encounter itself confirms man in his human finitude. In Judaism, man is real at every moment of his finite existence—including those moments when he is divorced from the Divine. The God of Judaism, while "near" at times, is—for whatever reason—"far" at other times. But times of Divine farness must also have meaning; for the far God remains an existing God, and nearness remains an ever-live possibility. These times of Divine farness, however, derive their meaning from times of Divine nearness. The dialectic between Divine nearness and Divine farness is all-pervasive in Jewish experience; and it points to an eschatological future in which it is overcome.

Secondly, the Divine-human meeting assumes structure and content in Judaism through the way man is accepted and confirmed as a consequence of this meeting. In Judaism God accepts and confirms man by *commanding* him in his humanity; and the response called for is *obedience* to God—an obedience to be expressed in finite human form. Here lies the ground for the Jewish rejection of the mystic surrender. Man *must* remain human because in commanding him *as* human, God accepts him in his humanity and makes him responsible in His very presence. In Judaism, Divine Grace is not super-added and subservient to Divine Commandment. Divine Grace already is, primordially, *in* the commandment; and were it not so, the commandment would be radically incapable of human performance. It is in the Divine Law

itself that the Psalmist finds his delight, not only in a Divine action subsequent to observance of the Law; and if the Law saves him from perishing in his affliction, it is because Divine Love has handed it over to humans—not to angels—thereby making it in principle capable of human fulfillment.

Because the Divine acceptance of the human is a commanding acceptance, the inexpressible meaning of the Divine-human encounter assumes four interrelated expressions of which two are immediately contained within the commandment itself. First, there is a dimension of meaning in the very fact of being commanded as a human by the Divine: to be thus commanded is to be accepted as humanly responsible. And before long the undifferentiated commanding Presence will give utterance to many specific commandments, which particularize Divine acceptance and human responsibility according to the exigencies of a finite human existence on earth.

Secondly, if to be commanded by God is to be both obligated and enabled to obey, then meaning must be capable of human realization, and this meaning must be real even in the sight of Divinity. The fear induced in the finite human by the Infinite Divine Presence may seem to destroy any such presumption. Yet the acceptance of the human by the commanding Love makes possible, and indeed mandatory, human self-acceptance.

A third aspect of meaning comes into view because the Divine commandment initiates a relation of *mutuality* between God and man. The God of Judaism is no Deistic First Cause which, having caused the world, goes into perpetual retirement. Neither is He a Law-giver who, having given laws, leaves man to respond in human solitariness. Along with the commandment, handed over for human action, goes the promise of *Divine* action. And because Divine action makes itself contingent upon human action, a relationship of mutuality is established. God gives to man a *covenant*—that is, a contract; He binds Himself by its terms and becomes a partner.

The meaning of the Divine-human encounter, however, has yet a fourth expression; and if this had not gradually emerged, the Jewish faith could hardly have survived through the centuries. Because a pristine Divine Love accepted the human, a relation of mutuality between an Infinite Divinity and a finite humanity—something that would seem to be impossible—nevertheless became possible. Yet that relation remains destructible at finite hands; indeed, were it *simply* mutual, it would be destroyed by man almost the moment it was established. Even in earlier forms of Jewish faith God is long-suffering enough to put up with persistent human failures; and at length it becomes clear that the covenant can survive only if God's patience is absolute. The covenant, to be sure, *remains* mutual; and Divine action remains part of this mutuality, as a response to human deeds. But Divine action also breaks through this limitation and maintains the covenant in *unilateral* love. The human race after Noah, and Israel at least since the time of Jeremiah, still can—and do—rebel against their respective covenants with God. But they can no longer destroy them. Sin still causes God to punish Israel; but no conceivable sin on Israel's part can cause Him to forsake her. Divine Love has made the covenant indestructible.

In Judaism, covenantal existence becomes a continuous, uninterrupted way of life. A Divine-human relation unstructured by commandment would alternate between times of inexpressible meaning and times of sheer waiting for such meaning. A relationship so structured by commandment, yet failing to encompass both Divine nearness and farness, could not extend its scope over the whole of human life. For if it were confined to times of Divine nearness, covenantal existence would be shattered into as many fragments as there are moments of Divine nearness, with empty spaces between them. If, on the other hand, it were confined to Divine farness, it would degenerate, on the Divine side, into an external law sanctioned by an absent God and, on the human side, into legalistic exercises practiced in His absence. But as understood and lived in Judaism, covenantal existence persists in times of Divine farness. The commandment is still present, as is the Divine promise, however obscured for the moment. The human power to perform the commandment, while impaired, is not destroyed; and he who cannot perform the commandment for the sake of God, as he is supposed to do, is bidden to perform it anyway—for performance which is not for His sake will lead to performance which *is* for His sake. Times of Divine nearness, then, do not light up themselves alone. Their meaning extends over all of life.

*The Buddha's Message*

## A MORALLY ORDERED UNIVERSE

The Buddha's teaching was a radical challenge to the beliefs and practices of people in his social milieu—and to ours as well. This is not to deny that he was influenced by his environment. Human thought necessarily develops out of an historical context, and the thinking of the Buddha is no exception. Nonetheless, from the materials he found in his culture, he developed a unique and extraordinary message that deeply contested the intellectual, moral, and religious outlook of people then living in the Ganges river basin.

One important respect in which this was true concerned the fourfold division of persons into brahmins, rulers and warriors, farmers and traders, and servants. This rigid, hierarchical system of classification held that virtually everything important about a person—most significantly, a person's obligations and opportunities—was determined by birth. For example, the brahmins were supposed to have been born with a capacity for wisdom and virtue that no members of another class could achieve no matter what they did. The Buddha rejected this system. He declared that 'anyone from the four castes' could 'become emancipated through super-knowledge.' An important aspect of the Buddha's teaching is its *universalism*: it is put forth as an outlook that is true of, and has relevance for, all human beings—including us. The understanding, compassion, joy, and tranquillity that come with enlightenment are said to be available to anyone who undertakes the Eightfold Path. . . .

The Buddha believed every human being could achieve enlightenment because he thought human nature and the universe have certain objective features we can know. . . . It is true that the Buddha's teaching stresses the impermanence of things, but this goes hand-in-hand with an emphasis on

the law-governed nature of the universe. Though the world is in constant change, it is very far from being in a state of chaos. Knowledge of the order of the universe is the key to enlightenment.

The world depicted by modern science is often said to be morally neutral or meaningless. By contrast, the universe portrayed by the Buddha is morally ordered. This need not mean the Buddha's teaching is incompatible with modern science, but it does mean the Buddha would regard the world of modern science as incomplete insofar as this world was taken to be morally neutral. . . .

## SUFFERING AND ITS CAUSE

The Buddha's teaching is primarily practical rather than theoretical in its orientation. The aim is to show persons how to overcome suffering and attain *Nibbāna*.<sup>1</sup> The purpose is not to persuade them to accept certain doctrines as such. This practical approach is famously illustrated by a story the Buddha told Mālunkyāputta, a skeptically minded disciple, when he persisted in demanding answers to a series of philosophical questions the Buddha refused to answer. The Buddha described someone wounded by a poison arrow who would not allow a surgeon to treat him until he knew the name and class of the man who wounded him, his height and complexion, where he lived, and so on. The Buddha pointed out that the man would die before finding out the answers to all his questions, and that he did not need these answers in order for the surgeon to operate successfully to save his life. For the practical purpose of healing his wound, there was no reason to answer the questions. The point of the story is that the Buddha had not declared answers to Mālunkyāputta's questions because there was no practical need to do so. Answering these questions would have been 'unbeneficial' and would not have led 'to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*' The teaching of the Buddha does not consist of answers to any and all philosophical questions that might occur to us. Rather, it consists of answers that are needed for a practical purpose. The Buddha then gave the moral of the story: 'And what have I declared? "This is suffering"—I have declared. "This is the origin of suffering"—I have declared. "This is the cessation of suffering"—I have declared. "This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering"—I have declared.' The Buddha put forward these answers—the Four Noble Truths—because they were 'beneficial,' because they did lead 'to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*.' The practical orientation of the Buddha's teaching does not mean it includes no theoretical doctrines, nor that it is unconcerned with the truth of these doctrines. It plainly contains such doctrines, and they are put forward as true and known to be true. Nonetheless, the Buddha would not have taught these doctrines unless they served the practical aim of overcoming human suffering. . . .

The Buddha's central teaching has the form of a medical diagnosis and plan of treatment: it describes a disease and its symptoms, identifies its cause, outlines what freedom from this disease would be like, and prescribes the course of treatment required to attain this healthy state. The story of the wounded man should be read in this light. We are to think of the Buddha as a physician who cures not strictly physical ailments, but broadly psychological ones, who shows 'wounded' human beings the way to the highest form of happiness. . . .

Here is the description of the disease and its symptoms:

*First Noble Truth.* Now this, *bhikkhus*,<sup>2</sup> is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.

The key term here and throughout is *dukkha*. It is ordinarily translated into English as 'suffering.' This is correct in part, but it is misleading. The description above features aging, sickness and death (the observation of which first led Siddhartha to seek enlightenment) and we naturally associate these with suffering. But for the other items listed—union with what is displeasing, separation from what is pleasing, and not getting what one wants—'suffering' sometimes is the right term and sometimes seems too strong. The Buddha clearly has in mind a broad range of ways in which our lives may be unsatisfactory. For the time being, we may summarize the first Noble Truth as the claim that human lives regularly lack contentment, fulfillment, perfection, security, and the like.

Stream-observers<sup>3</sup> might regard this as a rather pessimistic diagnosis. They might be inclined to think that many (if not most) human lives are not so bad, that the positive aspects of life outweigh the negative ones. The Buddha would not have been surprised by this response and did not deny that many persons would question his analysis. His point may be illustrated by an analogy: if an alcoholic is told his life is in bad shape, he will probably point out, perhaps correctly, that he has lots of good times; nonetheless, he has a serious problem and could have a far better life without alcohol and the 'good times' it brings. Similarly, the Buddha thought, most of us can point to some positive features of life: he is not saying we are miserable all the time. However, there is something not fully satisfactory about the lives most of us live. We seek enduring happiness by trying to attach ourselves to things that are in constant change. This sometimes brings temporary and partial fulfillment, but the long-term result is frustration and anxiety. Because of the impermanence of the world, we do not achieve the real happiness we implicitly seek. The Buddha thought we could all sense the truth of this with a moderate amount of honest reflection on the realities of human life, but he also believed that full understanding of the first Truth was difficult to achieve and would require significant progress towards enlightenment.

The next Noble Truth is a claim about the cause of discontentment in human life. Here is how the Buddha explained it:

*Second Noble Truth.* Now this, *bhikkhus*, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.

There is much in this passage that is likely to perplex us. For now, what is important is the contention that suffering and other forms of distress have a cause associated with various kinds of desire—craving, clinging, attachment, impulse, greed, lust, thirst, and so on are terms frequently employed in this connection. The Second Noble Truth states that the source of our discontentment is found not simply in our desires, but in the connection we forge between desires and happiness. In its simplest form, it asserts that we are typically unhappy because we do not get what we desire to have, or we do get what we desire not to have. We do not get the promotion we wanted, and we do get the disease we feared. Outcomes such as these are common in human life. These outcomes, and the anxieties their prospect produces, are causes of our discontentment. . . .

## NIBBĀNA

Many people would agree that suffering or unhappiness is rooted in desire, that it consists of not getting what we want and getting what we do not want. It may seem natural to infer from this that happiness consists of the opposite, in getting what we want and not getting what we do not want. Happiness, in this view, is acquisition of all that we try to gain and security from all that we seek to avoid.

The Buddha taught that this understanding of happiness is a mistake. We can never achieve true and complete happiness in these terms, and there is another, far better form of happiness that we can achieve. To revert to our earlier analogy, someone who holds the first view is like an alcoholic who reasons that, since he is unhappy when he is not drinking, he will be truly happy only if he is always drinking. However, what will really make him happy is to find a way to stop the obsessive craving to drink, to stop looking for happiness in drinking. The Buddha's striking assertion is a similar but broader claim. Obtaining what we are hoping to gain and safety from what we are trying to avoid will not bring us real happiness. This can only be achieved by a radical transformation of our desires and aversions—and especially of our attitudes towards them. We have arrived at the next Truth:

*Third Noble Truth.* Now this, *bhikkhus*, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it.

True happiness in life, the opposite of suffering, is brought about by reaching a state in which, on my reading, we eliminate many of our desires and stop clinging or attaching ourselves to all of them. The Buddha referred to this state with the term '*Nibbāna*'.

Why not seek happiness in the fulfillment of our desires, in striving to get what we want and to avoid what we do not want? The Buddha did not deny that a measure of happiness may be obtained from such striving, but he believed it would always be unsatisfactory in some respects. In part, the reason is that a life seeking such happiness will always be precarious because of the impermanent nature of the universe. What would fulfill our typical desires—for status, power, wealth, friends, and so on—is always subject to change. Even if we were fortunate and got all that we wanted (and can anyone truthfully say this?), old age, disease, and death would always stand ready to take these things from us. No matter what we have, we can never be secure that we will continue to possess it, and so we will never be truly happy. Another reason is that fulfilling our desires does not always make us happy. 'In this world there are only two tragedies,' said Oscar Wilde. 'One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it' (*Lady Windermere's Fan*: act 3).

For the Buddha, a better strategy than seeking to fulfill desires would be to live a morally good life: on account of *kamma*,<sup>4</sup> this would eventually produce greater happiness. However, the Buddha thought such happiness still would be temporary and imperfect, and he thought it would always be a struggle to live a truly good life as long as the belief that one is a self persisted. At best, this strategy might bring improvement, but ultimately it would only perpetuate the cycle of rebirth and its inherent suffering.

Considerations of this sort might be taken to show that these are inadequate roads to real happiness. But why suppose there is another form of happiness—*Nibbāna*—that is not only possible to achieve but better? The answer is the key to the Buddha's teaching and it involves the not-self doctrine. Sometimes it sounds as if *Nibbāna* involves the complete cessation of all desires (the word '*nibbāna*' literally means extinction or cessation), but this is not generally true of a person who has achieved enlightenment. This person does eliminate many desires, specifically all those that presuppose the belief that oneself has primary importance. This belief gives rise to an orientation to life in terms of what is mine and hence is more valuable, in contrast to what is not mine and hence is less valuable. The resulting thoughts and desires are the source of hatred, intolerance, anger, pride, greed, thirst for power and fame, and so on. These states bring unhappiness not only to others, but to those who possess them: a person full of hate does not have a happy life. On the other hand, full realization that I am not a distinct self would undermine the tendency to think myself has primary importance. The Buddha thought this would put an end to all desires associated with hatred and the like, and in fact would release my capacity for universal compassion. The result would be increased happiness for all concerned.

However, enlightenment does not mean the elimination of all desires—at least, not in a sustained way during this life (during meditative experiences of *Nibbāna*, and with the attainment of *Nibbāna* beyond death, desires are absent). For one thing, compassion clearly involves desire in some sense—namely, the desire that others fare well. Moreover, no human life is possible that does not involve some elementary desires such as for food or sleep. Surely the Buddha did not mean to deny this (in fact, the extreme asceticism he rejected would seem to have been an endeavor to achieve freedom from any desires in this life). But the Buddha did think the realization that we are not selves would bring about a fundamental change in our attitude towards those desires that would remain. This realization would eliminate clinging or attachment to the satisfaction of these desires, and it would thereby cut through the bond we ordinarily forge between this satisfaction and happiness.

On my interpretation, there are at least two aspects of this difficult idea. First, in the absence of the belief that I am a self distinct from other selves, I would no longer think of some desires as mine, as things with which I deeply identify and so need to satisfy to achieve my well-being. As a result, there would no longer be an unhealthy drive or obsession to fulfill these desires. Second, in the absence of the belief that I am a self with identity, a substance persisting through time in some respects unchanged, I would no longer be preoccupied with regrets about the past unfulfillment of my desires and worries about the prospects for their future fulfillment. Liberated in these ways from attachment to desires as mine, from pinning my happiness on their satisfaction, there would be freedom to focus attention on the present moment at all times. The implicit message of the Buddha is that, in this state of awareness, no matter what happened, there would always be something of value, something good, in what was experienced. Not clinging to the fulfillment of our desires would release a capacity for joy at each moment in our lives.

For a person who has attained *Nibbāna*, life is a process of living selflessly in which, unencumbered by the false belief that we are selves, we are enabled to live compassionate and joyful lives. To this it may be added that our lives would also possess great peace and tranquility. They would be lives of perfect contentment and true happiness.

In addition to *Nibbāna* in this life, the Buddha described *Nibbāna* as a state beyond this life and the entire cycle of rebirth (henceforth, when it is important to distinguish these, I will refer to them respectively as *Nibbāna-in-life* and *Nibbāna-after-death*). Though he thought it could not be described adequately in our concepts, we may say by way of a preliminary that he believed *Nibbāna-after-death* is neither a state in which one exists as a self nor a state of absolute nothingness. It is a form of selfless existence in which there is realization of some union with *Nibbāna* understood as ultimate reality beyond change and conditioning. This is a state in which suffering, and all that causes suffering, is entirely absent. *Nibbāna* both in this life and beyond is a state of perfect well-being and tranquility, one that all conscious beings have reason to seek.

## WISDOM, VIRTUE, AND CONCENTRATION

Even if we were convinced that *Nibbāna* would be the ultimate happiness, we might well wonder whether it would be possible for us to attain it. The Buddha's practical orientation made this a primary concern. He believed it is possible to achieve *Nibbāna*, but very difficult to do so. We have come to the final Truth:

*Fourth Noble Truth.* Now this, *bhikkhus*, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. It is this Noble Eightfold Path; that is right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

In the first discourse, addressed to the ascetic *samanas*,<sup>5</sup> the Buddha described the Eightfold Path as a 'middle way' that avoids two extremes: 'The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial.' Though the Buddha portrayed the Eightfold Path as a middle way between seeking sensual happiness and undergoing self-mortification, it clearly involves a rigorous regime that is supposed to radically transform us. This path, the Buddha said, 'leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*.'

The eight steps of the path are to be pursued not in sequence, but all together, with each step reinforcing the others (though the last two, right mindfulness and right concentration, are the culmination). The Buddha divided these steps into three parts: *wisdom* pertains primarily to intellectual development and conviction (right view and intention), *virtue* concerns moral or ethical training (right speech, action, and livelihood), and *concentration*—often rendered as 'meditation'—involves a set of mental disciplines (right effort, mindfulness, and concentration).

The first part, wisdom, instructs us to acquire a thorough comprehension of the Four Noble Truths and all that they involve. However, it does not require us to answer philosophical questions unrelated to attaining *Nibbāna*. In fact, this is discouraged, as we saw in the story of the man wounded by the arrow. Mālunkyāputta wanted the Buddha to tell him whether the world is eternal, whether it is finite, whether body and soul are one, and whether the *Tathāgata*<sup>6</sup> exists after death. The Buddha refused to answer these questions on the ground that attempts to do so would only hinder efforts to understand the Four Noble Truths.

Comprehension of the Four Noble Truths requires more than intellectual cultivation. We also need a fundamental commitment to understanding them, and our emotions and desires must be disciplined so that they do not distract us or lead us astray. Hence, the Buddha said we must renounce sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty. In this respect, he thought thinking and feeling, the mind and the heart, were closely connected.

The second part of the path concerns morality or ethics. Enlightenment requires moral as well as intellectual and emotional preparation. The Buddha spoke of morality at length, and he expected much more of members of the *Sangha*<sup>7</sup> than of lay followers. But there are basic precepts that apply to all persons. These fall into three categories. Right speech requires that we speak in ways that are truthful, friendly, useful, and productive of harmony. Right action dictates that we do not kill any living beings (human or animal), nor steal, nor have illegitimate sexual relations. Right livelihood says we should not earn our living by harming others (for example, by selling arms). Violation of these precepts, the Buddha thought, would only reinforce self-centered desires and would hinder attainment of *Nibbāna*.

The third part of the path—concentration, or meditation—is the least familiar to persons in the West, but the most significant for the Buddha. . . . Though the Buddha taught many forms of meditation, the general aim of these mental disciplines is twofold: first, to purify the mind of disturbances so as to bring about a peaceful, concentrated, attentive and mindful mental state; and second, to know reality as it actually is by observing that all things in our ordinary experience are impermanent, involve suffering, and are empty of any self. The ultimate aim is not to escape from the world nor to acquire special powers: it is to attain *Nibbāna*.

## NOTES

1. [Sanskrit, *Nirvana*.—S.M.C.]
2. [Monks.]
3. [Those who are culturally part of the contemporary Western world and have no Buddhist upbringing.]
4. [Sanskrit, *Karma*.]
5. [Spiritual wanderers.]
6. [Truthfinder; Buddha's title for himself.]
7. [Fully enlightened ones; the Buddha's first followers.]

*The Confucian Way*

Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) may well be the most influential thinker in human history, if influence is determined by the sheer number of people who have lived their lives, and died, in accordance with that thinker’s vision of how people ought to live, and die.

Long recognized and described as China’s “First (or Premier) Teacher,” his ideas have been the fertile soil in which the Chinese cultural tradition has been cultivated, although at the same time a number of the views and practices he championed were already evidenced in China centuries before his birth. Like many other epochal figures of the ancient world—Buddha, Socrates, Jesus—Confucius does not seem to have written anything that is clearly attributable to him; all that we know of his vision directly must be pieced together from the several accounts of his teachings, and his activities, found in the little work known as the *Analects*.

Beginning shortly after he died, a few of the disciples of Confucius began setting down what they remember the Master saying to them (very probably the present books 4–8). Some disciples of the disciples continued this processs for the next 75 years or so, and an addition dozen little “books” were composed by we-know-not-whom during the following century, and it was to be still another century before a number of these little “books” were gathered together to make up the *Analccts* as we have it today.

Thus it is not at all surprising that the text does not seem to form a coherent whole. Worse, if we take the writings of, say, Aristotle, or Spinoza, or Kant, as exemplary of philosophical texts, then the *Analects* does not seem to be properly philosophical, for it contains precious little metaphysics, puts forth no first principles, is not systematic, and the “sayings” which comprise it are not set down in a hypotheticodeductive mode of discourse.

From *Living Well: Introductory Readings in Ethics*, ed. Steven Luper, Harcourt Brace, 2000.  
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On the other hand, if the New Testament—or the Hebrew scriptures, or the *Quran*—are taken as religious texts *par excellence*, then it would appear that the *Analects* isn’t a religious text either, for it speaks not of God, nor of creation, salvation, or a transcendental realm of being; and no prophecies will be found in its pages.

However, if we are willing to construe philosophy and religion more broadly—i.e., as those domains that address the question “What kind of life should I live?”—then the *Analects* is both philosophical and religious, for it does indeed address this question; it does proffer models of what is right and what is good, models that are perhaps no less important and relevant today in the post-modern, post-industrial West than they were in pre-modern, pre-industrial China over two millennia ago. This is not at all to suggest that Confucius and his disciples were “just like us”; manifestly they were not. Hence, before coming to appreciate what they nevertheless may have to say to us today, we must first focus on how different they really were. . . .

. . . [W]e must first appreciate that for Confucius, we are fundamentally relational, not individual selves. The life of a hermit could not be a human life for him:

*I cannot flock with the birds and beasts.  
If I am not to a person in the midst of others,  
what am I to be?*

In other words, Confucian selves are first and foremost sons and daughters; then siblings, friends, neighbors, students, teachers, lovers, spouses, and perhaps much else; but not autonomous individuals. In the contemporary West, these relationships are described in terms of roles, which we first consciously (i.e., rationally) choose, and thereafter “play”; just as actors and actresses play different roles on the theater stage, so do autonomous individuals play roles on the stage of life. These roles may be important for our lives, but are not of our essence.

Confucian selves, on the other hand, are the sum of the roles they *live*, not play, and when all the specific roles one lives have been specified, then that person has been fully accounted for as a unique person, with no remainder with which to construct a free, autonomous, individual self. Consider how Confucius would respond to the “identity crisis” so many undergraduate students undergo at some point during their college career. When Mary Smith asks “Who am I?” the Master will first respond straightforwardly “You are obviously the daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Smith, and the sister of Tom Smith; you are the friend of x, y, and z, the roommate of w, the student of professors a, b, c, and d,” and so forth. To which Mary will undoubtedly reply “I don’t mean *that*. I’m searching for the *real me*.” To which Confucius could only respond sadly, shaking his head: “No wonder you call it a ‘crisis,’ for you have taken away everything that could possibly count as answers to your question.”

This view of a fully relational rather than autonomous self has a number of immediate implications for moral philosophy. In Western thought the

basis for moral analysis and evaluation is the *agent* and the *action*. “What did you do?” and “why did you do it?” are the central questions. But whereas the first question remains the same in a Confucian framework, the second becomes “with whom did you do it?” followed by a third, “When?” Put another way, Confucius focuses on interactions, not actions, and on specific, not general, interactors. Individual selves are agents who perform actions. Relational selves are always dynamically interacting in highly specific ways.

The roles we live are reciprocal and at the abstract level can be seen to hold between benefactors and beneficiaries. Thus we are, when young, beneficiaries of our parents, and when they age, become their benefactors; the converse holds with respect to our children. We are beneficiaries of our teachers, benefactors of our students, and are, at different times, benefactors and beneficiaries of and to our friends, spouses, neighbors, colleagues, lovers, and so on.

It is for these reasons that there can be no *general* answer to the question “What should I do?” except “Do what is *appropriate* (not ‘right’) under the specific circumstances.” Fairly careful readers of the *Analects* will note that Confucius sometimes gives a different answer to the same question asked by one of his disciples. But *very* careful readers of the text will also note that it is *different* disciples who ask the question, and the Master gives an answer appropriate for each questioner. To do this is neither dissembling, nor wrong. For example, your roommate asks you to read and comment on a paper she has just written for a course. You are not impressed with it. What do you say? Well, if your roommate is fairly intelligent, but having troubles at home right now, is experiencing her identity crisis, and is thinking of quitting school, your answer might run something like “There are problems with this paper, but you have a really good potential thesis here, and argument there, which you can develop along thus-and-such lines. And when you’ve done so, I’ll be happy to read it again.” But now suppose that your roommate is different. He has just received a few As on exams he didn’t really study for, and while he is basically a good person, is showing signs of arrogance and pomposity; in which case you might well be inclined to say “This paper is junk from start to finish. Why did you have me waste my time reading it?”

For a Confucian, these differing responses are not at all either inconsistent or hypocritical, but are both altogether appropriate responses with respect to the second Confucian moral question: “With whom did you do it?” The third question, “When?” is equally significant, because the benefactor–beneficiary relationships are not static. Having just failed an examination yourself, you schedule an appointment with your instructor to go over it, your basic question being “How can I improve next time?” But upon arriving at the appointed time, you find that your instructor—who does not drive—has just learned that his wife has had a heart attack, and been taken to the emergency room at the hospital. Not at all surprisingly, you do not ask your original question, but instead say “Please let me drive you to the hospital.”

All of these little examples appear simple, everyday, common-sensical at best, perhaps even trivial when compared to these moral issues focused on in the West: abortion, euthanasia, draft resistance, suicide, and so forth. But . . . they are the basic “stuff” of our human interactions, and Confucius seems to

be telling us that if we learn to get the little things right on a day-in and day-out basis, the “big” things will take care of themselves.

And we start out on the path of getting the little things right by focusing on our first, most important, and lifelong role: that of son or daughter. . . .

We did not ask to come into this world, we did not choose to be offspring, but we nevertheless have manifold responsibilities toward our parents; we are responsible for their well-being even though we have not freely chosen to assume those responsibilities. . . .

Confucius insists that we cannot merely rest content with seeing to the material needs of our parents: filial piety is “something much more than that.” We must not only meet our familial obligations, we must have the proper attitude toward them, we must *want* to meet our responsibilities; we must have feelings appropriate to the situation. This is why Confucius “could not bear to see the rituals of mourning conducted purely formally, without genuine grief.” This point is brought home forcefully when it is seen that our obligations to our parents do not cease when they die; we must continue to show respect for them, and honor their memory. Only then will we know and show the extent of our true filiality.

By cultivating filial piety in our relational roles to our parents—as both beneficiaries and benefactors—we are on the way (better: the Confucian Way) to achieving *ren*, which is the highest excellence, or virtue, for Confucius. . . . Usually translated as “goodness,” or “benevolence,” it is perhaps best captured in English by “authoritativeness,” which signifies both having to do with authoring, and authority. On the one hand, *ren* is easy, because we are human. On the other hand, it can be difficult to achieve in practice owing to our more basic—i.e., biological—desires. But once we set out on the path of *rcn*, it is with us forever. . . .

In order to achieve *ren* one must submit to *li*. This term has been variously translated as “rituals,” “rites,” “etiquette,” “ceremony,” “mores,” “customs,” “propriety,” and “worship.” . . . “Rituals” and “rites” are the two most common translations, and are acceptable so long as it is appreciated that the *li* are not only to be thought of in terms of a solemn high mass, wedding, bar mitzvah, or funeral; the *li* pertain equally to our manner of greeting, leave-taking, sharing food, and most other everyday interpersonal activities as well.

It is through rituals, custom, and tradition that one’s roles are properly effected. There are customary rituals, large and small, by means of which we interact with our parents, grandparents, relatives, young children, neighbors, officials, friends. These rituals are different for the different people with whom we are relating, and they may differ across time as well (we wouldn’t hug friends we saw every day, but probably would if we hadn’t seen them for some time). It is through the rituals that we express our filial piety toward our parents, respect for elders, care and affection for the young, and love and friendship for lovers and friends. We cannot simply “go through the motions” of performing the rituals, for this would show both a lack of concern for the other(s), and a lack of sincerity as well. It is through rituals, properly performed, that our true attitudes and feelings shine forth, and we more nearly approach *ren*.

Consider meeting someone for the first time. Your right hand automatically is raised, as is theirs; then you clasp it. Your clasp can be such that your

hand feels like a dead fish, or you can show off your strength by attempting to crack the other's knuckles, and in either case you can utter a flat "How do you do?" Or you can present a warm hand, squeezing only an appropriate amount; perhaps you will put your left hand over the handshake, after which you say "I'm very pleased to meet you," looking at the other directly. In short, it is not the case that when we've seen one introduction we've seen them all.

Rituals, and the proper performance thereof, have been largely neglected in developing theories of the right and the good in the Western philosophical tradition. Worse, the contemporary West is virtually anti-ritualistic. Rituals are seen as purely formal, empty, dead weights of the past, and detrimental to the full expression of individuality.

They are, however, absolutely central in Confucianism, and without an understanding of their potential for enriching human life, the *Analects* cannot come alive for the modern reader. We can only become fully human, for Confucius, by learning to restrain our impulses to accord with the prescriptions of rituals. Rituals are the templates within which we interact with our fellows: there are proper (customary) ways of being a father, a sister, a neighbor, a student, a teacher. These ways are constrained by rituals, but once mastered, are liberating, are the vehicle by means of which we express our uniqueness.

But unless we have guidelines (the rituals) our behaviors can only be random. (Listen to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, first as conducted by Toscanini, then by Bernstein, then by Rostropovich; is it not easy to distinguish them despite the severe constraints imposed on them all by the score?) There are many ways to be a good parent, teacher, friend, etc.; if Confucian selves aren't autonomous, they are certainly not automatons either.

So, then, it is through ritual that we cultivate and enhance our authoritarianism, but this can only be done as we become full participants in the rituals, expressing our feelings thereby, and thereby in turn investing them—and consequently ourselves—with significance. If someone you know is getting married, the ritual tradition dictates the giving of a gift. But if you merely purchase the first thing you see—or worse, have someone else buy it for you—you may be "going through the ritual," but are not participating in it, and it will thus be largely devoid of meaning. You must, first, *want* to buy the betrothed a gift (evidenced even in the modern Western expression "It's the thought that counts"), but in order to be a full participant in the ritual, and express yourself relationally, you must devote the time and effort to secure a gift that is appropriate for that person. This is what Confucius is telling us when he says "Ritual, ritual! Is it no more than giving gifts of jade and silk?"

It must also be noted that for Confucius, the significance of rituals is not confined to our interpersonal relations, rituals can also serve as the glue of a society. A people who accept and follow ritual prescriptions will not need much in the way of laws or punishments to achieve harmony, and no government that fails to submit to rituals will long endure; indeed, he even suggests that rituals can be sufficient for regulating a society. And true rulers, having a full measure of authoritarianism and submitting to ritual, will rule by personal example, not coercion; their formal duties are minimal.

Excepting the sages and sage kings, Confucius gives his highest praise to the *jun zi*, usually rendered as “Gentleman,” which can be highly misleading. The *jun zi* have traveled a goodly distance along the Confucian way, and live a goodly number of roles. Benefactors to many, they are still beneficiaries of others like themselves. While still capable of anger in the presence of wrongdoing, they are in their persons tranquil. They know many rituals (and much music) and perform all of their roles not only with skill, but with grace, dignity, and beauty, and they take delight in the performances. Still filial toward parents and elders, they now endeavor to take “All under heaven”—i.e., the world—as their province. Always proper in the conduct of their roles, that conduct is not forced, but rather effortless, spontaneous, creative.

Thus the best way to understand Confucius’ concept of the *jun zi* is to render the term as “exemplary person.” Having learned, submitted to, and mastered the rituals of the past, the *jun zi* re-authorizes them by making them his or her own, thus becoming their author, who can speak with authority in the present. The *jun zi* fully exemplify authoritativeness, and are content with it, no longer worrying about wealth, fame, or glory.

Against the background of the authoritative person as an ideal, we can appreciate that even though Confucianism is highly particularistic in defining our conduct in specific relational roles, it nevertheless bespeaks a universalistic vision. The one exception to the lack of general principles . . . is the negative formulation of the Golden Rule: “Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you.”

But more than that, it should be clear that Confucius had a strong sense of, empathy with, and concept of humanity writ large. All of the specific human relations of which we are a part, interacting with the dead as well as the living, will be mediated by the *li*, i.e., the rituals, customs, and traditions we come to share as our inextricably linked histories unfold, and by fulfilling the obligations defined by these relationships, we are, for Confucius, following the human way (*dao*).

It is a comprehensive way. By the manner in which we interact with others our lives will clearly have a moral dimension infusing *all*, not just some, of our conduct. By the ways in which this ethical interpersonal conduct is effected, with reciprocity, and governed by courtesy, respect, affection, custom, ritual, and tradition, our lives will also have an aesthetic dimension for ourselves and others. And by specifically meeting our defining traditional obligations to our parents, elders, and ancestors on the one hand, and to our contemporaries and descendants on the other, Confucius proffers an uncommon, but nevertheless spiritually authentic form of transcendence, a human capacity to go beyond the specific spatiotemporal circumstances in which we live, giving our personhood the sense of humanity shared in common and thereby a strong sense of continuity with what has gone before and what will come later. In the cosmic sense, Confucius never addresses the question of the meaning of life; he probably wouldn’t even have understood it. But his vision of what it is to be a human being provided for everyone to find meaning *in* life, a not inconsiderable accomplishment.

P A R T   T W O

# The Nontheistic Alternative





*On the Sufferings  
of the World*

Unless *suffering* is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim. It is absurd to look upon the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world, and originates in needs and necessities inseparable from life itself, as serving no purpose at all and the result of mere chance. Each separate misfortune, as it comes, seems, no doubt, to be something exceptional; but misfortune in general is the rule.

I know of no greater absurdity than that propounded by most systems of philosophy in declaring evil to be negative in its character. Evil is just what is positive; it makes its own existence felt. Leibnitz is particularly concerned to defend this absurdity; and he seeks to strengthen his position by using a palpable and paltry sophism. It is the good which is negative; in other words, happiness and satisfaction always imply some desire fulfilled, some state of pain brought to an end.

This explains the fact that we generally find pleasure to be not nearly so pleasant as we expected, and pain very much more painful.

The pleasure in this world, it has been said, outweighs the pain; or, at any rate, there is an even balance between the two. If the reader wishes to see shortly whether this statement is true, let him compare the respective feelings of two animals, one of which is engaged in eating the other.

The best consolation in misfortune or affliction of any kind will be the thought of other people who are in a still worse plight than yourself; and this is a form of consolation open to every one. But what an awful fate this means for mankind as a whole!

We are like lambs in a field, disporting themselves under the eye of the butcher, who chooses out first one and then another for his prey. So it is that in our good days we are all unconscious of the evil Fate may have presently in store for us—sickness, poverty, mutilation, loss of sight or reason.

From *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851), translated by T. Bailey Saunders.

No little part of the torment of existence lies in this, that Time is continually pressing upon us, never letting us take breath, but always coming after us, like a taskmaster with a whip. If at any moment Time stays his hand, it is only when we are delivered over to the misery of boredom.

But misfortune has its uses; for, as our bodily frame would burst asunder if the pressure of the atmosphere was removed, so, if the lives of men were relieved of all need, hardship and adversity; if everything they took in hand were successful, they would be so swollen with arrogance that, though they might not burst, they would present the spectacle of unbridled folly—nay, they would go mad. And I may say, further, that a certain amount of care or pain or trouble is necessary for every man at all times. A ship without ballast is unstable and will not go straight.

Certain it is that *work, worry, labor* and *trouble*, form the lot of almost all men their whole life long. But if all wishes were fulfilled as soon as they arose, how would men occupy their lives? what would they do with their time? If the world were a paradise of luxury and ease, a land flowing with milk and honey, where every Jack obtained his Jill at once and without any difficulty, men would either die of boredom or hang themselves; or there would be wars, massacres, and murders; so that in the end mankind would inflict more suffering on itself than it has now to accept at the hands of Nature.

In early youth, as we contemplate our coming life, we are like children in a theatre before the curtain is raised, sitting there in high spirits and eagerly waiting for the play to begin. It is a blessing that we do not know what is really going to happen. Could we foresee it, there are times when children might seem like innocent prisoners, condemned, not to death, but to life, and as yet all unconscious of what their sentence means. Nevertheless, every man desires to reach old age; in other words, a state of life of which it may be said: "It is bad to-day, and it will be worse to-morrow; and so on till the worst of all."

If you try to imagine, as nearly as you can, what an amount of misery, pain and suffering of every kind the sun shines upon in its course, you will admit that it would be much better if, on the earth as little as on the moon, the sun were able to call forth the phenomena of life; and if, here as there, the surface were still in a crystalline state.

Again, you may look upon life as an unprofitable episode, disturbing the blessed calm of non-existence. And, in any case, even though things have gone with you tolerably well, the longer you live the more clearly you will feel that, on the whole, life is *a disappointment, nay, a cheat*.

If two men who were friends in their youth meet again when they are old, after being separated for a lifetime, the chief feeling they will have at the sight of each other will be one of complete disappointment at life as a whole; because their thoughts will be carried back to that earlier time when life seemed so fair as it lay spread out before them in the rosy light of dawn, promised so much—and then performed so little. This feeling will so completely predominate over every other that they will not even consider it necessary to give it words; but on either side it will be silently assumed, and form the groundwork of all they have to talk about.

He who lives to see two or three generations is like a man who sits some time in the conjurer's booth at a fair, and witnesses the performance twice or thrice in succession. The tricks were meant to be seen only once; and when they are no longer a novelty and cease to deceive, their effect is gone.

While no man is much to be envied for his lot, there are countless numbers whose fate is to be deplored.

Life is a task to be done. It is a fine thing to say *defunctus est*; it means that the man has done his task.

If children were brought into the world by an act of pure reason alone, would the human race continue to exist? Would not a man rather have so much sympathy with the coming generation as to spare it the burden of existence? or at any rate not take it upon himself to impose that burden upon it in cold blood.

I shall be told, I suppose, that my philosophy is comfortless—because I speak the truth; and people prefer to be assured that everything the Lord has made is good. Go to the priests, then, and leave philosophers in peace! At any rate, do not ask us to accommodate our doctrines to the lessons you have been taught. That is what those rascals of sham philosophers will do for you. Ask them for any doctrine you please, and you will get it. Your University professors are bound to preach optimism; and it is an easy and agreeable task to upset their theories.

I have reminded the reader that every state of welfare, every feeling of satisfaction, is negative in its character; that is to say, it consists in freedom from pain, which is the positive element of existence. It follows, therefore, that the happiness of any given life is to be measured, not by its joys and pleasures, but by the extent to which it has been free from suffering—from positive evil. If this is the true standpoint, the lower animals appear to enjoy a happier destiny than man. Let us examine the matter a little more closely.

However varied the forms that human happiness and misery may take, leading a man to seek the one and shun the other, the material basis of it all is bodily pleasure or bodily pain. This basis is very restricted: it is simply health, food, protection from wet and cold, the satisfaction of the sexual instinct; or else the absence of these things. Consequently, as far as real physical pleasure is concerned, the man is not better off than the brute, except in so far as the higher possibilities of his nervous system make him more sensitive to every kind of pleasure, but also, it must be remembered, to every kind of pain. But then compared with the brute, how much stronger are the passions aroused in him! what an immeasurable difference there is in the depth and vehemence of his emotions!—and yet, in the one case, as in the other, all to produce the same result in the end: namely, health, food, clothing, and so on.

The chief source of all this passion is that thought for what is absent and future, which, with man, exercises such a powerful influence upon all he does. It is this that is the real origin of his cares, his hopes, his fears—emotions which affect him much more deeply than could ever be the case with those present joys and sufferings to which the brute is confined. In his powers of reflection, memory and foresight, man possesses, as it were, a machine for condensing and storing up his pleasures and his sorrows. But the brute has

nothing of the kind; whenever it is in pain, it is as though it were suffering for the first time, even though the same thing should have previously happened to it times out of number. It has no power of summing up its feelings. Hence its careless and placid temper: how much it is to be envied! But in man reflection comes in, with all the emotions to which it gives rise; and taking up the same elements of pleasure and pain which are common to him and the brute, it develops his susceptibility to happiness and misery to such a degree that, at one moment the man is brought in an instant to a state of delight that may even prove fatal, at another to the depths of despair and suicide.

If we carry our analysis a step farther, we shall find that, in order to increase his pleasures, man has intentionally added to the number and pressure of his needs, which in their original state were not much more difficult to satisfy than those of the brute. Hence luxury in all its forms; delicate food, the use of tobacco and opium, spirituous liquors, fine clothes, and the thousand and one things that he considers necessary to his existence.

And above and beyond all this, there is a separate and peculiar source of pleasure, and consequently of pain, which man has established for himself, also as the result of using his powers of reflection; and this occupies him out of all proportion to its value, nay, almost more than all his other interests put together—I mean ambition and the feeling of honor and shame; in plain words, what he thinks about the opinion other people have of him. Taking a thousand forms, often very strange ones, this becomes the goal of almost all the efforts he makes that are not rooted in physical pleasure or pain. It is true that besides the sources of pleasure which he has in common with the brute, man has the pleasures of the mind as well. These admit of many gradations, from the most innocent trifling or the merest talk up to the highest intellectual achievements; but there is the accompanying boredom to be set against them on the side of suffering. Boredom is a form of suffering unknown to brutes, at any rate in their natural state; it is only the very cleverest of them who show faint traces of it when they are domesticated; whereas in the case of man it has become a downright scourge. The crowd of miserable wretches whose one aim in life is to fill their purses but never to put anything into their heads, offers a singular instance of this torment of boredom. Their wealth becomes a punishment by delivering them up to misery of having nothing to do; for, to escape it, they will rush about in all directions, traveling here, there and everywhere. No sooner do they arrive in a place than they are anxious to know what amusements it affords; just as though they were beggars asking where they could receive a dole! Of a truth, need and boredom are the two poles of human life. Finally, I may mention that as regards the sexual relation, a man is committed to a peculiar arrangement which drives him obstinately to choose one person. This feeling grows, now and then, into a more or less passionate love,<sup>1</sup> which is the source of little pleasure and much suffering.

It is, however, a wonderful thing that the mere addition of thought should serve to raise such a vast and lofty structure of human happiness and misery; resting, too, on the same narrow basis of joy and sorrow as man holds in common with the brute, and exposing him to such violent emotions, to so many storms of

passion, so much convulsion of feeling, that what he has suffered stands written and may be read in the lines on his face. And yet, when all is told, he has been struggling ultimately for the very same things as the brute has attained, and with an incomparably smaller expenditure of passion and pain.

But all this contributes to increase the measures of suffering in human life out of all proportion to its pleasures; and the pains of life are made much worse for man by the fact that death is something very real to him. The brute flies from death instinctively without really knowing what it is, and therefore without ever contemplating it in the way natural to a man, who has this prospect always before his eyes. So that even if only a few brutes die a natural death, and most of them live only just long enough to transmit their species, and then, if not earlier, become the prey of some other animal,—whilst man, on the other hand, manages to make so-called natural death the rule, to which, however, there are a good many exceptions,—the advantage is on the side of the brute, for the reason stated above. But the fact is that man attains the natural term of years just as seldom as the brute; because the unnatural way in which he lives, and the strain of work and emotion, lead to a degeneration of the race; and so his goal is not often reached.

The brute is much more content with mere existence than man; the plant is wholly so; and man finds satisfaction in it just in proportion as he is dull and obtuse. Accordingly, the life of the brute carries less of sorrow with it, but also less of joy, when compared with the life of man; and while this may be traced, on the one side, to freedom from the torment of *care* and *anxiety*, it is also due to the fact that *hope*, in any real sense, is unknown to the brute. It is thus deprived of any share in that which gives us the most and best of our joys and pleasures, the mental anticipation of a happy future, and the inspiriting play of phantasy, both of which we owe to our power of imagination. If the brute is free from care, it is also, in this sense, without hope; in either case, because its consciousness is limited to the present moment, to what it can actually see before it. The brute is an embodiment of present impulses, and hence what elements of fear and hope exist in its nature—and they do not go very far—arise only in relation to objects that lie before it and within reach of those impulses: whereas a man's range of vision embraces the whole of his life, and extends far into the past and future.

Following upon this, there is one respect in which brutes show real wisdom when compared with us—I mean, their quiet, placid enjoyment of the present moment. The tranquillity of mind which this seems to give them often puts us to shame for the many times we allow our thoughts and our cares to make us restless and discontented. And, in fact, those pleasures of hope and anticipation which I have been mentioning are not to be had for nothing. The delight which a man has in hoping for and looking forward to some special satisfaction is a part of the real pleasure attaching to it enjoyed in advance. This is afterwards deducted; for the more we look forward to anything, the less satisfaction we find in it when it comes. But the brute's enjoyment is not anticipated, and therefore, suffers no deduction; so that the actual pleasure of the moment comes to it whole and unimpaired. In the same way, too, evil presses upon the brute only with its own intrinsic weight; whereas with us the fear of its coming often makes its burden ten times more grievous. . . .

If you want a safe compass to guide you through life, and to banish all doubt as to the right way of looking at it, you cannot do better than accustom yourself to regard this world as a penitentiary, a sort of a penal colony...

If you accustom yourself to this view of life you will regulate your expectations accordingly, and cease to look upon all its disagreeable incidents, great and small, its sufferings, its worries, its misery, as anything unusual or irregular; nay, you will find that everything is as it should be, in a world where each of us pays the penalty of existence in his own peculiar way. Amongst the evils of a penal colony is the society of those who form it; and if the reader is worthy of better company, he will need no words from me to remind him of what he has to put up with at present. If he has a soul above the common, or if he is a man of genius, he will occasionally feel like some noble prisoner of state, condemned to work in the galleys with common criminals; and he will follow his example and try to isolate himself.

In general, however, it should be said that this view of life will enable us to contemplate the so-called imperfections of the great majority of men, their moral and intellectual deficiencies and the resulting base type of countenance, without any surprise, to say nothing of indignation; for we shall never cease to reflect where we are, and that the men about us are beings conceived and born in sin, and living to atone for it. That is what Christianity means in speaking of the sinful nature of man.

*Pardon's the word to all!*<sup>2</sup> Whatever folly men commit, be their shortcomings or their vices what they may, let us exercise forbearance; remembering that when these faults appear in others, it is our follies and vices that we behold. They are the shortcomings of humanity, to which we belong; whose faults, one and all, we share; yes, even those very faults at which we now wax so indignant, merely because they have not yet appeared in ourselves. They are faults that do not lie on the surface. But they exist down there in the depths of our nature; and should anything call them forth, they will come and show themselves, just as we now see them in others. One man, it is true, may have faults that are absent in his fellow; and it is undeniable that the sum total of bad qualities is in some cases very large; for the difference of individuality between man and man passes all measure.

In fact, the conviction that the world and man is something that had better not have been, is of a kind to fill us with indulgence towards one another. Nay, from this point of view, we might well consider the proper form of address to be, not *Monsieur, Sir, mein Herr*, but *my fellow-sufferer, Soci malorum, compagnon de miseres!* This may perhaps sound strange, but it is in keeping with the facts; it puts others in a right light; and it reminds us of that which is after all the most necessary thing in life—the tolerance, patience, regard, and love of neighbor, of which everyone stands in need, and which, therefore, every man owes to his fellow.

## NOTES

1. I have treated this subject at length in "The Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes," p. 69.
2. "Cymbeline," Act v, Sc. 5.

*A Free Man's Worship*

To Dr. Faustus in his study Mephistopheles told the history of the Creation, saying,

The endless praises of the choirs of angels had begun to grow wearisome; for, after all, did he not deserve their praise? Had he not given them endless joy? Would it not be more amusing to obtain undeserved praise, to be worshiped by beings whom he tortured? He smiled inwardly, and resolved that the great drama should be performed.

For countless ages the hot nebula whirled aimlessly through space. At length it began to take shape, the central mass threw off planets, the planets cooled, boiling seas and burning mountains heaved and tossed, from black masses of cloud hot sheets of rain deluged the barely solid crust. And now the first germ of life grew in the depths of the ocean and developed rapidly in the fructifying warmth into vast forest trees, huge ferns springing from the damp mold, sea monsters breeding, fighting, devouring, and passing away. And from the monsters, as the play unfolded itself, Man was born, with the power of thought, the knowledge of good and evil, and the cruel thirst for worship. And Man saw that all is passing in this mad, monstrous world, that all is struggling to snatch, at any cost, a few brief moments of life before Death's inexorable decree. And Man said, "There is a hidden purpose, could we but fathom it, and the purpose is good; for we must reverence something, and in the visible world there is nothing worthy of reverence." And Man stood aside from the struggle, resolving that God intended harmony to come out of chaos by human efforts. And when he followed the instincts which God had transmitted to him from his ancestry of beasts of prey, he called it Sin, and asked God to forgive him. But he doubted whether he could be justly forgiven, until he invented a divine Plan by which God's wrath was to have been appeased. And seeing the present was bad, he made it yet worse, that thereby the future

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might be better. And he gave God thanks for the strength that enabled him to forgo even the joys that were possible. And God smiled; and when he saw that Man had become perfect in renunciation and worship, he sent another sun through the sky, which crashed into Man's sun; and all returned again to nebula.

"Yes," he murmured, "it was a good play; I will have it performed again."

Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only in the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

How, in such an alien and inhuman world, can so powerless a creature as man preserve his aspirations untarnished? A strange mystery it is that nature, omnipotent but blind, in the revolutions of her secular hurryings through the abysses of space, has brought forth at last a child, subject still to her power, but gifted with sight, with knowledge of good and evil, with the capacity of judging all the works of his unthinking mother. In spite of death, the mark and seal of the parental control, man is yet free, during his brief years, to examine, to criticize, to know, and in imagination to create. To him alone, in the world with which he is acquainted, this freedom belongs; and in this lies his superiority to the resistless forces that control his outward life.

The savage, like ourselves, feels the oppression of his impotence before the powers of nature; but having in himself nothing that he respects more than power, he is willing to prostrate himself before his gods, without inquiring whether they are worthy of his worship. Pathetic and very terrible is the long history of cruelty and torture, of degradation and human sacrifice, endured in the hope of placating the jealous gods: surely, the trembling believer thinks, when what is most precious has been freely given, their lust for blood must be appeased, and more will not be required. The religion of Moloch—as such creeds may be generically called—is in essence the cringing submission of the slave, who dare not, even in his heart, allow the thought that his master deserves no adulation. Since the independence of ideals is not yet acknowledged, power may be freely worshiped and receive an unlimited respect, despite its wanton infliction of pain.

But gradually, as morality grows bolder, the claim of the ideal world begins to be felt; and worship, if it is not to cease, must be given to gods of another kind than those created by the savage. Some, though they feel the demands of the ideal, will still consciously reject them, still urging that naked power is worthy of worship. Such is the attitude inculcated in God's answer to Job out of the whirlwind: the divine power and knowledge are paraded, but of the divine goodness there is not hint. Such also is the attitude of those who, in our own day, base their morality upon the struggle for survival, maintaining that the survivors are necessarily the fittest. But others, not content with an answer so repugnant to the moral sense, will adopt the position which we have become accustomed to regard as specially religious, maintaining that, in some hidden manner, the world of fact is really harmonious with the world of ideals. Thus man created God, all-powerful and all-good, the mystic unity of what is and what should be.

But the world of fact, after all, is not good; and, in submitting our judgment to it, there is an element of slavishness from which our thoughts must be purged. For in all things it is well to exalt the dignity of man, by freeing him as far as possible from the tyranny of nonhuman power. When we have realized that power is largely bad, that man, with his knowledge of good and evil, is but a helpless atom in a world which has no such knowledge, the choice is again presented to us: Shall we worship force, or shall we worship goodness? Shall our God exist and be evil, or shall he be recognized as the creation of our own conscience?

The answer to this question is very momentous and affects profoundly our whole morality. The worship of force, to which Carlyle and Nietzsche and the creed of militarism have accustomed us, is the result of failure to maintain our own ideals against a hostile universe: it is itself a prostrate submission to evil, a sacrifice of our best to Moloch. If strength indeed is to be respected, let us respect rather the strength of those who refuse that false "recognition of facts" which fails to recognize that facts are often bad. Let us admit that, in the world we know, there are many things that would be better otherwise, and that the ideals to which we do and must adhere are not realized in the realm of matter. Let us preserve our respect for truth, for beauty, for the ideal of perfection which life does not permit us to attain, though none of these things meets with the approval of the unconscious universe. If power is bad, as it seems to be, let us reject it from our hearts. In this lies man's true freedom: in determination to worship only the God created by our own love of the good, to respect only the heaven which inspires the insight of our best moments. In action, in desire, we must submit perpetually to the tyranny of outside forces; but in thought, in aspiration, we are free, free from our fellow men, free from the petty planet on which our bodies impotently crawl, free even, while we live, from the tyranny of death. Let us learn, then, that energy of faith which enables us to live constantly in the vision of the good; and let us descend, in action, into the world of fact, with that vision always before us.

When first the opposition of fact and ideal grows fully visible, a spirit of fiery revolt, of fierce hatred of the gods, seems necessary to the assertion of

freedom. To defy with Promethean constancy a hostile universe, to keep its evil always in view, always actively hated, to refuse no pain that the malice of power can invent, appears to be the duty of all who will not bow before the inevitable. But indignation is still a bondage, for it compels our thoughts to be occupied with an evil world; and in the fierceness of desire from which rebellion springs there is a kind of self-assertion which it is necessary for the wise to overcome. Indignation is a submission of our thoughts but not of our desires; the Stoic freedom in which wisdom consists is found in the submission of our desires but not of our thoughts. From the submission of our desires springs the virtue of resignation; from the freedom of our thoughts springs the whole world of art and philosophy, and the vision of beauty by which, at last, we half reconquer the reluctant world. But the vision of beauty is possible only to unfettered contemplation, to thoughts not weighted by the load of eager wishes; and thus freedom comes only to those who no longer ask of life that it shall yield them any of those personal goods that are subject to the mutations of time.

Although the necessity of renunciation is evidence of the existence of evil, yet Christianity, in preaching it, has shown a wisdom exceeding that of the Promethean philosophy of rebellion. It must be admitted that, of the things we desire, some, though they prove impossible, are yet real goods; others, however, as ardently longed for, do not form part of a fully purified ideal. The belief that what must be renounced is bad, though sometimes false, is far less often false than untamed passion supposes; and the creed of religion, by providing a reason for proving that it is never false, has been the means of purifying our hopes by the discovery of many austere truths.

But there is in resignation a further good element: even real goods, when they are unattainable, ought not to be fretfully desired. To every man comes, sooner or later, the great renunciation. For the young, there is nothing unattainable; a good thing desired with the whole force of a passionate will, and yet impossible, is to them not credible. Yet, by death, by illness, by poverty, or by the voice of duty, we must learn, each one of us, that the world was not made for us, and that, however beautiful may be the things we crave, Fate may nevertheless forbid them. It is the part of courage, when misfortune comes, to bear without repining the ruin of our hopes, to turn away our thoughts from vain regrets. This degree of submission to power is not only just and right: it is the very gate of wisdom.

But passive renunciation is not the whole of wisdom; for not by renunciation alone can we build a temple for the worship of our own ideals. Haunting foreshadowings of the temple appear in the realm of imagination, in music, in architecture, in the untroubled kingdom of reason, and in the golden sunset magic of lyrics, where beauty shines and glows, remote from the touch of sorrow, remote from the fear of change, remote from the failures and dis-enchantments of the world of fact. In the contemplation of these things the vision of heaven will shape itself in our hearts, giving at once a touchstone to judge the world about us and an inspiration by which to fashion to our needs whatever is not incapable of serving as a stone in the sacred temple.

Except for those rare spirits that are born without sin, there is a cavern of darkness to be traversed before that temple can be entered. The gate of the cavern is despair, and its floor is paved with the gravestones of abandoned hopes. There self must die; there the eagerness, the greed of untamed desire, must be slain, for only so can the soul be freed from the empire of Fate. But out of the cavern, the Gate of Renunciation leads again to the daylight of wisdom, by whose radiance a new insight, a new joy, a new tenderness, shine forth to gladden the pilgrim's heart.

When, without the bitterness of impotent rebellion, we have learned both to resign ourselves to the outward rule of Fate and to recognize that the nonhuman world is unworthy of our worship, it becomes possible at last so to transform and refashion the unconscious universe, so to transmute it in the crucible of imagination, that a new image of shining gold replaces the old idol of clay. In all the multiform facts of the world—in the visual shapes of trees and mountains and clouds, in the events of the life of man, even in the very omnipotence of death—the insight of creative idealism can find the reflection of a beauty which its own thoughts first made. In this way mind asserts its subtle mastery over the thoughtless forces of nature. The more evil the material with which it deals, the more thwarting to untrained desire, the greater is its achievement in inducing the reluctant rock to yield up its hidden treasures, the prouder its victory in compelling the opposing forces to swell the pageant of its triumph. Of all the arts, tragedy is the proudest, the most triumphant; for it builds its shining citadel in the very center of the enemy's country, on the very summit of his highest mountain; from its impregnable watchtowers, his camps and arsenals, his columns and forts, are all revealed; within its walls the free life continues, while the legions of death and pain and despair, and all the servile captains of tyrant Fate, afford the burghers of that dauntless city new spectacles of beauty. Happy those sacred ramparts, thrice happy the dwellers on that all-seeing eminence. Honor to those brave warriors who, through countless ages of warfare, have preserved for us the priceless heritage of liberty and have kept undefiled by sacrilegious invaders the home of the unsubdued.

But the beauty of tragedy does but make visible a quality which, in more or less obvious shapes, is present always and everywhere in life. In the spectacle of death, in the endurance of intolerable pain, and in the irrevocability of a vanished past, there is a sacredness, an overpowering awe, a feeling of the vastness, the depth, the inexhaustible mystery of existence, in which, as by some strange marriage of pain, the sufferer is bound to the world by bonds of sorrow. In these moments of insight, we lose all eagerness of temporary desire, all struggling and striving for petty ends, all care for the little trivial things that, to a superficial view, make up the common life of day by day; we see, surrounding the narrow raft illumined by the flickering light of human comradeship, the dark ocean on whose rolling waves we toss for a brief hour; from the great night without, a chill blast breaks in upon our refuge; all the loneliness of humanity amid hostile forces is concentrated upon the individual soul, which must struggle alone, with what of courage

it can command, against the whole weight of a universe that cares nothing for its hopes and fears. Victory, in this struggle with the powers of darkness, is the true baptism into the glorious company of heroes, the true initiation into the overmastering beauty of human existence. From that awful encounter of the soul with the outer world, renunciation, wisdom, and charity are born; and with their birth a new life begins. To take into the inmost shrine of the soul the irresistible forces whose puppets we seem to be—death and change, the irrevocableness of the past, and the powerlessness of man before the blind hurry of the universe from vanity to vanity—to feel these things and know them is to conquer them.

This is the reason why the past has such magical power. The beauty of its motionless and silent pictures is like the enchanted purity of late autumn, when the leaves, though one breath would make them fall, still glow against the sky in golden glory. The past does not change or strive; like Duncan, after life's fitful fever it sleeps well; what was eager and grasping, what was petty and transitory, has faded away; the things that were beautiful and eternal shine out of it like stars in the night. Its beauty, to a soul not worthy of it, is unendurable; but to a soul which has conquered Fate it is the key of religion.

The life of man, viewed outwardly, is but a small thing in comparison with the forces of nature. The slave is doomed to worship Time and Fate and Death, because they are greater than anything he finds in himself, and because all his thoughts are of things which they devour. But, great as they are, to think of them greatly, to feel their passionless splendor, is greater still. And such thought makes us free men; we no longer bow before the inevitable in Oriental subjection, but we absorb it and make it a part of ourselves. To abandon the struggle for private happiness, to expel all eagerness of temporary desire, to burn with passion for eternal things—this is emancipation, and this is the free man's worship. And this liberation is effected by contemplation of Fate; for Fate itself is subdued by the mind which leaves nothing to be purged by the purifying fire of time.

United with his fellow men by the strongest of all ties, the tie of a common doom, the free man finds that a new vision is with him always, shedding over every daily task the light of love. The life of man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, toward a goal that few can hope to reach, and where none may tarry long. One by one, as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death. Very brief is the time in which we can help them, in which their happiness or misery is decided. Be it ours to shed sunshine on their path, to lighten their sorrows by the balm of sympathy, to give them the pure joy of a never-tiring affection, to strengthen failing courage, to instill faith in hours of despair. Let us not weigh in grudging scales their merits and demerits, but let us think only of their need—of the sorrows, the difficulties, perhaps the blindness, that make the misery of their lives; let us remember that they are fellow sufferers in the same darkness, actors in the same tragedy with ourselves. And so, when their day is over, when their good and their evil have become eternal by the immortality of the past, be it ours to feel that,

### A Free Man's Worship

where they suffered, where they failed, no deed of ours was the cause; but wherever a spark of the divine fire kindled in their hearts, we were ready with encouragement, with sympathy, with brave words in which high courage glowed.

Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow fall, the lofty thoughts that enoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power.

*On the Meaning of Life*

Not everyone is disturbed by the question whether life has a meaning. Some—and they are not the unhappiest—have the child's mind, which has *not yet* asked about such things; others *no longer ask*, having unlearnt the question. In between are ourselves, the seekers. We cannot project ourselves back to the level of the innocent, whom life has not yet looked at with its dark mysterious eyes, and we do not care to join the weary and the blasé, who no longer believe in any meaning to existence, because they have been able to find none in their own.

A man who has failed of the goal that his youth was striving for, and found no substitute, may lament the meaninglessness of his own life; yet he still may believe in a meaning to existence generally, and think that it continues to be found where a person has reached his goals. But the man who has wrested from fate the achievement of his purposes, and then finds that his prize was not so valuable as it seemed, that he has somehow fallen prey to a deception—that man is quite blankly confronted with the question of life's value, and before him lies like a darkened wasteland the thought, not only that all things pass, but also that everything is ultimately in vain.

How are we to discover a unitary meaning, either in the perplexities of a man's lifetime, or in the stumbling progress of history itself? Existence may appear to us as a many-hued tapestry, or as a grey veil, but it is equally difficult either way to furl the billowing fabric so that its meaning becomes apparent. It all flaps past and seems to have vanished before we could render an account of it.

What is the reason for the strange contradiction, that achievement and enjoyment will not fuse into a proper meaning? Does not an inexorable law of nature appear to prevail here? Man sets himself goals, and while he is heading towards them he is buoyed up by hope, indeed, but gnawed at the same

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time by the pain of unsatisfied desire. Once the goal is reached, however, after the first flush of triumph has passed away, there follows inevitably a mood of desolation. A void remains, which can seemingly find an end only through the painful emergence of new longings, the setting of new goals. So the game begins anew, and existence seems doomed to be a restless swinging to and fro between pain and boredom, which ends at last in the nothingness of death. That is the celebrated line of thought which Schopenhauer made the basis of his pessimistic view of life. Is it not possible, somehow, to escape it?

We know how Nietzsche, for example, sought to conquer this pessimism. First by the flight into art: consider the world, he says, as an aesthetic phenomenon, and it is eternally vindicated! Then by the flight into knowledge: look upon life as an experiment of the knower, and the world will be to you the finest of laboratories! But Nietzsche again turned away from these standpoints; in the end, art was no longer his watchword, and nor were science, or beauty, or truth; it is hard to reduce to a brief formula what the wisest Nietzsche, the Nietzsche of *Zarathustra*, saw as the meaning of life. For if it be said that henceforth the ultimate value of life, to him, was *life itself*, that obviously says nothing clear and does not find the right expression for the deep truth which he then perceived or at least suspected. For he saw that life has no meaning, so long as it stands wholly under the domination of purposes:

Verily, it is a blessing and no blasphemy when I teach: Above all things standeth the heaven of chance, the heaven of innocence, the heaven of hazard, the heaven of sportiveness.

"Sir Hazard"—his is the most ancient title of nobility in earth: him have I restored to all things, I have saved them from the slavery of ends.

This freedom and heavenly brightness I set over all things as an azure dome, when I taught that above them and in them there willeth no "eternal will."

In truth, we shall never find an ultimate meaning in existence, if we view it only under the aspect of purpose.

I know not, however, whether the burden of purposes has ever weighed more heavily upon mankind than at the present time. The present idolizes work. But work means goal-seeking activity, direction to a purpose. Plunge into the crowd on a bustling city street and imagine yourself stopping the passers-by, one after another, and crying to them "Where are you off to so fast? What important business do you have?" And if, on learning the immediate goal, you were to ask further about the purpose of this goal, and again for the purpose of that purpose, you would almost always hit on the purpose after just a few steps in the sequence: maintenance of life, earning one's bread. And why maintain life? To this question you could seldom read off an intelligible answer from the information obtained.

And yet an answer has to be found. For mere living, pure existence as such is certainly valueless; it must also have a content, and in that only can the meaning of life reside. But what actually fills up our days almost entirely

is activities serving to maintain life. In other words, the content of existence consists in the work that is needed in order to exist. We are therefore moving in a circle, and in this fashion fail to arrive at a meaning for life. Nor is it any better if, in place of work itself, we direct our attention to the fruits of work. The greater part of its products is again subservient to work of some kind and hence indirectly to the maintenance of life, and another large part is undoubtedly meaningless trash. . . . Nor, indeed, can any work-products as such ever be valuable, save insofar as they somehow fulfil and enrich life, by launching man into valuable states and activities. The state of working cannot be one of these, for by work—if we understand this concept in its philosophical generality—we simply mean any activity undertaken solely in order to realize some purpose. It is therefore the characteristic mark of work that it has its purpose outside itself, and is not performed for its own sake. The doctrine that would wish to install work as such at the centre of existence, and exalt it to life's highest meaning, is bound to be in error, because every work-activity as such is always a mere means, and receives its value only from its goals.

The core and ultimate value of life can lie only in such states as exist for their own sake and carry their satisfaction in themselves. Now such states are undoubtedly given in the pleasure-feelings which terminate the fulfilment of a volition and accompany the gratifying of a desire; but if we sought to derive the value of existence from these moments, in which life's pressure is momentarily halted, we should at once become ensnared in that argument of Schopenhauer's, which displays to us, not the meaning, but the absurdity of life.

No, life means movement and action, and if we wish to find a meaning in it we must seek for *activities* which carry their own purpose and value within them, independently of any extraneous goals; activities, therefore, which are not work, in the philosophical sense of the word. If such activities exist, then in them the seemingly divided is reconciled, means and end, action and consequence are fused into one, we have then found ends-in-themselves which are more than mere end-points of acting and resting-points of existence, and it is these alone that can take over the role of a true content to life.

There really are such activities. To be consistent, we must call them *play*, since that is the name for free, purposeless action, that is, action which in fact carries its purpose within itself. We must take the word "play," however, in its broad, true, philosophical meaning—in a deeper sense than is commonly accorded to it in daily life. We are not thereby lending it any new or surprising meaning, but are merely repeating what was perfectly clear to at least one great mind, who apprehended the nature of the human with the eye of a poet—which is to say, in deep truth. For in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Friedrich Schiller utters the following words:

For, to declare it once and for all, Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*. This proposition, which at the moment perhaps seems paradoxical, will assume great and deep significance when we have once reached the point of applying it to

## On the Meaning of Life

the twofold seriousness of duty and of destiny; it will, I promise you, support the whole fabric of aesthetic art, and the still more difficult art of living. But it is only in science that this statement is unexpected; it has long since been alive and operative in Art, and in the feeling of the Greeks, its most distinguished exponents; only they transferred to Olympus what should have been realized on earth. Guided by its truth, they caused not only the seriousness and the toil which furrow the cheeks of mortals, but also the futile pleasure that smooths the empty face, to vanish from the brows of the blessed gods, and they released these perpetually happy beings from the fetters of every aim, every duty, every care, and made idleness and indifference the enviable portion of divinity; merely a more human name for the freest and sublimest state of being.

These are exalted words, which ring down from the poet's world into a care-dimmed age, and in our own world sound untimely to most ears. The poet sees a state of divine perfection among men, in which all their activities are turned into joyous play, all their working-days become holidays. Only insofar as man shares in this perfection, only in the hours when life smiles at him without the stern frown of purpose, is he really man. And it was sober consideration that led us to this very truth: the meaning of existence is revealed only in play.

But doesn't this notion lead us into mere dreams, does it not loosen every tie with reality, and have we not lost beneath our feet the solid earth of daily life, on which we have ultimately to stay planted, since the question of life is by nature an everyday question? In the harsh reality, especially of the present, there seems no room for such dreams; for our age, for the peoples of a war-racked globe, no other solution seems possible save the word "work," and it appears irresponsible to speak ill of it.

Yet we should not forget that the creation which the hour demands of us is work only in the economic sense, productive activity, that is, which leads to the engendering of values. There is, however, no irreconcilable opposition between play in the philosophical sense and work in the economic meaning of the term. Play, as we see it, is any activity which takes place entirely for its own sake, independently of its effects and consequences. There is nothing to stop these effects from being of a useful or valuable kind. If they are, so much the better; the action still remains play, since it already bears its own value within itself. Valuable goods may proceed from it, just as well as from intrinsically unpleasurable activity that strives to fulfil a purpose. Play too, in other words, can be creative; its outcome can coincide with that of work.

This notion of creative play will be accorded a major part in the life philosophy of the future. If mankind is to go on existing and progressing by way of playful activities, they will have to be creative; the necessary muse somehow be brought forth by means of them. And this is possible, since play is not a form of doing nothing. The more activities, indeed, become play in the philosophical sense, the more work would be accomplished in the economic sense, and the more values would be created in human society. Human action is work, not because it bears fruit, but only when it proceeds from, and is governed by, the thought of its fruit.

Let us look about us: where do we find creative play? The brightest example (which at the same time is more than a mere example), is to be seen in the creation of the artist. His activity, the shaping of his work by inspiration, is itself pleasure, and it is half by accident that enduring values arise from it. The artist may have no thought, as he works, of the benefit of these values, or even of his reward, since otherwise the act of creation is disrupted. Not the golden chain, but the song that pours from the heart, is the guerdon that richly rewards! So feels the poet, and so the artist. And anyone who feels thus in what he does, *is* an artist.

Take, for example, the scientist. *Knowing*, too, is a pure play of the spirit, the wrestling for scientific truth is an end-in-itself for him, he rejoices to measure his powers against the riddles which reality propounds to him, quite regardless of the benefits that may somehow accrue from this (and these, as we know, have often been the most astonishing precisely in the case of purely theoretical discoveries, whose practical utility no one could originally have guessed). The richest blessings flow from the work that is engendered as the child of its creator's happy mood, and in free play, without any anxious concern for its effects.

Not all the activity of the artist or thinker falls, of course, under the concept of creative play. The purely technical, the mere management of the material, as with the painter's colour-mixing, or the composer's setting-down of notes—all this remains, for the most part, toil and work; they are the husks and dross that often still attach to play in real life. Often, but not always; for in the process of execution the working acts involved can either become so mechanized that they hardly enter consciousness, or else develop so much charm and attractiveness that they turn into artistic play themselves.

And that is also true in the end of those actions which engender neither science nor art, but the day's necessities, and which are seemingly altogether devoid of spirit. The tilling of the fields, the weaving of fabrics, the cobbling of shoes, can all become play, and may take on the character of artistic acts. Nor is it even so uncommon for a man to take so much pleasure in such activities, that he forgets the purpose of them. Every true craftsman can experience in his own case this transformation of the means into an end-in-itself, which can take place with almost any activity, and which makes the product into a work of art. It is the joy in sheer creation, the dedication to the activity, the absorption in the movement, which transforms work into play. As we know, there is a great enchantment which almost always brings this transformation about—rhythm. To be sure, it will only work perfectly where it is not brought externally and deliberately to the activity, and artificially coupled with it, but evolves spontaneously from the nature of the action and its natural form. There are some kinds of work where this is impossible; many are of such a nature that they always remain an evil and—except, perhaps, among men entirely blunted and incapable of happiness—are invariably carried out with reluctance and distaste. With such occupations I advise a very careful scrutiny of their fruits: we shall invariably find that such mechanical, brutalizing, degrading forms of work serve ultimately to produce only trash

and empty luxury. So away with them! So long, indeed, as our economy is focussed on mere increase of production, instead of on the true enrichment of life, these activities cannot diminish, and thus slavery among mankind (for these alone are true forms of slave-labour) will not be able to decline. But a civilization which maintains artificial breeding-grounds for idle trumpery by means of forced slave-labour, must eventually come to grief through its own absurdity. All that will then remain over will be simply the avocations serving to generate true culture. But in them there dwells a spirit that favours their evolution into true forms of play.

At least there is no law of nature which in any way obstructs such a development of action into an end-in-itself; basically speaking, the road lies open to the realization of Schiller's dream. The idea of a human race thus liberated from all tormenting purposes, all oppressive cares, and cheerfully dedicated to the moment, is at least not a contradictory or inconceivable idea. The individual would lead an existence, as in the profound and beautiful saying of the Bible, like the life of the lilies of the field.

The objection may be raised at this point, that such a life would represent a relapse to a lower level, to the status of plants and animals. For the latter assuredly live for the moment, their consciousness is confined to a brief present, they certainly know pain, but not care. Man, on the contrary, has the privilege of embracing long periods, whole lifetimes, in the span of his consciousness, of coexperiencing them through foresight and hindsight, and that is how he becomes the knowing, supremely self-conscious being, in which capacity he confronts all the rest of nature.

But this objection is easy to meet. Man does not have to forfeit the range of his life, his joy in the moment will not be blind and bestial, but bathed in the clearest light of consciousness. He does not escape the menace of purposes by putting his head in the sand, so as not to see the future at all; it stands before him, calmly and clearly, in the light of hope, just as the past stands behind him in the light of recollection. He can shake off the curse of purposes and liberate his vision from the blight of cares, without lessening the boon of his hopes. He still sees even the remotest consequences of his action clearly before him, and not only the real consequences, but all possible ones as well; but no specific goal stands there as an end to be necessarily attained, so that the whole road would be meaningless if it were not; every point, rather, of the whole road already has its own intrinsic meaning, like a mountain path that offers sublime views at every step and new enchantments at every turn, whether it may lead to a summit or not. The setting of certain goals is admittedly needed in order to produce the tension required for life; even playful activity is constantly setting itself tasks, most palpably in sport and competition, which still remains play so long as it does not degenerate into real fighting. But such goals are harmless, they impose no burden on life and do not dominate it; they are left aside and it does not matter if they are not achieved, since at any moment they can be replaced by others. Stretches of life that stand under the dominion of huge inexorable purposes are like riddles with an answer that we either find or fail at; but a life of play

might be compared to an endless crossword puzzle, in which new words are constantly being found and connected, so that an ever larger area is progressively filled in, with no other aim but that of going on further without a halt.

The last liberation of man would be reached if in all his doings he could give himself up entirely to the act itself, inspired to his activity always by love. The end, then, would never justify the means, he might then exalt into his highest rule of action the principle: "What is not worth doing for its own sake, don't do for anything else's sake!" All life would then be truly meaningful, down to its ultimate ramifications; to live would mean: to celebrate the festival of existence.

Plato, in the *Laws* (803c), had already declared that men should make play, song and dance, as the true divine worship, into the proper content of life. But though well over two thousand years have passed in the meantime, perhaps men were closer in those days to such an order of life than they are today. In the present age, assuredly, the daily activity of man can in large part be justified only by distant purposes. In itself such activity is unpleasurable and unjustified, and the deification of work as such, the great gospel of our industrial age, has been exposed as idolatry. The greater part of our existence, filled as it is with goal-seeking work at the behest of others, has no value in itself, but obtains this only by reference to the festive hours of play, for which work provides merely the means and the preconditions.

Unremitting stern fulfilment of duty in the service of an end eventually makes us narrow and takes away the freedom that everyone requires for self-development. We have to be able to breathe freely. Hence arises the task of releasing, for a day, an hour, a minute, at least, the life that is fettered in its entirety to the purposes of utility; and these hours and minutes, however few they may be, form the content for whose sake all the rest is there, and for whose sake all the rest is on occasion sacrificed. At bottom we find man always ready to give up the senseless remainder of life, for an hour that is filled with value.

Man's teachers and benefactors, his seers and leaders, can strive for nothing else but to permeate the broadest possible stretches of existence with meaning. The achievement of a John Ruskin was based on the idea that human life must allow of being shaped into a chain of festive acts; the daily round can be made meaningful if it is filled in every detail with beauty. If it is not possible to lead the whole of life on the bright side, we must at least be able to break surface from time to time. If it is not possible to realize Schiller's dream, there is all the more need to follow Goethe's rule of life: "Work by day, at evening guests, toilsome weeks and joyous feasts." In our own civilization, joyous feasts are not possible without toilsome weeks, but in no age is a lasting life possible without joy and festivities. A life that is constantly focussed only on distant goals eventually loses all power of creation whatsoever. It is like a bow that is always bent: in the end it can no longer loose off the arrow, and with that its tension becomes pointless. Work and toil, so long as they have not themselves become joyous play, should make joy and play possible; therein their meaning lies. But they cannot do it if man has forgotten how to rejoice, if festive hours do not see to it that the knowledge of what joy is, is retained.

Yet let us beware of confusing joy, on which life's value depends, with its surrogate, mere pleasure, that shallow enjoyment of which Schiller said that it smooths the empty face of mortals. Pleasure wearies, while joy refreshes; the latter enriches, the former puts a false sheen upon existence. Both indeed, lead us away from daily toil and distract us from care, but they do it in different ways: pleasure by diverting us, joy by pulling us together. Diversion offers the spirit fleeting excitement, without depth or content; for joy there is more needed, a thought or feeling which fills the whole man, an inspiration which sets him soaring above everyday life. He can only joy whole-heartedly about things which completely take hold of him, he has to be utterly devoted to something. Pain is commended for deepening us (perhaps because otherwise we have nothing good to say of it), but true joy has a very much greater effect. Joy is deeper than heartache, says Nietzsche. Pleasure, however, merely ruffles the surface of the soul and leaves it as featureless as before; it even tends to silt up the soul, for it leaves behind a stale after-taste, as symptom of a spiritual turbidity. And by this, indeed, it can be distinguished from exalted joy, which is an affirmation of existence conferring meaning upon life.

Here we can learn from the *child*. Before he has yet been caught in the net of purposes, the cares of work are unknown to him; he needs no diversion or release from the working day. And it is precisely the child that is capable of the purest joy. People everywhere are wont to sing of the happiness of youth, and this is truly more than a mere invention of the poets; youth is really not overshadowed by the dark clouds of purpose.

And with that I come to the heart of what I should here like to say.

It is not in every expression of life, not in the whole breadth of it, that we are able to find a meaning—at least so long as Schiller's dream of divine perfection remains a mere dream; the meaning of the whole is concentrated and collected, rather, into a few short hours of deep, serene joy, into the hours of play. And these hours crowd thickest in *youth*. It is not only that childish games are play even in the philosophical sense of the term; it is also that later youth, which is already well acquainted with aims and purposes, and has been brought up to serve them, still does not stand entirely under their yoke, does not have its gaze fixed on them alone, is not concerned solely with attaining them, as is often the natural attitude later on. Youth, on the contrary, does not really care about purposes; if one collapses, another is quickly built up; goals are merely an invitation to rush in and fight, and this enterprising ardour is the true fulfilment of the youthful spirit. The enthusiasm of youth (it is basically what the Greeks called *Eros*), is devotion to the deed, not the goal. This act, this way of acting, is true play.

If it is clear in this fashion that what makes up the meaning of existence is nowhere so purely or strongly to be found as it is in youth, some notable questions and clues emerge from this. Youth, after all, is the first phase of life, and it seems incongruous that the meaning of the whole should be found only at its beginning. For according to the traditional view, life is to be regarded as a process of development, whose meaning is constantly unfolding, so that it ought to be most clearly apparent towards the end. What, then, is

youth? On the received view it is the time of immaturity, in which mind and body grow, in order later to *have* grown up to their vocation; the time of learning, in which all capacities are exercised, in order to be equipped for work; even the play of youth appears from this angle as merely a preparation for the seriousness of life. It is almost always so regarded, and almost the whole of education is conducted from this point of view: it signifies a training for adulthood. Youth therefore appears as a mere means to the later purposes of life, as a necessary learning period, that would have no meaning of its own.

This view is directly opposed to the insight that we have obtained. It has seldom been remarked, what a paradox it is that the time of preparation appears as the sweetest portion of existence, while the time of fulfilment seems the most toilsome. At times, however, it has been seen. It was primarily Rousseau, and perhaps Montaigne before him, who discovered the intrinsic value of youth. He warns the educator against debasing the youth of the pupil into a mere means and sacrificing his early happiness to later proficiency; the aim should be to fill the days of youth with joy, even for their own sake. At the present day this idea has begun to make a little headway. It is a leading conception of the modern youth movement, that a young life is not only going to receive its value from the future, but bears it within itself. Youth, in fact, is not just a time of growing, learning, ripening and incompleteness, but primarily a time of play, of doing for its own sake, and hence a true bearer of the meaning of life. Anyone denying this, and regarding youth as a mere introduction and prelude to real life, commits the same error that beclouded the mediaeval view of human existence: he shifts life's centre of gravity forwards, into the future. Just as the majority of religions, discontented with earthly life, are wont to transfer the meaning of existence out of this life and into a hereafter, so man in general is inclined always to regard every state, since none of them is wholly perfect, as a mere preparation for a more perfect one.

For modern man there is little doubt that the value and aim of life must either be totally of this world, or else cannot be found at all. And if man were to run through a thousand successive lives, as the theories of transmigration maintain, this would not absolve contemporary thought from seeking in every one of these stages of existence its own special meaning, independent of what has gone before or is yet to follow. Present-day man would have no right to look upon other, metaphysical worlds, if they existed, as superior or more meaningful, and ungratefully to despise our own world by comparison. The meaning of the life that he knows can only be sought in this world, as he knows it.

But within life he now commits the same mistake that he committed earlier in thinking of its metaphysical continuation: from immature youth he shifts the value of life into mature adulthood; in his prime, he sees that he is still not yet ripe, that his nature and achievements are not complete, and therefore shifts the meaning of life still further on, and expects it from the peace and mellowness of old age. But on actually arriving at this peace, he then projects the meaning of existence backwards again into the days of

## On the Meaning of Life

acting and striving, and these are by then over and past recovery. And the final result is that man lets his whole life fall under the curse of purposes. It is the unceasing search into the future and concern for the future that casts its shadow over every present and clouds the joy of it.

But if life has a meaning, it must lie in the present, for only the present is real. There is no reason at all, however, why more meaning should lie in the later present, in the middle or final period of life, than in an earlier present, in the first period, known as youth. And now let us consider what "youth" must actually mean for us in this connection. We found its true nature, not in the fact that it is a prelude and first phase of life, but rather in that it is the time of play, the time of activity for the pleasure of acting. And we recognized that all action, even the creative action of the adult, can and must, in its perfect form, take on the same character: it becomes play, self-sufficient action that acquires its value independently of the purpose.

But from this it follows that youth, in our philosophical sense, can by no means be confined to the early stages of life; it is present wherever the state of man has reached a peak, where his action has become play, where he is wholly given over to the moment and the matter in hand. We talk in such cases of youthful enthusiasm, and that is the right expression: enthusiasm is always youthful. The ardour which fires us for a cause, a deed or a man, and the ardour of youth, are one and the same fire. A man who is emotionally immersed in what he does is a youngster, a child. The great confirmation of this is genius, which is always imbued with a child-like quality. All true greatness is full of a deep innocence. The creativity of genius is the play of a child, his joy in the world is the child's pleasure in pretty things. Heraclitus of old it was who compared the creative world-spirit itself to a child at play, building things out of pebbles and bits of wood and tearing them down again. For us, therefore, the word "youth" does not have the external meaning of a specific period of life, a particular span of years; it is a state, a way of leading one's life, which basically has nothing to do with years and the number of them.

It will now no longer be possible to misunderstand me when, as the heart of what I am moved to say, I assert the proposition that the *meaning of life is youth*.

The more youth is realized in a life, the more valuable it is, and if a person dies young, however long he may have lived, his life has had meaning.

*The Myth of Sisyphus*

## AN ABSURD REASONING

*Absurdity and Suicide*

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect.

If I ask myself how to judge that this question is more urgent than that, I reply that one judges by the actions it entails. I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument. Galileo, who held a scientific truth of great importance, abjured it with the greatest of ease as soon as it endangered his life. In a certain sense, he did right.<sup>1</sup> That truth was not worth the stake. Whether the earth or the sun revolves around the other is a matter of profound indifference. To tell the truth, it is a futile question. On the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions. How to answer it? On all essential problems (I mean thereby those that run the risk of leading to death or those that intensify the passion of living) there

From *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus, translated by Justin O'Brien (Penguin, 1955)  
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are probably but two methods of thought: the method of La Palisse and the method of Don Quixote. Solely the balance between evidence and lyricism can allow us to achieve simultaneously emotion and lucidity. In a subject at once so humble and so heavy with emotion, the learned and classical dialectic must yield, one can see, to a more modest attitude of mind deriving at one and the same time from common sense and understanding.

Suicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, we are concerned here, at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide. An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art. The man himself is ignorant of it. One evening he pulls the trigger or jumps. Of an apartment-building manager who had killed himself I was told that he had lost his daughter five years before, that he had changed greatly since, and that that experience had "undermined" him. A more exact word cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined. Society has but little connection with such beginnings. The worm is in man's heart. That is where it must be sought. One must follow and understand this fatal game that leads from lucidity in the face of existence to flight from light. . . .

But if it is hard to fix the precise instant, the subtle step when the mind opted for death, it is easier to deduce from the act itself the consequences it implies. In a sense, and as in melodrama, killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it. Let's not go too far in such analogies, however, but rather return to everyday words. It is merely confessing that that "is not worth the trouble." Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.

What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. All healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death.

The subject of this essay is precisely this relationship between the absurd and suicide, the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd. The principle can be established that for a man who does not cheat, what he believes to be true must determine his action. Belief in the absurdity of existence must then dictate his conduct. It is legitimate to wonder, clearly and without false pathos, whether a conclusion of this importance requires forsaking as rapidly as possible an incomprehensible condition. I am speaking, of course, of men inclined to be in harmony with themselves.

Stated clearly, this problem may seem both simple and insoluble. But it is wrongly assumed that simple questions involve answers that are no less simple and that evidence implies evidence. A priori and reversing the terms of the problem, just as one does or does not kill oneself, it seems that there are but two philosophical solutions, either yes or no. This would be too easy. But allowance must be made for those who, without concluding, continue questioning. Here I am only slightly indulging in irony: this is the majority. I notice also that those who answer "no" act as if they thought "yes." As a matter of fact, if I accept the Nietzschean criterion, they think "yes" in one way or another. On the other hand, it often happens that those who commit suicide were assured of the meaning of life. These contradictions are constant. It may even be said that they have never been so keen as on this point where, on the contrary, logic seems so desirable. It is a commonplace to compare philosophical theories and the behavior of those who profess them. . . . Schopenhauer is often cited, as a fit subject for laughter, because he praised suicide while seated at a well-set table. This is no subject for joking. That way of not taking the tragic seriously is not so grievous, but it helps to judge a man.

In the face of such contradictions and obscurities must we conclude that there is no relationship between the opinion one has about life and the act one commits to leave it? Let us not exaggerate in this direction. In a man's attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world. The body's judgment is as good as the mind's, and the body shrinks from annihilation. We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that race which daily hastens us toward death, the body maintains its irreparable lead. In short, the essence of that contradiction lies in what I shall call the act of eluding because it is both less and more than diversion in the Pascalian sense. Eluding is the invariable game. The typical act of eluding, the fatal evasion that constitutes the third theme of this essay, is hope. Hope for another life one must "deserve" or trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it. . . .

### *Absurd Walls*

. . . All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning. Great works are often born on a street-corner or in a restaurant's revolving door. So it is with absurdity. The absurd world more than others derives its nobility from that abject birth. In certain situations, replying "nothing" when asked what one is thinking about may be pretense in a man. Those who are loved are well aware of this. But if that reply is sincere, if it symbolizes that odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent, in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the first sign of absurdity.

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and

Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. “Begins”—this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery. In itself weariness has something sickening about it. Here, I must conclude that it is good. For everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it. . . .

At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia. For a second we cease to understand it because for centuries we have understood it in solely the images and designs that we had attributed to it beforehand, because henceforth we lack the power to make use of that artifice. The world evades us because it becomes itself again. That stage scenery masked by habit becomes again what it is. It withdraws at a distance from us. Just as there are days when under the familiar face of a woman, we see as a stranger her we had loved months or years ago, perhaps we shall come even to desire what suddenly leaves us so alone. But the time has not yet come. Just one thing: that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd.

Men, too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive. This discomfort in the face of man’s own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this “nausea,” as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd. Likewise, the stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in a mirror, the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photographs is also the absurd.

I come at last to death and to the attitude we have toward it. On this point everything has been said and it is only proper to avoid pathos. Yet one will never be sufficiently surprised that everyone lives as if no one “knew.” This is because in reality there is no experience of death. Properly speaking, nothing has been experienced but what has been lived and made conscious. Here, it is barely possible to speak of the experience of others’ deaths. It is a substitute, an illusion, and it never quite convinces us. That melancholy convention cannot be persuasive. The horror comes in reality from the mathematical aspect of the event. If time frightens us, this is because it works out the problem and the solution comes afterward. All the pretty speeches about the soul will have their contrary convincingly proved, at least for a time. From this inert body on which a slap makes no mark the soul has disappeared. This

elementary and definitive aspect of the adventure constitutes the absurd feeling. Under the fatal lighting of that destiny, its uselessness becomes evident. No code of ethics and no effort are justifiable a priori in the face of the cruel mathematics that command our condition. . . .

Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal. The cat's universe is not the universe of the anthill. The truism "All thought is anthropomorphic" has no other meaning. Likewise, the mind that aims to understand reality can consider itself satisfied only by reducing it to terms of thought. If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled. If thought discovered in the shimmering mirrors of phenomena eternal relations capable of summing them up and summing themselves up in a single principle, then would be seen an intellectual joy of which the myth of the blessed would be but a ridiculous imitation. That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama. But the fact of that nostalgia's existence does not imply that it is to be immediately satisfied. . . .

With the exception of professional rationalists, today people despair of true knowledge. If the only significant history of human thought were to be written, it would have to be the history of its successive regrets and its impotences.

Of whom and of what indeed can I say: "I know that!" This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction. For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers. I can sketch one by one all the aspects it is able to assume, all those likewise that have been attributed to it, this upbringing, this origin, this ardor of these silences, this nobility or this vileness. But aspects cannot be added up. This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me. Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled. Forever I shall be a stranger to myself. . . .

Hence the intelligence, too, tells me in its way that this world is absurd. . . . In this unintelligible and limited universe, man's fate hence-forth assumes its meaning. A horde of irrationals has sprung up and surrounds him until his ultimate end. In his recovered and now studied lucidity, the feeling of the absurd becomes clear and definite. I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. . . .

### *Absurd Freedom*

. . . I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just

now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me—that is what I understand. And these two certainties—my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle—I also know that I cannot reconcile them. What other truth can I admit without lying, without bringing in a hope I lack and which means nothing within the limits of my condition?

If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not rise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity. This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation. I cannot cross it out with a stroke of the pen. What I believe to be true I must therefore preserve. What seems to me so obvious, even against me, I must support. And what constitutes the basis of that conflict, of that break between the world and my mind, but the awareness of it? If therefore I want to preserve it, I can through a constant awareness, ever revived, ever alert. This is what, for the moment, I must remember. . . .

Let us insist again on the method: it is a matter of persisting. At a certain point on his path the absurd man is tempted. History is not lacking in either religions or prophets, even without gods. He is asked to leap. All he can reply is that he doesn't fully understand, that it is not obvious. Indeed, he does not want to do anything but what he fully understands. He is assured that this is the sin of pride, but he does not understand the notion of sin; that perhaps hell is in store, but he has not enough imagination to visualize that strange future; that he is losing immortal life, but that seems to him an idle consideration. An attempt is made to get him to admit his guilt. He feels innocent. To tell the truth, that is all he feels—his irreparable innocence. This is what allows him everything. Hence, what he demands of himself is to live *solely* with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is, and to bring in nothing that is not certain. He is told that nothing is. But this at least is a certainty. And it is with this that he is concerned: he wants to find out if it is possible to live *without appeal*. . . .

Before encountering the absurd, the everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification (with regard to whom or what is not the question). He weighs his chances, he counts on "someday," his retirement or the labor of his sons. He still thinks that something in his life can be directed. In truth, he acts as if he were free, even if all the facts make a point of contradicting that liberty. But after the absurd, everything is upset. That idea that "I am," my way of acting as if everything has a meaning (even if, on occasion, I said that nothing has)—all that is given the lie in vertiginous fashion by the absurdity of a possible death. Thinking of the future, establishing aims for oneself, having preferences—all this presupposes a belief in freedom, even if one occasionally ascertains that one doesn't feel it. But at that moment I am well aware that that higher liberty, that freedom *to be*, which alone can serve as basis for a truth, does not exist. Death is there as the only reality. . . .

But at the same time the absurd man realizes that hitherto he was bound to that postulate of freedom on the illusion of which he was living. In a certain sense, that hampered him. To the extent to which he imagined a purpose to his life, he adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became the slave of his liberty. Thus I could not act otherwise than as the father (or the engineer or the leader of a nation, or the post-office subclerk) that I am preparing to be. . . .

The absurd enlightens me on this point: there is no future. Henceforth, this is the reason for my inner freedom. . . .

But what does life mean in such a universe? Nothing else for the moment but indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given. Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary. But this is worth examining.

Knowing whether or not one can live *without appeal* is all that interests me. I do not want to get out of my depth. This aspect of life being given me, can I adapt myself to it? Now, faced with this particular concern, belief in the absurd is tantamount to substituting the quantity of experiences for the quality. If I convince myself that this life has no other aspect than that of the absurd, if I feel that its whole equilibrium depends on that perpetual opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles, if I admit that my freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best of living but the most living. . . .

For on the one hand the absurd teaches that all experiences are unimportant, and on the other it urges toward the greatest quantity of experiences. How, then, can one fail to do as so many of those men I was speaking of earlier—choose the form of life that brings us the most possible of that human matter, thereby introducing a scale of values that on the other hand one claims to reject?

But again it is the absurd and its contradictory life that teaches us. For the mistake is thinking that that quantity of experiences depends on the circumstances of our life when it depends solely on us. Here we have to be oversimplistic. To two men living the same number of years, the world always provides the same sum of experiences. It is up to us to be conscious of them. Being aware of one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum. Where lucidity dominates, the scale of values becomes useless. . . .

## THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had

thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.

If one believes Homer, Sisyphus was the wisest and most prudent of mortals. According to another tradition, however, he was disposed to practice the profession of highwayman. I see no contradiction in this. Opinions differ as to the reasons why he became the futile laborer of the underworld. To begin with, he is accused of a certain levity in regard to the gods. He stole their secrets. *Ægina*, the daughter of *Æsopus*, was carried off by Jupiter. The father was shocked by that disappearance and complained to Sisyphus. He, who knew of the abduction, offered to tell about it on condition that *Æsopus* would give water to the citadel of Corinth. To the celestial thunderbolts he preferred the benediction of water. He was punished for this in the underworld. Homer tells us also that Sisyphus had put Death in chains. Pluto could not endure the sight of his deserted, silent empire. He dispatched the god of war, who liberated Death from the hands of her conqueror.

It is said also that Sisyphus, being near to death, rashly wanted to test his wife's love. He ordered her to cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square. Sisyphus woke up in the underworld. And there, annoyed by an obedience so contrary to human love, he obtained from Pluto permission to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun, warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness. Recalls, signs of anger, warnings were of no avail. Many years more he lived facing the curve of the gulf, the sparkling sea, and the smiles of earth. A decree of the gods was necessary. Mercury came and seized the impudent man by the collar and, snatching him from his joys, led him forcibly back to the underworld, where his rock was ready for him.

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth. Nothing is told us about Sisyphus in the underworld. Myths are made for the imagination to breath life into them. As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again towards the summit. He goes back down to the plain.

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured stop toward that torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his

suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.

If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. This word is not too much. Again I fancy Sisyphus returning toward his rock, and the sorrow was in the beginning. When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory, this is the rock itself. The boundless grief is too heavy to bear. These are our nights of Gethsemane. But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged. Thus, Oedipus at the outset obeys fate without knowing it. But from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Yet at the same moment, blind and desperate, he realizes that the only bond linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl. Then a tremendous remark rings out: "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well." Sophocles' Oedipus, like Dostoevsky's Kirilov, thus gives the recipe for the absurd victory. Ancient wisdom confirms modern heroism.

One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. "What! by such narrow ways—?" There is but one world, however. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the absurd discovery. It happens as well that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness. "I conclude that all is well," says Oedipus, and that remark is sacred. It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man. It teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted. It drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile sufferings. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men.

All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up. Unconscious, secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he

## The Myth of Sisyphus

contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

### NOTE

1. From the point of view of the relative value of truth. On the other hand, from the point of view of virile behavior, this scholar's fragility may well make us smile.

*The Meaning of Life*

Tolstoy, in his autobiographical work, "A Confession," reports how, when he was fifty and at the height of his literary success, he came to be obsessed by the fear that life was meaningless.

At first I experienced moments of perplexity and arrest of life, as though I did not know what to do or how to live; and I felt lost and became dejected. But this passed, and I went on living as before. Then these moments of perplexity began to recur oftener and oftener, and always in the same form. They were always expressed by the questions: What is it for? What does it lead to? At first it seemed to me that these were aimless and irrelevant questions. I thought that it was all well known, and that if I should ever wish to deal with the solution it would not cost me much effort; just at present I had no time for it, but when I wanted to, I should be able to find the answer. The questions however began to repeat themselves frequently, and to demand replies more and more insistently; and like drops of ink always falling on one place they ran together into one black blot.<sup>1</sup>

A Christian living in the Middle Ages would not have felt any serious doubts about Tolstoy's questions. To him it would have seemed quite certain that life had a meaning and quite clear what it was. The medieval Christian world picture assigned to man a highly significant, indeed the central part in the grand scheme of things. The universe was made for the express purpose of providing a stage on which to enact a drama starring Man in the title role.

To be exact, the world was created by God in the year 4004 b.c. Man was the last and the crown of this creation, made in the likeness of God, placed in the Garden of Eden on earth, the fixed centre of the universe, round which revolved the nine heavens of the sun, the moon, the planets and the fixed stars, producing as they revolved in their orbits the heavenly harmony

Inaugural Lecture delivered at the Canberra University College, 1957. Copyright © 1957 by Kurt Baier. Used by permission of the author.

of the spheres. And this gigantic universe was created for the enjoyment of man, who was originally put in control of it. Pain and death were unknown in paradise. But this state of bliss was not to last. Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree of knowledge, and life on this earth turned into a death-march through a vale of tears. Then, with the birth of Jesus, new hope came into the world. After He had died on the cross, it became at least possible to wash away with the purifying water of baptism some of the effects of Original Sin and to achieve salvation. That is to say, on condition of obedience to the law of God, man could now enter heaven and regain the state of everlasting, deathless bliss, from which he had been excluded because of the sin of Adam and Eve.

To the medieval Christian the meaning of human life was therefore perfectly clear. The stretch on earth is only a short interlude, a temporary incarceration of the soul in the prison of the body, a brief trial and test, fated to end in death, the release from pain and suffering. What really matters, is the life after the death of the body. One's existence acquires meaning not by gaining what this life can offer but by saving one's immortal soul from death and eternal torture, by gaining eternal life and everlasting bliss.

The scientific world picture which has found ever more general acceptance from the beginning of the modern era onwards is in profound conflict with all this. At first, the Christian conception of the world was discovered to be erroneous in various important details. The Copernican theory showed up the earth as merely one of several planets revolving round the sun, and the sun itself was later seen to be merely one of many fixed stars each of which is itself the nucleus of a solar system similar to our own. Man, instead of occupying the centre of creation, proved to be merely the inhabitant of a celestial body no different from millions of others. Furthermore, geological investigations revealed that the universe was not created a few thousand years ago, but was probably millions of years old.

Disagreements over details of the world picture, however, are only superficial aspects of a much deeper conflict. The appropriateness of the whole Christian outlook is at issue. For Christianity, the world must be regarded as the "creation" of a kind of Superman, a person possessing all the human excellences to an infinite degree and none of the human weaknesses, Who has made man in His image, a feeble, mortal, foolish copy of Himself. In creating the universe, God acts as a sort of playwright-cum-legislator-cum-judge-cum-executioner. In the capacity of playwright, He creates the historical world process, including man. He erects the stage and writes, in outline, the plot. He creates the *dramatis personae* and watches over them with the eye partly of a father, partly of the law. While on stage, the actors are free to extempore, but if they infringe the divine commandments, they are later dealt with by their creator in His capacity of judge and executioner.

Within such a framework, the Christian attitudes towards the world are natural and sound: it is natural and sound to think that all is arranged for the best even if appearances belie it; to resign oneself cheerfully to one's lot; to be filled with awe and veneration in regard to anything and everything that

happens; to want to fall on one's knees and worship and praise the Lord. These are wholly fitting attitudes within the framework of the world view just outlined. And this world view must have seemed wholly sound and acceptable because it offered the best explanation which was then available of all the observed phenomena of nature.

As the natural sciences developed, however, more and more things in the universe came to be explained without the assumption of a supernatural creator. Science, moreover, could explain them better, that is, more accurately and more reliably. The Christian hypothesis of a supernatural maker, whatever other needs it was capable of satisfying, was at any rate no longer indispensable for the purpose of explaining the existence or occurrence of anything. In fact, scientific explanations do not seem to leave any room for this hypothesis. The scientific approach demands that we look for a natural explanation of anything and everything. The scientific way of looking at and explaining things has yielded an immensely greater measure of understanding of, and control over, the universe than any other way. And when one looks at the world in this scientific way, there seems to be no room for a personal relationship between human beings and a supernatural perfect being ruling and guiding men. Hence many scientists and educated men have come to feel that the Christian attitudes towards the world and human existence are inappropriate. They have become convinced that the universe and human existence in it are without a purpose and therefore devoid of meaning.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. THE EXPLANATION OF THE UNIVERSE

Such beliefs are disheartening and unplausible. It is natural to keep looking for the error that must have crept into our arguments. And if an error has crept in, then it is most likely to have crept in with science. For before the rise of science, people did not entertain such melancholy beliefs, while the scientific world picture seems literally to force them on us.

There is one argument which seems to offer the desired way out. It runs somewhat as follows. Science and religion are not really in conflict. They are, on the contrary, mutually complementary, each doing an entirely different job. Science gives provisional, if precise, explanations of small parts of the universe, religion gives final and over-all, if comparatively vague, explanations of the universe as a whole. The objectionable conclusion, that human existence is devoid of meaning, follows only if we use scientific explanations where they do not apply, namely, where total explanations of the whole universe are concerned.<sup>3</sup>

After all, the argument continues, the scientific world picture is the inevitable outcome of rigid adherence to scientific method and explanation, but scientific, that is, causal explanations from their very nature are incapable of producing real illumination. They can at best tell us *how* things are or have come about, but never *why*. They are incapable of making the universe

intelligible, comprehensible, meaningful to us. They represent the universe as meaningless, not because it *is* meaningless, but because scientific explanations are not designed to yield answers to investigations into the why and wherefore, into the meaning, purpose, or point of things. Scientific explanations (this argument continues) began, harmlessly enough, as partial and provisional explanations of the movement of material bodies, in particular the planets, within the general framework of the medieval world picture. Newton thought of the universe as a clock made, originally wound up, and occasionally set right by God. His laws of motion only revealed the ways in which the heavenly machinery worked. Explaining the movement of the planets by these laws was analogous to explaining the machinery of a watch. Such explanations showed *how* the thing worked, but not *what it was for* or *why* it existed. Just as the explanation of how a watch works can help our understanding of the watch only if, in addition, we assume that there is a watchmaker who has designed it for a purpose, made it, and wound it up, so the Newtonian explanation of the solar system helps our understanding of it only on the similar assumption that there is some divine artificer who has designed and made this heavenly clockwork for some purpose, has wound it up, and perhaps even occasionally sets it right, when it is out of order.

Socrates, in the "Phaedo," complained that only explanations of a thing showing the good or purpose for which it existed could offer a *real* explanation of it. He rejected the kind of explanation we now call "causal" as no more than mentioning "that without which a cause could not be a cause," that is, as merely a necessary condition, but not the *real* cause, the real explanation.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Socrates held that *all* things can be explained in two different ways: either by mentioning merely a necessary condition, or by giving the *real* cause. The former is not an elucidation of the explicandum, not really a help in understanding it, in grasping its "why" and "wherefore."

This Socratic view, however, is wrong. It is not the case that there are two kinds of explanation for everything, one partial, preliminary, and not really clarifying, the other full, final, and illuminating. The truth is that these two kinds of explanation are equally explanatory, equally illuminating, and equally full and final, but that they are appropriate for different kinds of explicanda.

When in an uninhabited forest we find what looks like houses, paved streets, temples, cooking utensils, and the like, it is no great risk to say that these things are the ruins of a deserted city, that is to say, of something man-made. In such a case, the appropriate explanation is teleological, that is, in terms of the purposes of the builders of that city. On the other hand, when a comet approaches the earth, it is similarly a safe bet that, unlike the city in the forest, it was not manufactured by intelligent creatures and that, therefore, a teleological explanation would be out of place, whereas a causal one is suitable.

It is easy to see that in some cases causal, and in others teleological, explanations are appropriate. A small satellite circling the earth may or may not have been made by man. We may never know which is the true explanation,

but either hypothesis is equally explanatory. It would be wrong to say that only a teleological explanation can *really* explain it. Either explanation would yield complete clarity although, of course, only one can be true. Teleological explanation is only one of several that are possible.

It may indeed be strictly correct to say that the question "Why is there a satellite circling the earth?" can only be answered by a teleological explanation. It may be true that "Why?" questions can really be used properly only in order to elicit *someone's reasons* for doing something. If this is so, it would explain our dissatisfaction with causal answers to "Why?" questions. But even if it is so, it does not show that "Why is the satellite there?" *must be answered by a teleological explanation*. It shows only that either it must be so answered or it must not be asked. The question "Why have you stopped beating your wife?" can be answered only by a teleological explanation, but if you have never beaten her, it is an improper question. Similarly, if the satellite is not man-made, "Why is there a satellite?" is improper since it implies an origin it did not have. Natural science can indeed only tell us *how* things in nature have come about and not *why*, but this is so not because something else can tell us the *why* and *wherefore*, but because there is none.

There is, however, another point which has not yet been answered. The objection just stated was that causal explanations did not even set out to answer the crucial question. We ask the question "Why?" but science returns an answer to the question "How?" It might now be conceded that this is no ground for a complaint, but perhaps it will instead be said that causal explanations do not give complete or full answers even to that latter question. In causal explanations, it will be objected, the existence of one thing is explained by reference to its cause, but this involves asking for the cause of that cause, and so on, ad infinitum. There is no resting place which is not as much in need of explanation as what has already been explained. Nothing at all is ever fully and completely explained by this sort of explanation.

Leibniz has made this point very persuasively. "Let us suppose a book of the elements of geometry to have been eternal, one copy always having been taken down from an earlier one; it is evident that, even though a reason can be given for the present book out of a past one, nevertheless, out of any number of books, taken in order, going backwards, we shall never come upon a *full* reason; though we might well always wonder why there should have been such books from all time—why there were books at all, and why they were written in this manner. What is true of books is true also of the different states of the world; for what follows is in some way copied from what precedes . . . And so, however far you go back to earlier states, you will never find in those states a *full reason* why there should be any world rather than none, and why it should be such as it is."<sup>5</sup>

However, a moment's reflection will show that if any type of explanation is merely preliminary and provisional, it is teleological explanation, since it presupposes a background which itself stands in need of explanation. If I account for the existence of the man-made satellite by saying that it was made by some scientists for a certain purpose, then such an explanation can clarify

the existence of the satellite only if I assume that there existed materials out of which the satellite was made, and scientists who made it for some purpose. It therefore does not matter what type of explanation we give, whether causal or teleological: either type, any type of explanation, will imply the existence of something by reference to which the explicandum can be explained. And this in turn must be accounted for in the same way, and so on for ever.

But is not God a necessary being? Do we not escape the infinite regress as soon as we reach God? It is often maintained that, unlike ordinary intelligent beings, God is eternal and necessary; hence His existence, unlike theirs, is not in need of explanation. For what is it that creates the vicious regress just mentioned? It is that, if we accept the principle of sufficient reason (that there must be an explanation for the existence of anything and everything the existence of which is not logically necessary, but merely contingent<sup>6</sup>), the existence of all the things referred to in any explanation requires itself to be explained. If, however, God is a logically necessary being, then His existence requires no explanation. Hence the vicious regress comes to an end with God.

Now, it need not be denied that God is a necessary being in some sense of that expression. In one of these senses, I, for instance, am a necessary being: it is impossible that I should not exist, because it is self-refuting to say "I do not exist." The same is true of the English language and of the universe. It is self-refuting to say "There is no such thing as the English language" because this sentence is in the English language, or "There is no such thing as the universe" because whatever there is, *is* the universe. It is impossible that these things should not in fact exist since it is impossible that we should be mistaken in thinking that they exist. For what possible occurrence could even throw doubt on our being right on these matters, let alone show that we are wrong? I, the English language, and the universe, are necessary beings, simply in the sense in which all is necessarily true which has been *proved* to be true. The occurrence of utterances such as "I exist," "The English language exists" and "The universe exists" is in itself sufficient proof of their truth. These remarks are therefore necessarily true, hence the things asserted to exist are necessary things.

But this sort of necessity will not satisfy the principle of sufficient reason, because it is only hypothetical or consequential necessity.<sup>7</sup> *Given that* someone says "I exist," then it is logically impossible that *he* should not exist. Given the evidence we have, the English language and the universe most certainly do exist. But there is no necessity about the evidence. On the principle of sufficient reason, we must explain the existence of the evidence, for its existence is not logically necessary.

In other words, the only sense of "necessary being" capable of terminating the vicious regress is "logically necessary being," but it is no longer seriously in dispute that the notion of a logically necessary being is self-contradictory.<sup>8</sup> Whatever can be conceived of as existing can equally be conceived of as not existing.

However, even if per impossible, there were such a thing as a logically necessary being, we could still not make out a case for the superiority of teleological

over causal explanation. The existence of the universe cannot be explained in accordance with the familiar model of manufacture by a craftsman. For that model presupposes the existence of materials out of which the product is fashioned. God, on the other hand, must create the materials as well. Moreover, although we have a simple model of "creation out of nothing," for composers create tunes out of nothing, yet this is a great difference between creating *something to be sung*, and making the sounds which are a singing of it, or producing the piano on which to play it. Let us, however, waive all these objections and admit, for argument's sake, that creation out of nothing is conceivable. Surely, even so, no one can claim that it is the kind of explanation which yields the clearest and fullest understanding. Surely, to round off scientific explanations of the origin of the universe with creation out of nothing, does not add anything to our *understanding*. There may be merit of some sort in this way of speaking, but whatever it is, it is not greater clarity or explanatory power.<sup>9</sup>

What then, does all this amount to? Merely to the claim that scientific explanations are no worse than any other. All that has been shown is that all explanations suffer from the same defect: all involve a vicious infinite regress. In other words, no type of human explanation can help us to unravel the ultimate, unanswerable mystery. Christian ways of looking at things may not be able to render the world any more lucid than science can, but at least they do not pretend that there are no impenetrable mysteries. On the contrary, they point out untiringly that the claims of science to be able to elucidate everything are hollow. They remind us that science is not merely limited to the exploration of a tiny corner of the universe but that, however far out probing instruments may eventually reach, we can never even approach the answers to the last questions: "Why is there a world at all rather than nothing?" and "Why is the world such as it is and not different?" Here our finite human intellect bumps against its own boundary walls.

Is it true that scientific explanations involve an infinite vicious regress? Are scientific explanations really only provisional and incomplete? The crucial point will be this. Do *all* contingent truths call for explanation? Is the principle of sufficient reason sound? Can scientific explanations never come to a definite end? It will be seen that with a clear grasp of the nature and purpose of explanation we can answer these questions.<sup>10</sup>

Explaining something to someone is making him understand it. This involves bringing together in his mind two things, a model which is accepted as already simple and clear, and that which is to be explained, the explicandum, which is not so. Understanding the explicandum is seeing that it belongs to a range of things which could legitimately have been expected by anyone familiar with the model and with certain facts.

There are, however, two fundamentally different positions which a person may occupy relative to some explicandum. He may not be familiar with any model capable of leading him to expect the phenomenon to be explained. Most of us, for instance, are in that position in relation to the phenomena occurring in a good seance. With regard to other things people will differ. Someone who can play chess, already understands chess, already has

such a model. Someone who has never seen a game of chess has not. He sees the moves on the board but he cannot understand, cannot follow, cannot make sense of what is happening. Explaining the game to him is giving him an explanation, is making him understand. He can understand or follow chess moves only if he can see them as conforming to a model of a chess game. In order to acquire such a model, he will, of course, need to know the constitutive rules of chess, that is, the permissible moves. But that is not all. He must know that a normal game of chess is a competition (not all games are) between two people, each trying to win, and he must know what it is to win at chess: to manoeuvre the opponent's king into a position of checkmate. Finally, he must acquire some knowledge of what is and what is not conducive to winning: the tactical rules or canons of the game.

A person who has been given such an explanation and who has mastered it—which may take quite a long time—has now reached understanding, in the sense of the ability to follow each move. A person cannot in that sense understand merely one single move of chess and no other. If he does not understand any other moves, we must say that he has not yet mastered the explanation, that he does not really understand the single move either. If he has mastered the explanation, then he understands all those moves which he can see as being in accordance with the model of the game inculcated in him during the explanation.

However, even though a person who has mastered such an explanation will understand many, perhaps most, moves of any game of chess he cares to watch, he will not necessarily understand them all, as some moves of a player may not be in accordance with his model of the game. White, let us say, at his fifteenth move, exposes his queen to capture by Black's knight. Though in accordance with the constitutive rules of the game, this move is nevertheless perplexing and calls for explanation, because it is not conducive to the achievement by White of what must be assumed to be his aim: to win the game. The queen is a much more valuable piece than the knight against which he is offering to exchange.

An onlooker who has mastered chess may fail to understand this move, be perplexed by it, and wish for an explanation. Of course he may fail to be perplexed, for if he is a very inexperienced player he may not *see* the disadvantageousness of the move. But there is such a need whether anyone sees it or not. The move *calls for* explanation because to anyone who knows the game it must appear to be incompatible with the model which we have learnt during the explanation of the game, and by reference to which we all explain and understand normal games.

However, the required explanation of White's fifteenth move is of a very different kind. What is needed now is not the acquisition of an explanatory model, but the removal of the real or apparent incompatibility between the player's move and the model of explanation he has already acquired. In such a case the perplexity can be removed only on the assumption that the incompatibility between the model and the game is merely apparent. As our model includes a presumed aim of both players, there are the following three

possibilities: (a) White has made a mistake: he has over-looked the threat to his queen. In that case, the explanation is that White thought his move conducive to his end, but it was not. (b) Black has made a mistake: White set a trap for him. In that case, the explanation is that Black thought White's move was not conducive to White's end, but it was. (c) White is not pursuing the end which any chess player may be presumed to pursue: he is not trying to win his game. In that case, the explanation is that White has made a move which he knows is not conducive to the end of winning his game because, let us say, he wishes to please Black who is his boss.

Let us now set out the differences and similarities between the two types of understanding involved in these two kinds of explanation. I shall call the first kind "model"—understanding and explaining, respectively, because both involve the use of a model by reference to which understanding and explaining is effected. The second kind I shall call "unvexing," because the need for this type of explanation and understanding arises only when there is a perplexity arising out of the incompatibility of the model and the facts to be explained.

The first point is that unvexing presupposes model-understanding, but not vice versa. A person can neither have nor fail to have unvexing-understanding of White's fifteenth move at chess, if he does not already have model-understanding of chess. Obviously, if I don't know how to play chess, I shall fail to have model-understanding of White's fifteenth move. But I can neither fail to have nor, of course, can I have unvexing-understanding of it, for I cannot be perplexed by it. I merely fail to have model-understanding of this move as, indeed, of any other move of chess. On the other hand, I may well have model-understanding of chess without having unvexing-understanding of every move. That is to say, I may well know how to play chess without understanding White's fifteenth move. A person cannot fail to have unvexing-understanding of the move unless he is vexed or perplexed by it, hence he cannot even fail to have unvexing-understanding unless he already has model-understanding. It is not true that one either understands or fails to understand. On certain occasions, one neither understands nor fails to understand.

The second point is that there are certain things which cannot call for unvexing-explanations. No one can for instance call for an unvexing-explanation of White's first move, which is Pawn to King's Four. For no one can be perplexed or vexed by this move. Either a person knows how to play chess or he does not. If he does, then he must understand this move, for if he does not understand it, he has not yet mastered the game. And if he does not know how to play chess, then he cannot yet have, or fail to have, unvexing-understanding, he cannot therefore need an unvexing-explanation. Intellectual problems do not arise out of ignorance, but out of insufficient knowledge. An ignoramus is puzzled by very little. Once a student can see problems, he is already well into the subject.

The third point is that model-understanding implies being able, without further thought, to have model-understanding of a good many other things,

unvexing-understanding does not. A person who knows chess and therefore has model-understanding of it, must understand a good many chess moves, in fact all except those that call for unvexing-explanations. If he claims that he can understand White's first move, but no others, then he is either lying or deceiving himself or he really does not understand any move. On the other hand, a person who, after an unvexing-explanation, understands White's fifteenth move, need not be able, without further explanation, to understand Black's or any other further move which calls for unvexing-explanation.

What is true of explaining deliberate and highly stylized human behaviour such as playing a game of chess is also true of explaining natural phenomena. For what is characteristic of natural phenomena, that they recur in essentially the same way, that they are, so to speak, repeatable, is also true of chess games, as it is not of games of tennis or cricket. There is only one important difference: man himself has invented and laid down the rules of chess, as he has not invented or laid down the "rules or laws governing the behaviour of things." This difference between chess and phenomena is important, for it adds another way to the three already mentioned,<sup>11</sup> in which a perplexity can be removed by an unvexing-explanation, namely, by abandoning the original explanatory model. This is, of course, not possible in the case of games of chess, because the model for chess is not a "construction" on the basis of the already existing phenomena of chess, but an invention. The person who first thought up the model of chess could not have been mistaken. The person who first thought of a model explaining some phenomenon could have been mistaken.

Consider an example. We may think that the following phenomena belong together: the horizon seems to recede however far we walk towards it; we seem to be able to see further the higher the mountain we climb; the sun and moon seem every day to fall into the sea on one side but to come back from behind the mountains on the other side without being any the worse for it. We may explain these phenomena by two alternative models: (a) that the earth is a large disc; (b) that it is a large sphere. However, to a believer in the first theory there arises the following perplexity: how is it that when we travel long enough towards the horizon in any one direction, we do eventually come back to our starting point without ever coming to the edge of the earth? We may at first attempt to "save" the model by saying that there is only an apparent contradiction. We may say either that the model does not require us to come to an edge, for it may be possible only to walk round and round on the flat surface. Or we may say that the person must have walked over the edge without noticing it, or perhaps that the travellers are all lying. Alternatively, the fact that our model is "constructed" and not invented or laid down enables us to say, what we could not do in the case of chess, that the model is inadequate or unsuitable. We can choose another model which fits all the facts, for instance, that the earth is round. Of course, then we have to give an unvexing-explanation for why it *looks* flat, but we are able to do that.

We can now return to our original question, "Are scientific explanations true and full explanations or do they involve an infinite regress, leaving them for ever incomplete?"

Our distinction between model- and unvexing-explanations will help here. It is obvious that only those things which are perplexing *call for* and *can be given* unvexing-explanations. We have already seen that in disposing of one perplexity, we do not necessarily raise another. On the contrary, unvexing-explanations truly and completely explain what they set out to explain, namely, how something is possible which, on our explanatory model, seemed to be impossible. There can therefore be no infinite regress here. Unvexing-explanations are real and complete explanations.

Can there be an infinite regress, then, in the case of model-explanations? Take the following example. European children are puzzled by the fact that their antipodean counterparts do not drop into empty space. This perplexity can be removed by substituting for their explanatory model another one. The European children imagine that throughout space there is an all-pervasive force operating in the same direction as the force that pulls them to the ground. We must, in our revised model, substitute for this force another acting everywhere in the direction of the centre of the earth. Having thus removed their perplexity by giving them an adequate model, we can, however, go on to ask *why* there should be such a force as the force of gravity, why bodies should "naturally," in the absence of forces acting on them, behave in the way stated in Newton's laws. And we might be able to give such an explanation. We might for instance construct a model of space which would exhibit as derivable from it what in Newton's theory are "brute facts." Here we would have a case of the brute facts of one theory being explained within the framework of another, more general theory. And it is a sound methodological principle that we should continue to look for more and more general theories.

Note two points, however. The first is that we must distinguish, as we have seen, between *the possibility* and *the necessity* of giving an explanation. Particular occurrences can be explained by being exhibited as instances of regularities, and regularities can be explained by being exhibited as instances of more general regularities. Such explanations make things clearer. They organize the material before us. They introduce order where previously there was disorder. But absence of this sort of explanation (model-explanation) does not leave us with a puzzle or perplexity, an intellectual restlessness or cramp. The unexplained things are not unintelligible, incomprehensible, or irrational. Some things, on the other hand, call for, require, demand an explanation. As long as we are without such an explanation, we are perplexed, puzzled, intellectually perturbed. We need an unvexing-explanation.

Now, it must be admitted that we may be able to construct a more general theory, from which, let us say, Newton's theory can be derived. This would further clarify the phenomena of motion and would be intellectually satisfying. But failure to do so would not leave us with an intellectual cramp. The facts stated in Newton's theory do not require, or stand in need of, unvexing-explanations. They could do so only if we already had another theory or model with which Newton's theory was incompatible. They could not do so, by themselves, prior to the establishment of such another model.

The second point is that there is an objective limit to which such explanations tend, and beyond which they are pointless. There is a very good reason for wishing to explain a less general by a more general theory. Usually, such a unification goes hand in hand with greater precision in measuring the phenomena which both theories explain. Moreover, the more general theory, because of its greater generality, can explain a wider range of phenomena including not only phenomena already explained by some other theories but also newly discovered phenomena, which the less general theory cannot explain. Now, the ideal limit to which such expansions of theories tend is an all-embracing theory which unifies all theories and explains all phenomena. Of course, such a limit can never be reached, since new phenomena are constantly discovered. Nevertheless, theories may be tending towards it. It will be remembered that the contention made against scientific theories was that there is no such limit because they involve an infinite regress. On that view, which I reject, there is no conceivable point at which scientific theories could be said to have explained the whole universe. On the view I am defending, there is such a limit, and it is the limit towards which scientific theories are actually tending. I claim that the nearer we come to this limit, the closer we are to a full and complete explanation of everything. For if we were to reach the limit, then though we could, of course, be left with a model which is itself unexplained and could be yet further explained by derivation from another model, there would be no need for, and no point in, such a further explanation. There would be no need for it, because any clearly defined model permitting us to expect the phenomena it is designed to explain offers full and complete explanations of these phenomena, however narrow the range. And while, at lower levels of generality, there is a good reason for providing more general models, since they further simplify, systematize, and organize the phenomena, this, which is the only reason for building more general theories, no longer applies once we reach the ideal limit of an all-embracing explanation.

It might be said that there is another reason for using different models: that they might enable us to discover new phenomena. Theories are not only instruments of explanation, but also of discovery. With this I agree, but it is irrelevant to my point: that *the needs of explanation* do not require us to go on for ever deriving one explanatory model from another.

It must be admitted, then, that in the case of model-explanations there is a regress, but it is neither vicious nor infinite. It is not vicious because, in order to explain a group of explicanda, a model-explanation *need* not itself be derived from another more general one. It gives a perfectly full and consistent explanation by itself. And the regress is not infinite, for there is a natural limit, an all-embracing model, which can explain all phenomena, beyond which it would be pointless to derive model-explanations from yet others.

What about our most serious question, "Why is there anything at all?" Sometimes, when we think about how one thing has developed out of another and that one out of a third, and so on back throughout all time, we are driven to ask the same question about the universe as a whole. We want to add up

all things and refer to them by the name, “the world,” and we want to know why the world exists and why there is not nothing instead. In such moments, the world seems to us a kind of bubble floating on an ocean of nothingness. Why should such flotsam be adrift in empty space? Surely, its emergence from the hyaline billows of nothingness is more mysterious even than Aphrodite’s emergence from the sea. Wittgenstein expressed in these words the mystification we all feel: “Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is. The contemplation of the world *sub specie aeterni* is the contemplation of it as a limited whole. The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling.”<sup>12</sup>

Professor J. J. C. Smart expresses his own mystification in these moving words:

That anything should exist at all does seem to me a matter for the deepest awe. But whether other people feel this sort of awe, and whether they or I ought to is another question. I think we ought to. If so, the question arises: If “Why should anything exist at all?” cannot be interpreted after the manner of the cosmological argument, that is, as an absurd request for the non-sensical postulation of a logically necessary being, what sort of question is it? What sort of question is this question “Why should anything exist at all?” All I can say is that I do not yet know.<sup>13</sup>

It is undeniable that the magnitude and perhaps the very existence of the universe is awe-inspiring. It is probably true that it gives many people “the mystical feeling.” It is also undeniable that our awe, our mystical feeling, aroused by contemplating the vastness of the world, is justified, in the same sense in which our fear is justified when we realize we are in danger. There is no more appropriate object for our awe or for the mystical feeling than the magnitude and perhaps the existence of the universe, just as there is no more appropriate object for our fear than a situation of personal peril. However, it does not follow from this that it is a good thing to cultivate, or indulge in, awe or mystical feelings, any more than it is necessarily a good thing to cultivate, or indulge in, fear in the presence of danger.

In any case, whether or not we ought to have or are justified in having a mystical feeling or a feeling of awe when contemplating the universe, having such a feeling is not the same as asking a meaningful question, although having it may well *incline us* to utter certain forms of words. Our question “Why is there anything at all?” may be no more than the expression of our feeling of awe or mystification, and not a meaningful question at all. Just as the feeling of fear may naturally but illegitimately give rise to the question “What sin have I committed?” so the feeling of awe or mystification may naturally but illegitimately lead to the question “Why is there anything at all?” What we have to discover, then, is whether this question makes sense or is meaningless.

Yes, of course, it will be said, it makes perfectly good sense. There is an undeniable fact and it calls for explanation. The fact is that the universe exists. In the light of our experience, there can be no possible doubt that something or other exists, and the claim that the universe exists commits us to no more than that. And surely this calls for explanation, because the universe must

have originated somehow. Everything has an origin and the universe is no exception. Since the universe is the totality of things, it must have originated out of nothing. If it had originated out of something, even something as small as one single hydrogen atom, what has so originated could not be the whole universe, but only the universe minus the atom. And then the atom itself would call for explanation, for it too must have had an origin, and it must be *an origin out of nothing*. And how can anything originate out of nothing? Surely that calls for explanation.

However, let us be quite clear what is to be explained. There are two facts here, not one. The first is that the universe exists, which is undeniable. The second is that the universe must have originated out of nothing, and that is not undeniable. It is true that, *if it has originated at all*, then it must have originated out of nothing, or else it is not the universe that has originated. But need it have originated? Could it not have existed for ever?<sup>14</sup> It might be argued that nothing exists for ever, that everything has originated out of something else. That may well be true, but it is perfectly compatible with the fact that the universe is everlasting. We may well be able to trace the origin of any thing to the time when, by some transformation, it has developed out of some other thing, and yet it may be the case that no thing has its origin in nothing, and the universe has existed for ever. For even if every *thing* has a beginning and an end, the total of mass and energy may well remain constant.

Moreover, the hypothesis that the universe originated out of nothing is, empirically speaking, completely empty. Suppose, for argument's sake, that the annihilation of an object without remainder is conceivable. It would still not be possible for any hypothetical observer to ascertain whether space was empty or not. Let us suppose that *within the range of observation of our observer* one object after another is annihilated without remainder and that only one is left. Our observer could not then tell whether in remote parts of the universe, beyond his range of observation, objects are coming into being or passing out of existence. What, moreover, are we to say of the observer himself? Is he to count for nothing? Must we not postulate him away as well, if the universe is to have arisen out of nothing?

Let us, however, ignore all these difficulties and assume that the universe really has originated out of nothing. Even that does not prove that the universe has not existed for ever. If the universe can conceivably develop out of nothing, then it can conceivably vanish without remainder. And it can arise out of nothing again and subside into nothingness once more, and so on ad infinitum. Of course, "again" and "once more" are not quite the right words. The concept of time hardly applies to such universes. It does not make sense to ask whether one of them is earlier or later than, or perhaps simultaneous with, the other because we cannot ask whether they occupy the same or different spaces. Being separated from one another by "nothing," they are not separated from one another by "anything." We cannot therefore make any statements about their mutual spatio-temporal relations. It is impossible to distinguish between one long continuous universe and two universes

separated by nothing. How, for instance, can we tell whether the universe including ourselves is not frequently annihilated and “again” reconstituted just as it was?

Let us now waive these difficulties as well. Let us suppose for a moment that we understand what is meant by saying that the universe originated out of nothing and that this has happened only once. Let us accept this as a fact. Does this fact call for explanation?

It does not call for an unvexing-explanation. That would be called for only if there were a perplexity due to the incompatibility of an accepted model with some fact. In our case, the fact to be explained is the origination of the universe out of nothing, hence there could not be such a perplexity, for we need not employ a model incompatible with this. If we had a model incompatible with our “fact,” then that would be the wrong model and we would simply have to substitute another for it. The model we employ to explain the origin of the universe out of nothing could not be based on the similar origins of other things for, of course, there is nothing else with a similar origin.

All the same, it seems very surprising that something should have come out of nothing. It is contrary to the principle that every thing has an origin, that is, has developed out of something else. It must be admitted that there is this incompatibility. However, it does not arise because a well-established model does not square with an undeniable fact; it arises because a well-established model does not square with *an assumption* of which it is hard even to make sense and for which there is no evidence whatsoever. In fact, the only reason we have for making this assumption, is a simple logical howler: that because every thing has an origin, the universe must have an origin, too, except, that, being the universe, it must have originated out of nothing. This is a howler, because it conceives of the universe as a big thing, whereas in fact it is the totality of things, that is, not a thing. That every thing has an origin does not entail that the totality of things has an origin. On the contrary, it strongly suggests that it has not. For to say that every thing has an origin implies that any given thing must have developed out of something else which in turn, being a thing, must have developed out of something else, and so forth. If we assume that every thing has an origin, we need not, indeed it is hard to see how we can, assume that the totality of things has an origin as well. There is therefore no perplexity, because we need not and should not assume that the universe has originated out of nothing.

If, however, in spite of all that has been said just now, someone still wishes to assume, contrary to all reason, that the universe has originated out of nothing, there would still be no perplexity, for then he would simply have to give up the principle which is incompatible with this assumption, namely, that no thing can originate out of nothing. After all, this principle *could* allow for exceptions. We have no proof that it does not. Again, there is no perplexity, because no incompatibility between our assumption and an inescapable principle.

But, it might be asked, do we not need a model-explanation of our supposed fact? The answer is No. We do not need such an explanation, for there

could not possibly be a model for this origin other than this origin itself. We cannot say that origination out of nothing is like birth, or emergence, or evolution, or anything else we know for it is not like anything we know. In all these cases, there is *something* out of which the new thing has originated.

To sum up. The question, "Why is there anything at all?" looks like a perfectly sensible question modelled on "Why does *this* exist?" or "How has *this* originated?" It looks like a question about the origin of a thing. However, it is not such a question, for the universe is not a thing, but the totality of things. There is therefore no reason to assume that the universe has an origin. The very assumption that it has is fraught with contradictions and absurdities. If, nevertheless, it were true that the universe has originated out of nothing, then this would not call either for an unvexing or a model-explanation. It would not call for the latter, because there could be no model of it taken from another part of our experience, since there is nothing analogous in our experience to origination out of nothing. It would not call for the former, because there can be no perplexity due to the incompatibility of a well-established model and an undeniable fact, since there is no undeniable fact and no well-established model. If, on the other hand, as is more probable, the universe has not originated at all, but is eternal, then the question why or how it has originated simply does not arise. There can then be no question about why anything at all exists, for it could not mean how or why the universe had originated, since ex hypothesi it has no origin. And what else could it mean?

Lastly, we must bear in mind that the hypothesis that the universe was made by God out of nothing only brings us back to the question who made God or how God originated. And if we do not find it repugnant to say that God is eternal, we cannot find it repugnant to say that the universe is eternal. The only difference is that we know for certain that the universe exists, while we have the greatest difficulty in even making sense of the claim that God exists.

To sum up. According to the argument examined, we must reject the scientific world picture because it is the outcome of scientific types of explanation which do not really and fully explain the world around us, but only tell us *how* things have come about, not *why*, and can give no answer to the ultimate question, why there is anything at all rather than nothing. Against this, I have argued that scientific explanations are real and full, just like the explanations of everyday life and of the traditional religions. They differ from those latter only in that they are more precise and more easily disprovable by the observation of facts.

My main points dealt with the question why scientific explanations were thought to be merely provisional and partial. The first main reason is the misunderstanding of the difference between teleological and causal explanations. It is first, and rightly, maintained that teleological explanations are answers to "Why?" questions, while causal explanations are answers to "How?" questions. It is further, and wrongly, maintained that, in order to obtain real and full explanations of anything, one must answer both "Why?" and "How?" questions. In other words, it is thought that all matters can

and must be explained by both teleological and causal types of explanation. Causal explanations, it is believed, are merely provisional and partial, waiting to be completed by teleological explanations. Until a teleological explanation has been given, so the story goes, we have not *really* understood the explicandum. However, I have shown that both types are equally real and full explanations. The difference between them is merely that they are appropriate to different types of explicanda.

It should, moreover, be borne in mind that teleological explanations are not, in any sense, unscientific. They are rightly rejected in the natural sciences, not however because they are unscientific, but because no intelligences or purposes are found to be involved there. On the other hand, teleological explanations are very much in place in psychology, for we find intelligence and purpose involved in a good deal of human behaviour. It is not only not unscientific to give teleological explanations of deliberate human behaviour, but it would be quite unscientific to exclude them.

The second reason why scientific explanations are thought to be merely provisional and partial, is that they are believed to involve a vicious infinite regress. Two misconceptions have led to this important error. The first is the general misunderstanding of the nature of explanation, and in particular the failure to distinguish between the two types which I have called model- and unvexing-explanations, respectively. If one does not draw this distinction, it is natural to conclude that scientific explanations lead to a vicious infinite regress. For while it is true of those perplexing matters which are elucidated by unvexing-explanations that they are incomprehensible and cry out for explanation, it is not true that after an unvexing-explanation has been given, this itself is again capable, let alone in need of, a yet further explanation of the same kind. Conversely, while it is true that model-explanations of regularities can themselves be further explained by more general model-explanations, it is not true that, in the absence of such more general explanations, the less general are incomplete, hang in the air, so to speak, leaving the explicandum incomprehensible and crying out for explanation. The distinction between the two types of explanation shows us that an explicandum is either perplexing and incomprehensible, in which case an explanation of it is *necessary* for clarification and, when given, *complete*, or it is a regularity capable of being subsumed under a model, in which case a further explanation is *possible* and often profitable, but *not necessary* for clarification.

The second misconception responsible for the belief in a vicious infinite regress is the misrepresentation of scientific explanation as *essentially causal*. It has generally been held that, in a scientific explanation, the explicandum is the effect of some event, the cause, temporally prior to the explicandum. Combined with the principle of sufficient reason (the principle that anything is in need of explanation which might conceivably have been different from what it is), this error generates the nightmare of determinism. Since any event might have been different from what it was, acceptance of this principle has the consequence that *every* event must have a reason or explanation. But if the reason is itself an event *prior in time*, then every reason must have a reason

preceding it, and so the infinite regress of explanation is necessarily tied to the time scale stretching infinitely back into the endless past. It is, however, obvious from our account that science is not primarily concerned with the forging of such causal chains. The primary object of the natural sciences is not historical at all. Natural science claims to reveal, not the beginnings of things, but their underlying reality. It does not dig up the past, it digs down into the structure of things existing here and now. Some scientists do allow themselves to speculate, and rather precariously at that, about origins. But their hard work is done on the structure of what exists now. In particular those explanations which are themselves further explained are not explanations linking event to event in a gapless chain reaching back to creation day, but generalisations of theories tending towards a unified theory.

## 2. THE PURPOSE OF MAN'S EXISTENCE

Our conclusion in the previous section has been that science is in principle able to give complete and real explanations of every occurrence and thing in the universe. This has two important corollaries: (i) Acceptance of the scientific world picture cannot be *one's reason for* the belief that the universe is unintelligible and therefore meaningless, though coming to accept it, after having been taught the Christian world picture, may well have been, in the case of many individuals, *the only or the main cause* of their belief that the universe and human existence are meaningless. (ii) It is not in accordance with reason to reject this pessimistic belief on the grounds that scientific explanations are only provisional and incomplete and must be supplemented by religious ones.

In fact, it might be argued that the more clearly we understand the explanations given by science, the more we are driven to the conclusion that human life has no purpose and therefore no meaning. The science of astronomy teaches us that our earth was not specially created about 6,000 years ago, but evolved out of hot nebulae which previously had whirled aimlessly through space for countless ages. As they cooled, the sun and the planets formed. On one of these planets at a certain time the circumstances were propitious and life developed. But conditions will not remain favourable to life. When our solar system grows old, the sun will cool, our planet will be covered with ice, and all living creatures will eventually perish. Another theory has it that the sun will explode and that the heat generated will be so great that all organic life on earth will be destroyed. That is the comparatively short history and prospect of life on earth. Altogether it amounts to very little when compared with the endless history of the inanimate universe.

Biology teaches us that the species man was not specially created but is merely, in a long chain of evolutionary changes of forms of life, the last link, made in the likeness not of God but of nothing so much as an ape. The rest of the universe, whether animate or inanimate, instead of serving the ends of

man, is at best indifferent, at worst savagely hostile. Evolution to whose operation the emergence of man is due is a ceaseless battle among members of different species, one species being gobbled up by another, only the fittest surviving. Far from being the gentlest and most highly moral, man is simply the creature best fitted to survive, the most efficient if not the most rapacious and insatiable killer. And in this unplanned, fortuitous, monstrous, savage world man is madly trying to snatch a few brief moments of joy, in the short intervals during which he is free from pain, sickness, persecution, war or famine until, finally, his life is snuffed out in death. Science has helped us to know and understand this world, but what purpose or meaning can it find in it?

Complaints such as these do not mean quite the same to everybody, but one thing, I think, they mean to most people: science shows life to be meaningless, because life is without purpose. The medieval world picture provided life with a purpose, hence medieval Christians could believe that life had a meaning. The scientific account of the world takes away life's purpose and with it its meaning.

There are, however, two quite different senses of "purpose." Which one is meant? Has science deprived human life of purpose in both senses? And if not, is it a harmless sense, in which human existence has been robbed of purpose? Could human existence still have meaning if it did not have a purpose in that sense?

What are the two senses? In the first and basic sense, purpose is normally attributed only to persons or their behaviour as in "Did you have a purpose in leaving the ignition on?" In the second sense, purpose is normally attributed only to things, as in "What is the purpose of that gadget you installed in the workshop?" The two uses are intimately connected. We cannot attribute a purpose to a thing without implying that someone did something, in the doing of which he had some purpose, namely, to bring about the thing with the purpose. Of course, *his* purpose is not identical with *its* purpose. In hiring labourers and engineers and buying materials and a site for a factory and the like, the entrepreneur's purpose, let us say, is to manufacture cars, but the purpose of cars is to serve as a means of transportation.

There are many things that a man may do, such as buying and selling, hiring labourers, ploughing, felling trees, and the like, which it is foolish, pointless, silly, perhaps crazy, to do if one has no purpose in doing them. A man who does these things without a purpose is engaging in inane, futile pursuits. Lives crammed full with such activities devoid of purpose are pointless, futile, worthless. Such lives may indeed be dismissed as meaningless. But it should also be perfectly clear that acceptance of the scientific world picture does not force us to regard our lives as being without a purpose in this sense. Science has not only not robbed us of any purpose which we had before, but it has furnished us with enormously greater power to achieve these purposes. Instead of praying for rain or a good harvest or offspring, we now use ice pellets, artificial manure, or artificial insemination.

By contrast, having or not having a purpose, in the other sense, is value neutral. We do not think more or less highly of a thing for having or not

having a purpose. "Having a purpose," in this sense, confers no kudos, "being purposeless" carries no stigma. A row of trees growing near a farm may or may not have a purpose: it may or may not be a windbreak, may or may not have been planted or deliberately left standing there in order to prevent the wind from sweeping across the fields. We do not in any way disparage the trees if we say they have no purpose, but have just grown that way. They are as beautiful, made of as good wood, as valuable, as if they had a purpose. And, of course, they break the wind just as well. The same is true of living creatures. We do not disparage a dog when we say that it has no purpose, is not a sheep dog or a watch dog or a rabbitting dog, but just a dog that hangs around the house and is fed by us.

Man is in a different category, however. To attribute to a human being a purpose in that sense is not neutral, let alone complimentary: it is offensive. It is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose. If, at a garden party, I ask a man in livery, "What is your purpose?" I am insulting him. I might as well have asked, "What are you for?" Such questions reduce him to the level of a gadget, a domestic animal, or perhaps a slave. I imply that *we* allot to *him* the tasks, the goals, the aims which he is to pursue; that *his* wishes and desires and aspirations and purposes are to count for little or nothing. We are treating him, in Kant's phrase, merely as a means to our ends, not as an end in himself.

The Christian and the scientific world pictures do indeed differ fundamentally on this point. The latter robs man of a purpose in this sense. It sees him as a being with no purpose allotted to him by anyone but himself. It robs him of any goal, purpose, or destiny appointed for him by any outside agency. The Christian world picture, on the other hand, sees man as a creature, a divine artefact, something halfway between a robot (manufactured) and an animal (alive), a homunculus, or perhaps Frankenstein, made in God's laboratory, with a purpose or task assigned him by his Maker.

However, lack of purpose in this sense does not in any way detract from the meaningfulness of life. I suspect that many who reject the scientific outlook because it involves the loss of purpose of life, and therefore meaning, are guilty of a confusion between the two senses of "purpose" just distinguished. They confusedly think that if the scientific world picture is true, then their lives must be futile because that picture implies that man has no purpose given him from without. But this is muddled thinking, for, as has already been shown, pointlessness, is implied only by purposelessness in the other sense, which is not at all implied by the scientific picture of the world. These people mistakenly conclude that there can be no purpose *in* life because there is no purpose *of* life; that *men* cannot themselves adopt and achieve purposes because *man*, unlike a robot or a watch dog, is not a creature with a purpose.<sup>15</sup>

However, not all people taking this view are guilty of the above confusion. Some really hanker after a purpose of life in this sense. To some people the greatest attraction of the medieval world picture is the belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good Father, the view of themselves as His children who worship Him, of their proper attitude to what befalls them as

submission, humility, resignation in His will, and what is often described as the "creaturely feeling."<sup>16</sup> All these are attitudes and feelings appropriate to a being that stands to another in the same sort of relation, though of course on a higher plane, in which a helpless child stands to his progenitor. Many regard the scientific picture of the world as cold, unsympathetic, unhomely, frightening, because it does not provide for any appropriate object of this creaturely attitude. There is nothing and no one in the world, as science depicts it, in which we can have faith or trust, on whose guidance we can rely, to whom we can turn for consolation, whom we can worship or submit to—except other human beings. This may be felt as a keen disappointment, because it shows that the meaning of life cannot lie in submission to His will, in acceptance of whatever may come, and in worship. But it does not imply that life can have *no* meaning. It merely implies that it must have a different meaning from that which it was thought to have. Just as it is a great shock for a child to find that he must stand on his own feet, that his father and mother no longer provide for him, so a person who has lost his faith in God must reconcile himself to the idea that he has to stand on his own feet, alone in the world except for whatever friends he may succeed in making.

But is not this to miss the point of the Christian teaching? Surely, Christianity can tell us the meaning of life because it tells us the grand and noble end for which God has created the universe and man. No human life, however pointless it may seem, is meaningless because in being part of God's plan, every life is assured of significance.

This point is well taken. It brings to light a distinction of some importance: we call a person's life meaningful not only if it is worthwhile, but also if he has helped in the realization of some plan or purpose transcending his own concerns. A person who knows he must soon die a painful death, can give significance to the remainder of his doomed life by, say, allowing certain experiments to be performed on him which will be useful in the fight against cancer. In a similar way, only on a much more elevated plane, every man, however humble or plagued by suffering, is guaranteed significance by the knowledge that he is participating in God's purpose.

What, then, on the Christian view, is the grand and noble end for which God has created the world and man in it? We can immediately dismiss that still popular opinion that the smallness of our intellect prevents us from stating meaningfully God's design in all its imposing grandeur.<sup>17</sup> This view cannot possibly be a satisfactory answer to our question about the purpose of life. It is, rather, a confession of the impossibility of giving one. If anyone thinks that this "answer" can remove the sting from the impression of meaninglessness and insignificance in our lives, he cannot have been stung very hard.

If, then, we turn to those who are willing to state God's purpose in so many words, we encounter two insuperable difficulties. The first is to find a purpose grand and noble enough to explain and justify the great amount of undeserved suffering in this world. We are inevitably filled by a sense of bathos when we read statements such as this: "... history is the scene of a divine purpose, in which the whole history is included, and Jesus of Nazareth

is the centre of that purpose, both as revelation and as achievement, as the fulfilment of all that was past, and the promise of all that was to come. . . . If God is God, and if He made all these things, why did He do it? . . . God created a universe, bounded by the categories of time, space, matter, and causality, because He desired to enjoy for ever the society of a fellowship of finite and redeemed spirits which have made to His love the response of free and voluntary love and service."<sup>18</sup> Surely this cannot be right. Could a God be called omniscient, omnipotent, *and* all-good who, for the sake of satisfying his desire to be loved and served, imposes (or has to impose) on his creatures the amount of undeserved suffering we find in the world?

There is, however, a much more serious difficulty still: God's purpose in making the universe must be stated in terms of a dramatic story many of whose key incidents symbolize religious conceptions and practices which we no longer find morally acceptable: the imposition of a taboo on the fruits of a certain tree, the sin and guilt incurred by Adam and Eve by violating the taboo, the wrath of God,<sup>19</sup> the curse of Adam and Eve and all their progeny, the expulsion from Paradise, the Atonement by Christ's bloody sacrifice on the cross which makes available by way of the sacraments God's Grace by which alone men can be saved (thereby, incidentally, establishing the valuable power of priests to forgive sins and thus alone make possible a man's entry to heaven),<sup>20</sup> Judgment Day on which the sheep are separated from the goats and the latter condemned to eternal torment in hellfire.

Obviously it is much more difficult to formulate a purpose for creating the universe and man that will justify the enormous amount of undeserved suffering which we find around us, if that story has to be fitted in as well. For now we have to explain not only why an omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good God should create such a universe and such a man, but also why, foreseeing every move of the feeble, weak-willed, ignorant, and covetous creature to be created, He should nevertheless have created him and, having done so, should be incensed and outraged by man's sin, and why He should deem it necessary to sacrifice His own son on the cross to atone for this sin which was, after all, only a disobedience of one of his commands, and why this atonement and consequent redemption could not have been followed by man's return to Paradise—particularly of those innocent children who had not yet sinned—and why, on Judgment Day, this merciful God should condemn some to eternal torment.<sup>21</sup> It is not surprising that in the face of these and other difficulties, we find, again and again, a return to the first view: that God's purpose cannot meaningfully be stated.

It will perhaps be objected that no Christian to-day believes in the dramatic history of the world as I have presented it. But this is not so. It is the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic, the Greek Orthodox, and a large section of the Anglican Church.<sup>22</sup> Nor does Protestantism substantially alter this picture. In fact, by insisting on "Justification by Faith Alone" and by rejecting the ritualistic, magical character of the medieval Catholic interpretation of certain elements in the Christian religion, such as indulgences, the sacraments, and prayer, while at the same time insisting on the necessity of

grace, Protestantism undermined the moral element in medieval Christianity expressed in the Catholics' emphasis on personal merit.<sup>23</sup> Protestantism, by harking back to St. Augustine, who clearly realized the incompatibility of grace and personal merit,<sup>24</sup> opened the way for Calvin's doctrine of Predestination (the intellectual parent of that form of rigid determinism which is usually blamed on science) and Salvation or Condemnation from all eternity.<sup>25</sup> Since Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Presbyterians and Baptists officially subscribe to the views just outlined, one can justifiably claim that the overwhelming majority of professing Christians hold or ought to hold them.

It might still be objected that the best and most modern views are wholly different. I have not the necessary knowledge to pronounce on the accuracy of this claim. It may well be true that the best and most modern views are such as Professor Braithwaite's who maintains that Christianity is, roughly speaking, "morality plus stories," where the stories are intended merely to make the strict moral teaching both more easily understandable and more palatable.<sup>26</sup> Or it may be that one or the other of the modern views on the nature and importance of the dramatic story told in the sacred Scriptures is the best. My reply is that even if it is true, it does not prove what I wish to disprove, that one can extract a sensible answer to our question, "What is the meaning of life?" from the kind of story subscribed to by the overwhelming majority of Christians, who would, moreover, reject any such modernist interpretation at least as indignantly as the scientific account. Moreover, though such views can perhaps avoid some of the worst absurdities of the traditional story, they are hardly in a much better position to state the purpose for which God has created the universe and man in it, because they cannot overcome the difficulty of finding a purpose grand and noble enough to justify the enormous amount of undeserved suffering in the world.

Let us, however, for argument's sake, waive all these objections. There remains one fundamental hurdle which no form of Christianity can overcome: the fact that it demands of man a morally repugnant attitude towards the universe. It is now very widely held<sup>27</sup> that the basic element of the Christian religion is an attitude of worship towards a being supremely worthy of being worshipped and that it is religious feelings and experiences which apprise their owner of such a being and which inspire in him the knowledge or the feeling of complete dependence, awe, worship, mystery, and self-abasement. There is, in other words, a bi-polarity (the famous "I-Thou relationship") in which the object, "the wholly-other," is exalted whereas the subject is abased to the limit. Rudolf Otto has called this the "creature-feeling"<sup>28</sup> and he quotes as an expression of it, Abraham's words when venturing to plead for the men of Sodom: "Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes" (Genesis XVIII.27). Christianity thus demands of men an attitude inconsistent with one of the presuppositions of morality: that man is not wholly dependent on something else, that man has free will, that man is in principle capable of responsibility. We have seen that the concept of grace is the Christian attempt to reconcile the claim of total dependence

and the claim of individual responsibility (partial independence), and it is obvious that such attempts must fail. We may dismiss certain doctrines, such as the doctrine of original sin or the doctrine of eternal hellfire or the doctrine that there can be no salvation outside the Church as extravagant and peripheral, but we cannot reject the doctrine of total dependence without rejecting the characteristically Christian attitude as such.

### 3. THE MEANING OF LIFE

Perhaps some of you will have felt that I have been shirking the real problem. To many people the crux of the matter seems as follows. How can there be any meaning in our life if it ends in death? What meaning can there be in it that our inevitable death does not destroy? How can our existence be meaningful if there is no after-life in which perfect justice is meted out? How can life have any meaning if all it holds out to us are a few miserable earthly pleasures and even these to be enjoyed only rarely and for such a piteously short time?

I believe this is the point which exercises most people most deeply. Kirilov, in Dostoevsky's novel, *The Possessed*, claims, just before committing suicide, that as soon as we realize that there is no God, we cannot live any longer, we must put an end to our lives. One of the reasons which he gives is that when we discover that there is no paradise, we have nothing to live for.

"... there was a day on earth, and in the middle of the earth were three crosses. One on the cross had such faith that He said to another, 'To-day thou shalt be with me in paradise.' The day came to an end, both died, and they went, but they found neither paradise nor resurrection. The saying did not come true. Listen: that man was the highest of all on earth. . . . There has never been any one like Him before or since, and never will be. . . . And if that is so, if the laws of Nature did not spare even *Him*, and made even *Him* live in the midst of lies and die for a lie, then the whole planet is a lie and is based on a lie and a stupid mockery. So the very laws of the planet are a lie and a farce of the devil. What, then, is there to live for?"<sup>29</sup> And Tolstoy, too, was nearly driven to suicide when he came to doubt the existence of God and an after-life.<sup>30</sup> And this is true of many.

What, then, is it that inclines us to think that if life is to have a meaning, there would be an after-life? It is this. The Christian world view contains the following three propositions. The first is that since the Fall, God's curse of Adam and Eve, and the expulsion from Paradise, life on earth for mankind has not been worth while, but a vale of tears, one long chain of misery, suffering, unhappiness, and injustice. The second is that a perfect after-life is awaiting us after the death of the body. The third is that we can enter this perfect life only on certain conditions, among which is also the condition of enduring our earthly existence to its bitter end. In this way, our earthly existence which, in itself, would not (at least for many people if not all) be worth

living, acquires meaning and significance: only if we endure it, can we gain admission to the realm of the blessed.

It might be doubted whether this view is still held to-day. However, there can be no doubt that even to-day we all imbibe a good deal of this view with our earliest education. In sermons, the contrast between the perfect life of the blessed and our life of sorrow and drudgery is frequently driven home and we hear it again and again that Christianity has a message of hope and consolation for all those "who are weary and heavy laden."<sup>31</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that when the implications of the scientific world picture begin to sink in, when we come to have doubts about the existence of God and another life, we are bitterly disappointed. For if there is no afterlife, then all we are left is our earthly life which we have come to regard as a necessary evil, the painful fee of admission to the land of eternal bliss. But if there is no eternal bliss to come and if this hell on earth is all, why hang on till the horrible end?

Our disappointment therefore arises out of these two propositions, that the earthly life is not worth living, and that there is another perfect life of eternal happiness and joy which we may enter upon if we satisfy certain conditions. We can regard our lives as meaningful, if we believe both. We cannot regard them as meaningful if we believe merely the first and not the second. It seems to me inevitable that people who are taught something of the history of science, will have serious doubts about the second. If they cannot overcome these, as many will be unable to do, then they must either accept the sad view that their life is meaningless or they must abandon the first proposition: that this earthly life is not worth living. They must find the meaning of their life in this earthly existence. But is this possible?

A moment's examination will show us that the Christian evaluation of our earthly life as worthless, which we accept in our moments of pessimism and dissatisfaction, is not one that we normally accept. Consider only the question of murder and suicide. On the Christian view, other things being equal, the most kindly thing to do would be for every one of us to kill as many of our friends and dear ones as still have the misfortune to be alive, and then to commit suicide without delay, for every moment spent in this life is wasted. On the Christian view, God has not made it that easy for us. He has forbidden us to hasten others or ourselves into the next life. Our bodies are his private property and must be allowed to wear themselves out in the way decided by Him, however painful and horrible that may be. We are, as it were, driving a burning car. There is only one way out, to jump clear and let it hurtle to destruction. But the owner of the car has forbidden it on pain of eternal tortures worse than burning. And so we do better to burn to death inside.

On this view, murder is a less serious wrong than suicide. For murder can always be confessed and repented and therefore forgiven, suicide cannot—unless we allow the ingenious way out chosen by the heroine of Graham Greene's play, *The Living Room*, who swallows a slow but deadly poison and, while awaiting its taking effect, repents having taken it. Murder, on the other hand, is not so serious because, in the first place, it need not rob the victim of

anything but the last lap of his march in the vale of tears, and, in the second place, it can always be forgiven. Hamlet, it will be remembered, refrains from killing his uncle during the latter's prayers because, as a true Christian, he believes that killing his uncle at that point, when the latter has purified his soul by repentance, would merely be doing him a good turn, for murder at such a time would simply despatch him to undeserved and everlasting happiness.

These views strike us as odd, to say the least. They are the logical consequence of the official medieval evaluation of this our earthly existence. If this life is not worth living, then taking it is not robbing the person concerned of much. The only thing wrong with it is the damage to God's property, which is the same both in the case of murder and suicide. We do not take this view at all. Our view, on the contrary, is that murder is the most serious wrong because it consists in taking away from some one else against his will his most precious possession, his life. For this reason, when a person suffering from an incurable disease asks to be killed, the mercy killing of such a person is regarded as a much less serious crime than murder because, in such a case, the killer is not robbing the other of a good against his will. Suicide is not regarded as a real crime at all, for we take the view that a person can do with his own possessions what he likes.

However, from the fact that these are our normal opinions, we can infer nothing about their truth. After all, we could easily be mistaken. Whether life is or is not worthwhile, is a value judgment. Perhaps all this is merely a matter of opinion or taste. Perhaps no objective answer can be given. Fortunately, we need not enter deeply into these difficult and controversial questions. It is quite easy to show that the medieval evaluation of earthly life is based on a misguided procedure.

Let us remind ourselves briefly of how we arrive at our value judgments. When we determine the merits of students, meals, tennis players, bulls, or bathing belles, we do so on the basis of some criteria and some standard or norm. Criteria and standards notoriously vary from field to field and even from case to case. But that does not mean that we have *no* idea about what are the appropriate criteria or standards to use. It would not be fitting to apply the criteria for judging bulls to the judgment of students or bathing belles. They score on quite different points. And even where the same criteria are appropriate as in the judgment of students enrolled in different schools and universities, the standards will vary from one institution to another. Pupils who would only just pass in one, would perhaps obtain honours in another. The higher the standard applied, the lower the marks, that is, the merit conceded to the candidate.

The same procedure is applicable also in the evaluation of a life. We examine it on the basis of certain criteria and standards. The medieval Christian view uses the criteria of the ordinary man: a life is judged by what the person concerned can get out of it: the balance of happiness over unhappiness, pleasure over pain, bliss over suffering. Our earthly life is judged not worthwhile because it contains much unhappiness, pain, and suffering, little happiness, pleasure, and bliss. The next life is judged worthwhile because it provides eternal bliss and no suffering.

Armed with these criteria, we can compare the life of this man and that, and judge which is more worthwhile, which has a greater balance of bliss over suffering. But criteria alone enable us merely to make comparative judgments of value, not absolute ones. We can say which is more and which is less worthwhile, but we cannot say which is worthwhile and which is not. In order to determine the latter, we must introduce a standard. But what standard ought we to choose?

Ordinarily, the standard we employ is the average of the kind. We call a man and a tree tall if they are well above the average of their kind. We do not say that Jones is a short man because he is shorter than a tree. We do not judge a boy a bad student because his answer to a question in the Leaving Examination is much worse than that given in reply to the same question by a young man sitting for his finals for the Bachelor's degree.

The same principles must apply to judging lives. When we ask whether a given life was or was not worthwhile, then we must take into consideration the range of worthwhileness which ordinary lives normally cover. Our end poles of the scale must be the best possible and the worst possible life that one finds. A good and worthwhile life is one that is well above average. A bad one is one well below.

The Christian evaluation of earthly lives is misguided because it adopts a quite unjustifiably high standard. Christianity singles out the major shortcomings of our earthly existence: there is not enough happiness; there is too much suffering; the good and bad points are quite unequally and unfairly distributed; the underprivileged and underendowed do not get adequate compensation; it lasts only a short time. It then quite accurately depicts the perfect or ideal life as that which does not have any of these shortcomings. Its next step is to promise the believer that he will be able to enjoy this perfect life later on. And then it adopts as its standard of judgment the perfect life, dismissing as inadequate anything that falls short of it. Having dismissed earthly life as miserable, it further damns it by characterizing most of the pleasures of which earthly existence allows as bestial, gross, vile, and sinful, or alternatively as not really pleasurable.

This procedure is as illegitimate as if I were to refuse to call anything tall unless it is infinitely tall, or anything beautiful unless it is perfectly flawless, or any one strong unless he is omnipotent. Even if it were true that there is available to us an after-life which is flawless and perfect, it would still not be legitimate to judge earthly lives by this standard. We do not fail every candidate who is not an Einstein. And if we do not believe in an after-life, we must of course use ordinary earthly standards.

I have so far only spoken of the worthwhileness, only of what a person can get out of a life. There are other kinds of appraisal. Clearly, we evaluate people's lives not merely from the point of view of what they yield to the persons that lead them, but also from that of other men on whom these lives have impinged. We judge a life more significant if the person has contributed to the happiness of others, whether directly by what he did for others, or by the plans, discoveries, inventions, and work he performed. Many lives

that hold little in the way of pleasure or happiness for its owner are highly significant and valuable, deserve admiration and respect on account of the contributions made.

It is now quite clear that death is simply irrelevant. If life can be worthwhile at all, then it can be so even though it be short. And if it is not worthwhile at all, then an eternity of it is simply a nightmare. It may be sad that we have to leave this beautiful world, but it is so only if and because it is beautiful. And it is no less beautiful for coming to an end. I rather suspect that an eternity of it might make us less appreciative, and in the end it would be tedious.

It will perhaps be objected now that I have not really demonstrated that life has a meaning, but merely that it can be worthwhile or have value. It must be admitted that there is a perfectly natural interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" on which my view actually proves that life has no meaning. I mean the interpretation discussed in Section 2 of this lecture, where I attempted to show that, if we accept the explanations of natural science, we cannot believe that living organisms have appeared on earth in accordance with the deliberate plan of some intelligent being. Hence, on this view, life cannot be said to have a purpose, in the sense in which man-made things have a purpose. Hence it cannot be said to have a meaning or significance in that sense.

However, this conclusion is innocuous. People are disconcerted by the thought that *life as such* has no meaning in that sense only because they very naturally think it entails that no individual life can have meaning either. They naturally assume that *this* life or *that* can have meaning only if *life as such* has meaning. But it should by now be clear that your life and mine may or may not have meaning (in one sense) even if life as such has none (in the other). Of course, it follows from this that your life may have meaning while mine has not. The Christian view guarantees a meaning (in one sense) to every life, the scientific view does not (in any sense). By relating the question of the meaningfulness of life to the particular circumstances of an individual's existence, the scientific view leaves it an open question whether an individual's life has meaning or not. It is, however, clear that the latter is the important sense of "having a meaning." Christians, too, must feel that their life is wasted and meaningless if they have not achieved salvation. To know that even such lost lives have a meaning in another sense is no consolation to them: What matters is not that life should have a guaranteed meaning, whatever happens here or here-after, but that, by luck (Grace) or the right temperament and attitude (Faith) or a judicious life (Works) a person should make the most of his life.

"But here lies the rub," it will be said. "Surely, it makes all the difference whether there is an after-life. This is where morality comes in." It would be a mistake to believe that. Morality is not the meting out of punishment and reward. To be moral is to refrain from doing to others what, if they followed reason, they would not do to themselves, and to do for others what, if they followed reason, they would want to have done. It is, roughly speaking, to recognize that others, too, have a right to a worthwhile life. Being moral does not make one's own life worthwhile, it helps others to make theirs so.

## 4. CONCLUSION

I have tried to establish three points: (i) that scientific explanations render their explicanda as intelligible as pre-scientific explanations; they differ from the latter only in that, having testable implications and being more precisely formulated, their truth or falsity can be determined with a high degree of probability; (ii) that science does not rob human life of purpose, in the only sense that matters, but, on the contrary, renders many more of our purposes capable of realization; (iii) that common sense, the Christian world view, and the scientific approach agree on the criteria but differ on the standard to be employed in the evaluation of human lives; judging human lives by the standards of perfection, as Christians do, is unjustified; if we abandon this excessively high standard and replace it by an everyday one, we have no longer any reason for dismissing earthly existence as not worthwhile.

On the basis of these three points I have attempted to explain why so many people come to the conclusion that human existence is meaningless and to show that this conclusion is false. In my opinion, this pessimism rests on a combination of two beliefs, both partly true and partly false: the belief that the meaningfulness of life depends on the satisfaction of at least three conditions, and the belief that this universe satisfies none of them. The conditions are, first, that the universe is intelligible, second, that life has a purpose, and third, that all men's hopes and desires can ultimately be satisfied. It seemed to medieval Christians and it seems to many Christians today that Christianity offers a picture of the world which can meet these conditions. To many Christians and non-Christians alike it seems that the scientific world picture is incompatible with that of Christianity, therefore with the view that these three conditions are met, therefore with the view that life has a meaning. Hence they feel that they are confronted by the dilemma of accepting either a world picture incompatible with the discoveries of science or the view that life is meaningless.

I have attempted to show that the dilemma is unreal because life can be meaningful even if not all of these conditions are met. My main conclusion, therefore, is that acceptance of the scientific world picture provides no reason for saying that life is meaningless, but on the contrary every reason for saying that there are many lives which are meaningful and significant. My subsidiary conclusion is that one of the reasons frequently offered for retaining the Christian world picture, namely, that its acceptance gives us a guarantee of a meaning for human existence, is unsound. We can see that our lives can have a meaning even if we abandon it and adopt the scientific world picture instead. I have, moreover, mentioned several reasons for rejecting the Christian world picture: (i) the biblical explanations of the details of our universe are often simply false; (ii) the so-called explanations of the whole universe are incomprehensible or absurd; (iii) Christianity's low evaluation of earthly existence (which is the main cause of the belief in the meaninglessness of life) rests on the use of an unjustifiably high standard of judgment.

## NOTES

1. Count Leo Tolstoy, "A Confession," reprinted in *A Confession, The Gospel in Brief, and What I Believe*, No. 229, The World's Classics (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1940).
2. See, e.g., Edwyn Bevan, *Christianity*, pp. 211–227. See also H. J. Paton, *The Modern Predicament* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1955), pp. 103–116, 374.
3. See for instance, L. E. Elliott-Binns, *The Development of English Theology in the Later Nineteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1952), pp. 30–33.
4. See "Phaedo" (*Five Dialogues* by Plato, Everyman's Library No. 456), para. 99, p. 189.
5. "On the Ultimate Origination of Things" (*The Philosophical Writings of Leibniz*, Everyman's Library No. 905), p. 32.
6. See "Monadology" (*The Philosophical Writings of Leibniz*, Everyman's Library No. 905), para. 32–38, pp. 8–10.
7. To borrow the useful term coined by Professor D. A. T. Gasking of Melbourne University.
8. See, e.g., J. J. C. Smart, "The Existence of God," reprinted in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. by A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (London: S.C.M. Press, 1957), pp. 35–39.
9. That creation out of nothing is not a clarificatory notion becomes obvious when we learn that "in the philosophical sense" it does not imply creation at a particular time. The universe could be regarded as a creation out of nothing even if it had no beginning. See, e.g., E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd. 1957), pp. 147–155 and E. L. Mascall, *Via Media* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1956), pp. 28 ff.
10. In what follows I have drawn heavily on the work of Ryle and Toulmin. See for instance G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949), pp. 56–60 etc. and his article, "If, So, and Because," in *Philosophical Analysis* by Max Black, and S. E. Toulmin, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1953).
11. See p. 84 points (a)–(c).
12. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1922), Sect. 6.44–6.45.
13. Op. cit. p. 46. See also Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1952), esp. pp. 9–29.
14. Contemporary theologians would admit that it cannot be proved that the universe must have had a beginning. They would admit that we know it only through revelation. (See footnote No. 9.) I take it more or less for granted that Kant's attempted proof of the Thesis in his First Antinomy of Reason [Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1950), pp. 396–402] is invalid. It rests on a premise which is false: that the completion of the infinite series of succession of states, which must have preceded the present state if the world has had no beginning, is logically impossible. We can persuade ourselves to think that this infinite series is logically impossible if we insist that it is a series which must, literally, be *completed*. For the verb "to complete," as normally used, implies an activity which, in turn, implies an agent who must have *begun* the activity at some time. If an infinite series is a whole that must be *completed* then, indeed, the world must have had a beginning. But that is precisely the question at issue. If we say, as Kant does at first, "that an eternity has elapsed," we do not feel the same impossibility.

It is only when we take seriously the words "synthesis" and "completion," both of which suggest or imply "work" or "activity" and therefore "beginning," that it seems necessary that an infinity of successive states cannot have elapsed. [See also R. Crawshay-Williams, *Methods and Criteria of Reasoning* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), App. iv.]

15. See, e.g., "Is Life Worth Living?" B.B.C. Talk by the Rev. John Sutherland Bonnell in *Asking Them Questions*, Third Series, ed. by R. S. Wright (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1950).
16. See, e.g., Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, pp. 9–11. See also C. A. Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1957), p. 246, and H. J. Paton, *The Modern Predicament*, pp. 69–71.
17. For a discussion of this issue, see the eighteenth century controversy between Deists and Theists, for instance, in Sir Leslie Stephen's *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1902), pp. 112–119 and pp. 134–163. See also the attacks by Toland and Tindal on "the mysterious" in *Christianity not Mysterious and Christianity as Old as the Creation, or the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature*, resp., parts of which are reprinted in Henry Bettenson's *Doctrines of the Christian Church*, pp. 426–431. For modern views maintaining that mysteriousness is an essential element in religion, see Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, esp. pp. 25–40, and most recently M. B. Foster, *Mystery and Philosophy* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1957), esp. Chs. IV. and VI. For the view that statements about God must be nonsensical or absurd, see, e.g., H. J. Paton, op. cit. pp. 119–120, 367–369. See also "Theology and Falsification" in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. by A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (London: S.C.M. Press, 1955), pp. 96–131; also N. McPherson, "Religion as the Inexpressible," *ibid.*, esp. pp. 137–143.
18. Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith To-day* (London: Penguin Books, 1955), pp. 240–241.
19. It is difficult to feel the magnitude of this first sin unless one takes seriously the words "Behold, the man has eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and is become as one of us; and now, may he not put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever?" Genesis iii, 22.
20. See in this connection the pastoral letter of 2nd February, 1905, by Johannes Katschthaler, Prince Bishop of Salzburg on the honour due to priests, contained in *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papstums*, by Mirbt, pp. 497–499, translated and reprinted in *The Protestant Tradition*, by J. S. Whale (Cambridge: University Press, 1955), pp. 259–262.
21. How impossible it is to make sense of this story has been demonstrated beyond any doubt by Tolstoy in his famous "Conclusion of a Criticism of Dogmatic Theology," reprinted in *A Confession, The Gospel in Brief, and What I Believe*.
22. See "The Nicene Creed," "The Tridentine Profession of Faith," "The Syllabus of Errors," reprinted in *Documents of the Christian Church*, pp. 34, 373, and 380 resp.
23. See, e.g., J. S. Whale, *The Protestant Tradition*, Ch. IV., esp. pp. 48–56.
24. See *ibid.*, pp. 61 ff.
25. See "The Confession of Augsburg" esp. Articles II., IV., XVIII., XIX., XX.; "Christiana Religio Instituti," "The Westminster Confession of Faith," esp. Articles III., VI., IX., X., XI., XVI., XVII.; "The Baptist Confession of Faith," esp. Articles III., XXI., XXIII., reprinted in *Documents of the Christian Church*, pp. 294 ff., 298 ff., 344 ff., 349 ff.
26. See, e.g., his *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Eddington Memorial Lecture).
27. See, e.g., the two series of Gifford Lectures most recently published: *The Modern Predicament* by H. J. Paton (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1955), pp. 69 ff., and

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*On Selfhood and Godhood* by C. A. Campbell (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1957), pp. 231–250.

28. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 9.
29. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Devils* (London: The Penguin Classics, 1953), pp. 613–614.
30. Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession, The Gospel in Brief, and What I Believe*, The World's Classics, p. 24.
31. See, for instance, J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 171, 176–178, etc. See also Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith To-day*, p. 241.

*The Meaning and  
Value of Life*

To the questions "Is human life ever worthwhile?" and "Does (or can) human life have any meaning?" many religious thinkers have offered affirmative answers with the proviso that these answers would not be justified unless two of the basic propositions of most Western religions were true—that human life is part of a divinely ordained cosmic scheme and that after death at least some human beings will be rewarded with eternal bliss. Thus, commenting on Bertrand Russell's statement that not only must each individual human life come to an end but that life in general will eventually die out, C. H. D. Clark contrasts this "doctrine of despair" with the beauty of the Christian scheme. "If we are asked to believe that all our striving is without final consequence," then "life is meaningless and it scarcely matters how we live if all will end in the dust of death." According to Christianity, on the other hand, "each action has vital significance." Clark assures us that "God's grand design is life eternal for those who walk in the steps of Christ. Here is the one grand incentive to good living. . . . As life is seen to have purpose and meaning, men find release from despair and the fear of death" (*Christianity and Bertrand Russell*, p. 30). In a similar vein, the Jewish existentialist Emil Fackenheim claims that "whatever meaning life acquires" is derived from the encounter between God and man. The meaning thus conferred upon human life "cannot be understood in terms of some finite human purpose, supposedly more ultimate than the meeting itself. For what could be more ultimate than the Presence of God?" It is true that God is not always "near," but "times of Divine farness" are by no means devoid of meaning. "Times of Divine nearness do not light up themselves alone. Their meaning extends over all of life." There is a "dialectic between Divine nearness and Divine farness," and it points to "an eschatological future in which it is overcome" ("Judaism and the Meaning of Life").

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Among unbelievers not a few maintain that life can be worthwhile and have meaning in some humanly important sense even if the religious world view is rejected. Others, however, agree with the religious theorists that our two questions must be given negative answers if there is no God and if death means personal annihilation. Having rejected the claims of religion, they therefore conclude that life is not worthwhile and that it is devoid of meaning. These writers, to whom we shall refer here as "pessimists," do not present their judgments as being merely expressions of certain moods or feelings but as conclusions that are in some sense objectively warranted. They offer reasons for their conclusions and imply that anybody reaching a contradictory conclusion is mistaken or irrational. Most pessimists do not make any clear separation between the statements that life is not worthwhile and that life is without meaning. They usually speak of the "futility" or the "vanity" of life, and presumably they mean by this both that life is not worth living and that it has no meaning. For the time being we, too, shall treat these statements as if they were equivalent. However, later we shall see that in certain contexts it becomes important to distinguish between them.

Our main concern in this article will be to appraise pessimism as just defined. We shall not discuss either the question whether life is part of a divinely ordained plan or the question whether we survive our bodily death. Our question will be whether the pessimistic conclusions are justified if belief in God and immortality are rejected.

## SCHOPENHAUER'S ARGUMENTS

Let us begin with a study of the arguments offered by the pessimists, remembering that many of these are indirectly endorsed by religious apologists. The most systematic and probably the most influential, though in fact not the gloomiest, of the pessimists was Schopenhauer. The world, he wrote, is something which ought not to exist: the truth is that "we have not to rejoice but rather to mourn at the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; that it is something which ought not to be." It is absurd to speak of life as a gift, as so many philosophers and thoughtless people have done. "It is evident that everyone would have declined such a gift if he could have seen it and tested it beforehand." To those who assure us that life is only a lesson, we are entitled to reply: "For this very reason I wish I had been left in the peace of the all-sufficient nothing, where I would have no need of lessons or of anything else" (*The World as Will and Idea*, Vol. III, p. 390).

Schopenhauer offers numerous arguments for his conclusion. Some of these are purely metaphysical and are based on his particular system. Others, however, are of a more empirical character and are logically independent of his brand of metaphysical voluntarism. Happiness, according to Schopenhauer, is unobtainable for the vast majority of mankind. "Everything in life shows that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated or recognized

as illusion." People either fail to achieve the ends they are striving for or else they do achieve them only to find them grossly disappointing. But as soon as a man discovers that a particular goal was not really worth pursuing, his eye is set on a new one and the same illusory quest begins all over again. Happiness, accordingly, always lies in the future or in the past, and "the present may be compared to a small dark cloud which the wind drives over the sunny plain: before and behind it all is bright, only it itself always casts a shadow. The present is therefore always insufficient; but the future is uncertain, and the past is irrevocable" (*ibid.*, p. 383). Men in general, except for those sufficiently rational to become totally resigned, are constantly deluded—"now by hope, now by what was hoped for." They are taken in by "the enchantment of distance," which shows them "paradieses." These paradieses, however, vanish like "optical illusions when we have allowed ourselves to be mocked by them." The "fearful envy" excited in most men by the thought that somebody else is genuinely happy shows how unhappy they really are, whatever they pretend to others or to themselves. It is only "because they feel themselves unhappy" that "men cannot endure the sight of one whom they imagine happy."

On occasions Schopenhauer is ready to concede that some few human beings really do achieve "comparative" happiness, but this is not of any great consequence. For aside from being "rare exceptions," these happy people are really like "decoy birds"—they represent a possibility which must exist in order to lure the rest of mankind into a false sense of hope. Moreover, happiness, insofar as it exists at all, is a purely "negative" reality. We do not become aware of the greatest blessings of life—health, youth, and freedom—until we have lost them. What is called pleasure or satisfaction is merely the absence of craving or pain. But craving and pain are positive. As for the few happy days of our life—if there are any—we notice them only "after they have given place to unhappy ones."

Schopenhauer not infrequently lapsed from his doctrine of the "negative" nature of happiness and pleasure into the more common view that their status is just as "positive" as that of unhappiness and pain. But he had additional arguments which do not in any way depend on the theory that happiness and pleasure are negative. Perhaps the most important of these is the argument from the "perishableness" of all good things and the ultimate extinction of all our hopes and achievements in death. All our pleasures and joys "disappear in our hands, and we afterwards ask astonished where they have gone." Moreover, a joy which no longer exists does not "count"—it counts as little as if it had never been experienced at all:

That which *has been* exists no more; it exists as little as that which *has never been*. But of everything that exists you may say, in the next moment, that it has been. Hence something of great importance in our past is inferior to something of little importance in our present, in that the latter is a *reality*, and related to the former as something to nothing. ("The Vanity of Existence," in *The Will to Live*, p. 229)

Some people have inferred from this that the enjoyment of the present should be “the supreme object of life.” This is fallacious; for “that which in the next moment exists no more, and vanishes utterly, like a dream, can never be worth a serious effort.”

The final “judgment of nature” is destruction by death. This is “the last proof” that life is a “false path,” that all man’s wishing is “a perversity,” and that “nothing at all is worth our striving, our efforts and struggles.” The conclusion is inescapable: “All good things are vanity, the world in all its ends bankrupt, and life a business which does not cover its expenses” (*The World as Will and Idea*, Vol. III, p. 383).

## THE POINTLESSNESS OF IT ALL

Some of Schopenhauer’s arguments can probably be dismissed as the fantasies of a lonely and embittered man who was filled with contempt for mankind and who was singularly incapable of either love or friendship. His own misery, it may be plausibly said, made Schopenhauer overestimate the unhappiness of human beings. It is frequently, but not universally, true that what is hoped for is found disappointing when it is attained, and while “fearful envy” of other people’s successes is common enough, real sympathy and generosity are not quite so rare as Schopenhauer made them out to be. Furthermore, his doctrine that pleasure is negative while pain is positive, insofar as one can attach any clear meaning to it, seems glaringly false. To this it should be added, however, that some of Schopenhauer’s arguments are far from idiosyncratic and that substantially the same conclusions have been endorsed by men who were neither lonely nor embittered and who did not, as far as one can judge, lack the gift of love or friendship.

### Darrow

Clarence Darrow, one of the most compassionate men who ever lived, also concluded that life was an “awful joke.” Like Schopenhauer, Darrow offered as one of his reasons the apparent aimlessness of all that happens. “This weary old world goes on, begetting, with birth and with living and with death,” he remarked in his moving plea for the boy-murderers Loeb and Leopold, “and all of it is blind from the beginning to the end” (*Clarence Darrow—Attorney for the Damned*, A. Weinberg, ed., New York, 1957). Elsewhere he wrote: “Life is like a ship on the sea, tossed by every wave and by every wind; a ship headed for no port and no harbor, with no rudder, no compass, no pilot; simply floating for a time, then lost in the waves” (“Is Life Worth Living?,” p. 43). In addition to the aimlessness of life and the universe, there is the fact of death. “I love my friends,” wrote Darrow, “but they all must come to a tragic end.” Death is more terrible the more one is attached to things in the world. Life, he concludes, is “not worth while,” and he adds (somewhat inconsistently,

in view of what he had said earlier) that “it is an unpleasant interruption of nothing, and the best thing you can say of it is that it does not last long” (“Is the Human Race Getting Anywhere?,” p. 53).

### Tolstoy

Tolstoy, unlike Darrow, eventually came to believe in Christianity, or at least in his own idiosyncratic version of Christianity, but for a number of years the only position for which he could see any rational justification was an extreme form of pessimism. During that period (and there is reason to believe that in spite of his later protestations to the contrary, his feelings on this subject never basically changed) Tolstoy was utterly overwhelmed by the thought of his death and the death of those he cared for and, generally, by the transitory nature of all human achievements. “Today or tomorrow,” he wrote in “A Confession,” “sickness and death will come to those I love or to me; nothing will remain but stench and worms. Sooner or later my affairs, whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and I shall not exist. Then why go on making any effort?” Tolstoy likened the fate of man to that of the traveler in the Eastern tale who, pursued by an enraged beast, seeks refuge in a dry well. At the bottom of the well he sees a dragon that has opened its jaws to swallow him. To escape the enraged beast above and the dragon below, he holds onto a twig that is growing in a crack in the well. As he looks around he notices that two mice are gnawing at the stem of the twig. He realizes that very soon the twig will snap and he will fall to his doom, but at the same time he sees some drops of honey on the leaves of the branch and reaches out with his tongue to lick them. “So I too clung to the twig of life, knowing that the dragon of death was inevitably awaiting me, ready to tear me to pieces. . . . I tried to lick the honey which formerly consoled me, but the honey no longer gave me pleasure. . . . I only saw the unescapable dragon and the mice, and I could not tear my gaze from them. And this is not a fable but the real unanswerable truth.”

These considerations, according to Tolstoy, inevitably lead to the conclusion that life is a “stupid fraud,” that no “reasonable meaning” can be given to a single action or to a whole life. To the questions “What is it for?” “What then?” “Why should I live?” the answer is “Nothing can come of it,” “Nothing is worth doing,” “Life is not worthwhile.”

What ways out are available to a human being who finds himself in this “terrible position”? Judging by the conduct of the people he observed, Tolstoy relates that he could see only four possible “solutions.” The first is the way of ignorance. People who adopt this solution (chiefly women and very young and very dull people) have simply not or not yet faced the questions that were tormenting him. Once a person has fully realized what death means, this solution is not available to him. The second way is that of “Epicureanism,” which consists in admitting the “hopelessness of life” but seizing as many of life’s pleasures as possible while they are within reach. It consists in “disregarding the dragon and the mice and licking the honey in the best way, especially if much of it is around.” This, Tolstoy adds, is the

solution adopted by the majority of the people belonging to his "circle," by which he presumably means the well-to-do intellectuals of his day. Tolstoy rejects this solution because the vast majority of human beings are not well-to-do and hence have little or no honey at their disposal and also because it is a matter of accident whether one is among those who have honey or those who have not. Moreover, Tolstoy observes, it requires a special "moral dullness," which he himself lacked, to enjoy the honey while knowing the truth about death and the deprivations of the great majority of men. The third solution is suicide. Tolstoy calls this the way of "strength and energy." It is chosen by a few "exceptionally strong and consistent people." After they realize that "it is better to be dead than to be alive, and that it is best of all not to exist," they promptly end the whole "stupid joke." The means for ending it are readily at hand for everybody, but most people are too cowardly or too irrational to avail themselves of them. Finally, there is the way of "weakness." This consists in seeing the dreadful truth and clinging to life nevertheless. People of this kind lack the strength to act rationally and Tolstoy adds that he belonged to this last category.

### *Strengths of the Pessimist Position*

Is it possible for somebody who shares the pessimists' rejection of religion to reach different conclusions without being plainly irrational? Whatever reply may be possible, any intelligent and realistic person would surely have to concede that there is much truth in the pessimists' claims. That few people achieve real and lasting happiness, that the joys of life (where there are any) pass away much too soon, that totally unpredictable events frequently upset the best intentions and wreck the noblest plans—this and much more along the same lines is surely undeniable. Although one should not dogmatize that there will be no significant improvements in the future, the fate of past revolutions, undertaken to rid man of some of his apparently avoidable suffering, does not inspire great hope. The thought of death, too, even in those who are not so overwhelmed by it as Tolstoy, can be quite unendurable. Moreover, to many who have reflected on the implications of physical theory it seems plain that because of the constant increase of entropy in the universe all life anywhere will eventually die out. Forebodings of this kind moved Bertrand Russell to write his famous essay "A Free Man's Worship," in which he concluded that "all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins." Similarly, Wilhelm Ostwald observed that "in the longest run the sum of all human endeavor has no recognizable significance." Although it is disputed whether physical theory really has such gloomy implications, it would perhaps be wisest to assume that the position endorsed by Russell and Ostwald is well-founded.

## COMPARATIVE VALUE JUDGMENTS ABOUT LIFE AND DEATH

Granting the strong points in the pessimists' claims, it is still possible to detect certain confusions and dubious inferences in their arguments. To begin with, there is a very obvious inconsistency in the way writers like Darrow and Tolstoy arrive at the conclusion that death is better than life. They begin by telling us that death is something terrible because it terminates the possibility of any of the experiences we value. From this they infer that nothing is really worth doing and that death is better than life. Ignoring for the moment the claim that in view of our inevitable death nothing is "worth doing," there very plainly seems to be an inconsistency in first judging death to be such a horrible evil and in asserting later on that death is better than life. Why was death originally judged to be an evil? Surely because it is the termination of life. And if something, *y*, is bad because it is the termination of something, *x*, this can be so only if *x* is good or has positive value. If *x* were not good, the termination of *x* would not be bad. One cannot consistently have it both ways.

To this it may be answered that life did have positive value prior to one's realization of death but that once a person has become aware of the inevitability of his destruction life becomes unbearable and that this is the real issue. This point of view is well expressed in the following exchange between Cassius and Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (III.i.102–105):

- CASSIUS. Why he that cuts off twenty years of life  
Cuts off so many years of fearing death.  
BRUTUS. Grant that, and then is death a benefit:  
So are we Caesar's friends that have abridged  
His time of fearing death.

There is a very simple reply to this argument. Granting that some people after once realizing their doom cannot banish the thought of it from their minds, so much so that it interferes with all their other activities, this is neither inevitable nor at all common. It is, on the contrary, in the opinion of all except some existentialists, morbid and pathological. The realization that one will die does not in the case of most people prevent them from engaging in activities which they regard as valuable or from enjoying the things they used to enjoy. To be told that one is not living "authentically" if one does not brood about death day and night is simply to be insulted gratuitously. A person who knows that his talents are not as great as he would wish or that he is not as handsome as he would have liked to be is not usually judged to live "inauthentically," but on the contrary to be sensible if he does not constantly brood about his limitations and shortcomings and uses whatever talents he does possess to maximum advantage.

There is another and more basic objection to the claim that death is better than life. This objection applies equally to the claim that while death is better than life it would be better still not to have been born in the first place and to

the judgment that life is better than death. It should be remembered that we are here concerned with such pronouncements when they are intended not merely as the expression of certain moods but as statements which are in some sense true or objectively warranted. It may be argued that a value comparison—any judgment to the effect that *A* is better or worse than *B* or as good as *B*—makes sense only if *both A and B* are, in the relevant respect, in principle open to inspection. If somebody says, for example, that Elizabeth Taylor is a better actress than Betty Grable, this seems quite intelligible. Or, again, if it is said that life for the Jews is better in the United States than it was in Germany under the Nazis, this also seems readily intelligible. In such cases the terms of the comparison are observable or at any rate describable. These conditions are fulfilled in some cases when value comparisons are made between life and death, but they are not fulfilled in the kind of case with which Tolstoy and the pessimists are concerned. If the conception of an afterlife is intelligible, then it would make sense for a believer or for somebody who has not made up his mind to say such things as “Death cannot be worse than this life” or “I wonder if it will be any better for me after I am dead.” Achilles, in the *Iliad*, was not making a senseless comparison when he exclaimed that he would rather act

. . . as a serf of another,  
A man of little possessions, with scanty means of  
subsistence,  
Than rule as a ghostly monarch the ghosts of all  
the departed.

Again, the survivors can meaningfully say about a deceased individual “It is better (for the world) that he is dead” or the opposite. For the person himself, however, if there is no afterlife, death is not a possible object of observation or experience, and statements by him that his own life is better than, as good as, or worse than his own death, unless they are intended to be no more than expressions of certain wishes or moods, must be dismissed as senseless. At first sight the contention that in the circumstances under discussion value comparisons between life and death are senseless may seem implausible because of the widespread tendency to think of death as a shadowy kind of life—as sleep, rest, or some kind of homecoming. Such “descriptions” may be admirable as poetry or consolation, but taken literally they are simply false.

## IRRELEVANCE OF THE DISTANT FUTURE

These considerations do not, however, carry us very far. They do not show either that life is worth living or that it “has meaning.” Before tackling these problems directly, something should perhaps be said about the curious and totally arbitrary preference of the future to the present, to which writers like Tolstoy and Darrow are committed without realizing it. Darrow implies that

life would not be "futile" if it were not an endless cycle of the same kind of activities and if instead it were like a journey toward a destination. Tolstoy clearly implies that life would be worthwhile, that some of our actions at least would have a "reasonable meaning," if the present life were followed by eternal bliss. Presumably, what would make life no longer futile as far as Darrow is concerned is some feature of the destination, not merely the fact that it is a destination; and what would make life worthwhile in Tolstoy's opinion is not merely the eternity of the next life but the "bliss" which it would confer—eternal misery and torture would hardly do. About the bliss in the next life, if there is such a next life, Tolstoy shows no inclination to ask "What for?" or "So what?" But if bliss in the next life is not in need of any further justification, why should any bliss that there might be in the present life need justification?

### *The Logic of Value Judgments*

Many of the pessimists appear to be confused about the logic of value judgments. It makes sense for a person to ask about something "Is it really worthwhile?" or "Is it really worth the trouble?" if he does not regard it as intrinsically valuable or if he is weighing it against another good with which it may be in conflict. It does not make sense to ask such a question about something he regards as valuable in its own right and where there is no conflict with the attainment of any other good. (This observation, it should be noted, is quite independent of what view one takes of the logical status of intrinsic value judgments.) A person driving to the beach on a crowded Sunday, may, upon finally getting there, reflect on whether the trip was really worthwhile. Or, after undertaking a series of medical treatments, somebody may ask whether it was worth the time and the money involved. Such questions make sense because the discomforts of a car ride and the time and money spent on medical treatments are not usually judged to be valuable for their own sake. Again, a woman who has given up a career as a physician in order to raise a family may ask herself whether it was worthwhile, and in this case the question would make sense not because she regards the raising of a family as no more than a means, but because she is weighing it against another good. However, if somebody is very happy, for any number of reasons—because he is in love, because he won the Nobel prize, because his child recovered from a serious illness—and if this happiness does not prevent him from doing or experiencing anything else he regards as valuable, it would not occur to him to ask "Is it worthwhile?" Indeed, this question would be incomprehensible to him, just as Tolstoy himself would presumably not have known what to make of the question had it been raised about the bliss in the hereafter.

It is worth recalling here that we live not in the distant future but in the present and also, in a sense, in the relatively near future. To bring the subject down to earth, let us consider some everyday occurrences: A man with a toothache goes to a dentist, and the dentist helps him so that the toothache disappears. A man is falsely accused of a crime and is faced with the possibility of a severe sentence as well as with the loss of his reputation; with the help

of a devoted attorney his innocence is established, and he is acquitted. It is true that a hundred years later all of the participants in these events will be dead and none of them will *then* be able to enjoy the fruits of any of the efforts involved. But this most emphatically does not imply that the dentist's efforts were not worthwhile or that the attorney's work was not worth doing. To bring in considerations of what will or will not happen in the remote future is, in such and many other though certainly not in all human situations, totally irrelevant. Not only is the finality of death irrelevant here; equally irrelevant are the facts, if they are facts, that life is an endless cycle of the same kind of activities and that the history of the universe is not a drama with a happy ending.

This is, incidentally, also the answer to religious apologists like C. H. D. Clark who maintain that all striving is pointless if it is "without final consequence" and that "it scarcely matters how we live if all will end in the dust of death." Striving is not pointless if it achieves what it is intended to achieve even if it is without *final* consequence, and it matters a great deal how we live if we have certain standards and goals, although we cannot avoid "the dust of death."

### *The Vanished Past*

In asserting the worthlessness of life Schopenhauer remarked that "what has been exists as little as what has never been" and that "something of great importance now past is inferior to something of little importance now present." Several comments are in order here. To begin with, if Schopenhauer is right, it must work both ways: if only the present counts, then past sorrows no less than past pleasures do not "count." Furthermore, the question whether "something of great importance now past is inferior to something of little importance now present" is not, as Schopenhauer supposed, a straightforward question of fact but rather one of valuation, and different answers, none of which can be said to be mistaken, will be given by different people according to their circumstances and interests. Viktor Frankl, the founder of "logotherapy," has compared the pessimist to a man who observes, with fear and sadness, how his wall calendar grows thinner and thinner as he removes a sheet from it every day. The kind of person whom Frankl admires, on the other hand, "files each successive leaf neatly away with its predecessors" and reflects "with pride and joy" on all the richness represented by the leaves removed from the calendar. Such a person will not in old age envy the young. "'No, thank you,' he will think. 'Instead of possibilities, I have realities in my past'" (*Man's Search for Meaning*, pp. 192–193). This passage is quoted not because it contains any great wisdom but because it illustrates that we are concerned here not with judgments of fact but with value judgments and that Schopenhauer's is not the only one that is possible. Nevertheless, his remarks are, perhaps, a healthy antidote to the cheap consolation and the attempts to cover up deep and inevitable misery that are the stock in trade of a great deal of popular psychology. Although Schopenhauer's judgments about the inferior value of the past cannot be treated as objectively true propositions, they express only too well what a great many human beings are bound to

feel on certain occasions. To a man dying of cancer it is small consolation to reflect that there was a time when he was happy and flourishing; and while there are undoubtedly some old people who do not envy the young, it may be suspected that more often the kind of talk advocated by the prophets of positive thinking is a mask for envy and a defense against exceedingly painful feelings of regret and helplessness in the face of aging and death and the now-unalterable past.

## THE MEANINGS OF THE “MEANING OF LIFE”

Let us now turn to the question whether, given the rejection of belief in God and immortality, life can nevertheless have any “meaning” or “significance.” Kurt Baier has called attention to two very different senses in which people use these expressions and to the confusions that result when they are not kept apart. Sometimes when a person asks whether life has any meaning, what he wants to know is whether there is a superhuman intelligence that fashioned human beings along with other objects in the world to serve some end—whether their role is perhaps analogous to the part of an instrument (or its player) in a symphony. People who ask whether history has a meaning often use the word in the same sense. When Macbeth exclaimed that life “is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing,” he was answering this cosmic question in the negative. His point evidently was not that human life is part of a scheme designed by a superhuman idiot but that it is not part of any design. Similarly, when Fred Hoyle, in his book *The Nature of the Universe* (rev. ed., New York, 1960), turns to what he calls “the deeper issues” and remarks that we find ourselves in a “dreadful situation” in which there is “scarcely a clue as to whether our existence has any real significance,” he is using the word “significance” in this cosmic sense.

On the other hand, when we ask whether a *particular* person’s life has or had any meaning, we are usually concerned not with cosmic issues but with the question whether certain purposes are to be found *in* his life. Thus, most of us would say without hesitation that a person’s life had meaning if we knew that he devoted himself to a cause (such as the spread of Christianity or communism or the reform of mental institutions), or we would at least be ready to say that it “acquired meaning” once he became sufficiently attached to his cause. Whether we approve of what they did or not, most of us would be ready to admit—to take some random examples—that Dorothea Dix, Pasteur, Lenin, Margaret Sanger, Anthony Comstock, and Winston Churchill led meaningful lives. We seem to mean two things in characterizing such lives as meaningful: we assert, first, that the life in question had some dominant, over-all goal or goals which gave direction to a great many of the individual’s actions and, second, that these actions and possibly others not immediately related to the overriding goal were performed with a special zest that was not present before the person became attached to his goal or

that would not have been present if there had been no such goal in his life. It is not necessary, however, that a person should be devoted to a cause, in the sense just indicated, before we call his life meaningful. It is sufficient that he should have some attachments that are not too shallow. This last expression is of course rather vague, but so is the use of the word "meaning" when applied to human lives. Since the depth or shallowness of an attachment is a matter of degree, it makes perfectly good sense to speak of degrees of meaning in this context. Thus, C. G. Jung writes that in the lives of his patients there never was "sufficient meaning" (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, New York and Toronto, 1963, p. 140). There is nothing odd in such a locution, and there is equally nothing odd in saying about a man who has made a partial recovery from a deep depression that there is now again "some" meaning in his life.

Although frequently when people say about somebody that his life has or had meaning, they evidently regard this as a good thing, this is not invariably the case. One might express this point in the following way: saying that attachment to a certain goal has made a man's life meaningful is *not* tantamount to saying that the acts to which the goal has given direction are of positive value. A man might himself observe—and there would be nothing logically odd about it—"As long as I was a convinced Nazi (or communist or Christian or whatever) my life had meaning, my acts had a zest with which I have not been able to invest them since, and yet most of my actions were extremely harmful." Even while fully devoted to his cause or goal the person need not, and frequently does not, regard it as *intrinsically* valuable. If challenged he will usually justify the attachment to his goal by reference to more fundamental value judgments. Thus, somebody devoted to communism or to medical research or to the dissemination of birth-control information will in all likelihood justify his devotion in terms of the production of happiness and the reduction of suffering, and somebody devoted to Christianity will probably justify his devotion by reference to the will of God.

Let us refer to the first of the two senses we have been discussing as the "cosmic" sense and to the second as the "terrestrial" sense. (These are by no means the only senses in which philosophers and others have used the word "meaning" when they have spoken of the meaning or meaninglessness of life, but for our purposes it is sufficient to take account of these two senses.) Now if the theory of cosmic design is rejected it immediately follows that human life has no meaning in the first or cosmic sense. It does not follow in the least, however, that a particular human life is meaningless in the second, or terrestrial, sense. This conclusion has been very clearly summarized by Baier: "Your life or mine may or may not have meaning (in one sense)," he writes, "even if life as such has none (in the other). . . . The Christian view guarantees a meaning (in one sense) to every life, the scientific view [what we have simply been calling the unbeliever's position] does not in any sense" (*The Meaning of Life*, p. 28). In the terrestrial sense it will be an open question whether an individual's life has meaning or not, to be decided by the particular circumstances of his existence. It may indeed be the case that once a person comes to believe that life has no meaning in the cosmic sense his

attachment to terrestrial goals will be undermined to such an extent that his life will cease to be meaningful in the other sense as well. However, it seems very plain that this is by no means what invariably happens, and even if it did invariably happen the meaninglessness of a given person's life in the terrestrial sense would not *logically* follow from the fact, if it is a fact, that life is meaningless in the cosmic sense.

This is perhaps the place to add a few words of protest against the rhetorical exaggerations of certain theological writers. Fackenheim's statement, quoted earlier, that "whatever meaning life acquires, it derives from the encounter between God and man" is typical of many theological pronouncements. Statements of this kind are objectionable on several grounds. Let us assume that there is a God and that meetings between God and certain human beings do take place; let us also grant that activities commanded by God in these meetings "acquire meaning" by being or becoming means to the end of pleasing or obeying God. Granting all this, it does not follow that obedience of God is the only possible unifying goal. It would be preposterous to maintain that the lives of *all* unbelievers have been lacking in such goals and almost as preposterous to maintain that the lives of believers never contain unifying goals other than obedience of God. There have been devout men who were also attached to the advance of science, to the practice of medicine, or to social reform and who regarded these ends as worth pursuing independently of any divine commandments. Furthermore, there is really no good reason to grant that the life of a particular person becomes meaningful in the terrestrial sense just because human life in general has meaning in the cosmic sense. If a superhuman being has a plan in which I am included, this fact will make (or help to make) my life meaningful in the terrestrial sense only if I know the plan and approve of it and of my place in it, so that working toward the realization of the plan gives direction to my actions.

## IS HUMAN LIFE EVER WORTHWHILE?

Let us now turn to the question of whether life is ever worth living. This also appears to be denied by the pessimists when they speak of the vanity or the futility of human life. We shall see that in a sense it cannot be established that the pessimists are "mistaken," but it is also quite easy to show that in at least two senses which seem to be of importance to many people, human lives frequently are worth living. To this end, let us consider under what circumstances a person is likely to raise the question "Is my life (still) worthwhile?" and what is liable to provoke somebody into making a statement like "My life has ceased to be worth living." We saw in an earlier section that when we say of certain acts, such as the efforts of a dentist or a lawyer, that they were worthwhile we are claiming that they achieved certain goals. Something similar seems to be involved when we say that a person's life is (still) worthwhile or worth living. We seem to be making two assertions: first, that the person

has some goals (other than merely to be dead or to have his pains eased) which do not seem to him to be trivial and, second, that there is some genuine possibility that he will attain these goals. These observations are confirmed by various systematic studies of people who contemplated suicide, of others who unsuccessfully attempted suicide, and of situations in which people did commit suicide. When the subjects of these studies declared that their lives were no longer worth living they generally meant either that there was nothing left in their lives about which they seriously cared or that there was no real likelihood of attaining any of the goals that mattered to them. It should be noted that in this sense an individual may well be mistaken in his assertion that his life is or is not worthwhile any longer: he may, for example, mistake a temporary indisposition for a more permanent loss of interest, or, more likely, he may falsely estimate his chances of achieving the ends he wishes to attain.

### *Different Senses of "Worthwhile"*

According to the account given so far, one is saying much the same thing in declaring a life to be worthwhile and in asserting that it has meaning in the "terrestrial" sense of the word. There is, however, an interesting difference. When we say that a person's life has meaning (in the terrestrial sense) we are not committed to the claim that the goal or goals to which he is devoted have any positive value. (This is a slight oversimplification, assuming greater uniformity in the use of "meaning of life" than actually exists, but it will not seriously affect any of the controversial issues discussed here.) The question "As long as his life was dedicated to the spread of communism it had meaning to him, but was it really meaningful?" seems to be senseless. We are inclined to say, "If his life had meaning to him, then it had meaning—that's all there is to it." We are not inclined (or we are much less inclined) to say something of this kind when we speak of the worth of a person's life. We might say—for example, of someone like Eichmann—"While he was carrying out the extermination program, his life *seemed* worthwhile to him, but since his goal was so horrible, his life *was not* worthwhile." One might perhaps distinguish between a "subjective" and an "objective" sense of "worthwhile." In the subjective sense, saying that a person's life is worthwhile simply means that he is attached to some goals which he does not consider trivial and that these goals are attainable for him. In declaring that somebody's life is worthwhile in the objective sense, one is saying that he is attached to certain goals which are both attainable and of positive value.

It may be held that unless one accepts some kind of rationalist or intuitionist view of fundamental value judgments one would have to conclude that in the objective sense of "worthwhile" no human life (and indeed no human action) could ever be shown to be worthwhile. There is no need to enter here into a discussion of any controversial questions about the logical status of fundamental value judgments. But it may be pointed out that somebody who favors a subjectivist or emotivist account can quite consistently allow for the distinction between ends that only seem to have positive value

and those that really do. To mention just one way in which this could be done: one may distinguish between ends that would be approved by rational and sympathetic human beings and those that do not carry such an endorsement. One may then argue that when we condemn such a life as Eichmann's as not being worthwhile we mean not that the ends to which he devoted himself possess some non-natural characteristic of badness but that no rational or sympathetic person would approve of them.

### *The Pessimists' Special Standards*

The unexciting conclusion of this discussion is that some human lives are at certain times not worthwhile in either of the two senses we have distinguished, that some are worthwhile in the subjective but not in the objective sense, some in the objective but not in the subjective sense, and some are worthwhile in both senses. The unexcitingness of this conclusion is not a reason for rejecting it, but some readers may question whether it meets the challenge of the pessimists. The pessimist, it may be countered, surely does not deny the plain fact that human beings are on occasions attached to goals which do not seem to them trivial, and it is also not essential to his position to deny (and most pessimists do not in fact deny) that these goals are sometimes attainable. The pessimist may even allow that in a superficial ("immediate") sense the goals which people try to achieve are of positive value, but he would add that because our lives are not followed by eternal bliss they are not "really" or "ultimately" worthwhile. If this is so, then the situation may be characterized by saying that the ordinary man and the pessimist do not mean the same by "worthwhile," or that they do mean the same in that both use it as a positive value expression but that their standards are different: the standards of the pessimist are very much more demanding than those of most ordinary people.

Anybody who agrees that death is final will have to concede that the pessimist is not mistaken in his contention that judged by *his* standards, life is never worthwhile. However, the pessimist is mistaken if he concludes, as frequently happens, that life is not worthwhile by ordinary standards because it is not worthwhile by his standards. Furthermore, setting aside the objection mentioned earlier (that there is something arbitrary about maintaining that eternal bliss makes life worthwhile but not allowing this role to bliss in the present life), one may justifiably ask why one should abandon ordinary standards in favor of those of the pessimist. Ordinarily, when somebody changes standards (for example, when a school raises or lowers its standards of admission) such a change can be supported by reasons. But how can the pessimist justify his special standards? It should be pointed out here that our ordinary standards do something for us which the pessimist's standards do not: they guide our choices, and as long as we live we can hardly help making choices. It is true that in one type of situation the pessimist's standards also afford guidance—namely, in deciding whether to go on living. It is notorious, however, that whether or not they are, by their own standards, rational in this, most pessimists do not commit suicide. They are then

faced with much the same choices as other people. In these situations their own demanding standards are of no use, and in fact they avail themselves of the ordinary standards. Schopenhauer, for example, believed that if he had hidden his antireligious views he would have had no difficulty in obtaining an academic appointment and other worldly honors. He may have been mistaken in this belief, but in any event his actions indicate that he regarded intellectual honesty as worthwhile in a sense in which worldly honors were not. Again, when Darrow had the choice between continuing as counsel for the Chicago and North Western Railway and taking on the defense of Eugene V. Debs and his harassed and persecuted American Railway Union, he did not hesitate to choose the latter, apparently regarding it as worthwhile to go to the assistance of the suppressed and not worthwhile to aid the suppressor. In other words, although no human action is worthwhile, some human actions and presumably some human lives are less unworthy than others.

## IS THE UNIVERSE BETTER WITH HUMAN LIFE THAN WITHOUT IT?

We have not—at least not explicitly—discussed the claims of Schopenhauer, Eduard von Hartmann, and other pessimists that the nonexistence of the world would be better than its existence, by which they mean that a world without human life would be better than one with it.

### *Arguments of a Phenomenologist*

Some writers do not think that life can be shown to have meaning in any philosophically significant sense unless an affirmative answer to this question can be justified. Thus, in his booklet *Der Sinn unseres Daseins* the German phenomenologist Hans Reiner distinguishes between the everyday question about what he calls the “need-conditioned” meaning of life, which arises only for a person who is already in existence and has certain needs and desires, and the question about the meaning of human life in general. The latter question arises in concrete form when a responsible person is faced with the *Zeugungsproblem*—the question whether he should bring a child into the world. Reiner allows that a person’s life has meaning in the former or “merely subjective” sense as long as his ordinary goals (chiefly his desire for happiness) are attained. This, however, does not mean that his life has an “objective” or “existential” (*seinshaft*) meaning—a significance or meaning which “attaches to life as such” and which, unlike the need-conditioned meaning, cannot be destroyed by any accident of fate. The philosopher, according to Reiner, is primarily concerned with the question of whether life has meaning in this objective or existential sense. “Our search for the meaning of our life,” Reiner writes, “is identical with the search for a logically compelling reason (*einen einsichtigen Grund*) why it is better for us to exist than not to exist” (*Der*

*Sinn unseres Daseins*, p. 27). Again, the real question is “whether it is better that mankind should exist than that there should be a world without any human life” (*ibid.*, p. 31). It may be questioned whether this is what anybody normally means when he asks whether life has any meaning, but Reiner certainly addresses himself to one of the questions raised by Schopenhauer and other pessimists that ought to be discussed here.

Reiner believes that he can provide a “logically compelling reason” why a world with human life is better than one without it. He begins by pointing out that men differ from animals by being, among other things, “moral individuals.” To be a moral individual is to be part of the human community and to be actively concerned in the life of other human beings. It is indeed undeniable that people frequently fail to bring about the ends of morally inspired acts or wishes, but phenomenological analysis discloses that “the real moral value and meaning” of an act does not depend on the attainment of the “external goal.” As Kant correctly pointed out, the decisive factor is “the good will,” the moral intent or attitude. It is here that we find the existential meaning of life: “Since that which is morally good contains its meaning and value within itself, it follows that it is intrinsically worthwhile. The existence of what is morally good is therefore better than its nonexistence” (*ibid.*, pp. 54–55). But the existence of what is morally good is essentially connected with the existence of free moral individuals, and hence it follows that the existence of human beings as moral agents is better than their nonexistence.

Unlike happiness, which constitutes the meaning of life in the everyday or need-conditioned sense, the morally good does not depend on the accidents of life. It is not within a person’s power to be happy, but it is “essentially” (*grundsätzlich*) in everybody’s power to do what is good. Furthermore, while all happiness is subjective and transitory, leaving behind it no more than a “melancholy echo,” the good has eternal value. Nobody would dream of honoring and respecting a person for his happiness or prosperity. On the other hand, we honor every good deed and the expression of every moral attitude, even if it took place in a distant land and among a foreign people. If we discover a good act or a good attitude in an enemy we nevertheless respect it and cannot help deriving a certain satisfaction from its existence. The same is true of good deeds carried out in ages long past. In all this the essentially timeless nature of morality becomes evident. Good deeds cease to exist as historical events only; their value, on the other hand, has eternal reality and is collected as an indestructible “fund.” This may be a metaphysical statement, but it is not a piece of “metaphysical speculation.” It simply makes explicit what the experience of the morally good discloses to phenomenological analysis (*ibid.*, pp. 55–57).

### *Replies to Reiner*

There is a great deal in this presentation with which one could take issue. If one is not misled by the image of the ever-growing, indestructible “fund,” one may wonder, for example, what could be meant by claiming that the value of a good

deed is "eternal," other than that most human beings tend to approve of such an action regardless of when or where it took place. However, we are here concerned primarily with the question whether Reiner has met the challenge of the pessimists, and it seems clear that he has not. A pessimist like Schopenhauer or Darrow might provisionally grant the correctness of Reiner's phenomenological analysis of morality but still offer the following rejoinder: The inevitable misery of all or nearly all human beings is so great that even if in the course of their lives they have a chance to preserve their inner moral natures or their good will, the continued torture to which their lives condemn them would not be justified. Given the pessimist's estimate of human life, this is surely not an unreasonable rejoinder. Even without relying on the pessimist's description of human life, somebody while accepting Reiner's phenomenological analysis might reach the opposite conclusion. He might, for example, share the quietist strain of Schopenhauer's teachings and object to the whole hustle and bustle of life, concluding that the "peace of the all-sufficient nothing"—or, more literally, a universe without human life—was better in spite of the fact that moral deeds could not then be performed. Since he admits the "facts" of morality on which Reiner bases his case but considers the peace of the all-sufficient nothing more valuable than morality, it is not easy to see how an appeal to the latter would show him to be mistaken. What phenomenological analysis has not disclosed, to Reiner or, as far as is known, to anybody else, is that doing good is the only or necessarily the greatest value.

### *Why the Pessimist Cannot Be Answered*

The conclusion suggests itself that the pessimist cannot here be refuted, not because what he says is true or even because we do not know who is right and who is wrong but because the question whether a universe with human life is better than one without it does not have any clear meaning unless it is interpreted as a request for a statement of personal preference. The situation seems to be somewhat similar to what we found in the case of the question "Is my life better than my death?" when asked in certain circumstances. In some contexts indeed when we talk about human life in general, the word "better" has a reasonably clear meaning. Thus, if it is maintained that life for the human race will be better than it is now after cancer and mental illness have been conquered, or that human life will be better (or worse) after religion has disappeared, we understand fairly well what is meant, what facts would decide the issue either way. However, we do not really know what would count as evidence for or against the statement "The existence of human life as such is better than its nonexistence." Sometimes it is claimed that the question has a fairly clear meaning, namely, whether happiness outweighs unhappiness. Thus, von Hartmann supports his answer that the nonexistence of human life is better than its existence, that in fact an inanimate world would be better than one with life, with the argument that as we descend the scale of civilization and "sensitivity," we reach ever lower levels of misery. "The individuals of the lower and poorer classes and of ruder nations," he writes, "are happier than

those of the elevated and wealthier classes and of civilized nations, not indeed because they are poorer and have to endure more want and privations, but because they are coarser and duller" (*Philosophy of the Unconscious*, Vol. III, p. 76). The "brutes," similarly, are "happier (i.e., less miserable)" than man, because "the excess of pain which an animal has to bear is less than that which a man has to bear." The same principle holds within the world of animals and plants:

How much more painful is the life of the more finely-feeling horse compared with that of the obtuse pig, or with that of the proverbially happy fish in the water, its nervous system being of a grade so far inferior! As the life of a fish is more enviable than that of a horse, so is the life of an oyster than that of a fish, and the life of a plant than that of an oyster. (*ibid.*)

The conclusion is inevitable: the best or least undesirable form of existence is reached when, finally, we "descend beneath the threshold of consciousness"; for only there do we "see individual pain entirely disappear" (*Philosophy of the Unconscious*, Vol. III, pp. 76–77). Schopenhauer, also, addressing himself directly to the "Zeugungsproblem," reaches a negative answer on the ground that unhappiness usually or necessarily outweighs happiness. "Could the human race continue to exist," he asks (in *Parerga und Paralipomena*, Vol. II, pp. 321–322), if "the generative act were . . . an affair of pure rational reflection? Would not rather everyone have so much compassion for the coming generation as to prefer to spare it the burden of existence, or at least be unwilling to take on himself the responsibility of imposing such a burden in cold blood?" In these passages Schopenhauer and von Hartmann assume that in the question "Is a world with human life better than one without human life?" the word "better" must be construed in a hedonistic or utilitarian sense—and the same is true of several other philosophers who do not adopt their pessimistic answer. However, while one may *stipulate* such a sense for "better" in this context, it is clear that this is *not* what is meant prior to the stipulation. Spinoza, for example, taught that the most miserable form of existence is preferable to nonexistence. Perhaps few who have directly observed the worst agonies and tortures that may be the lot of human beings or of animals would subscribe to this judgment, but Spinoza can hardly be accused of a self-contradictory error. Again, Nietzsche's philosophy is usually and quite accurately described as an affirmation of life, but Nietzsche was very careful not to play down the horrors of much of life. While he did not endorse Schopenhauer's value judgments, he thought that, by and large, Schopenhauer had not been far wrong in his description of the miseries of the human scene. In effect Nietzsche maintained that even though unhappiness is more prevalent than happiness, the existence of life is nevertheless better than its nonexistence, and this surely is not a self-contradiction.

It is important to point out what does not follow from the admission that in a nonarbitrary sense of "better," the existence of the human race cannot be shown to be better than its nonexistence: It does not follow that I or anybody else cannot or should not prefer the continued existence of the human race

to its nonexistence or my own life to my death, and it does not follow that I or anybody else cannot or should not enjoy himself or that I or anybody else is "irrational" in any of these preferences. It is also impossible to prove that in some nonarbitrary sense of "better," coffee with cream is better than black coffee, but it does not follow that I cannot or should not prefer or enjoy it or that I am irrational in doing so. There is perhaps something a trifle absurd and obsessive in the need for a "proof" that the existence of life is better than its nonexistence. It resembles the demand to have it "established by argument" that love is better than hate.

Perhaps it would be helpful to summarize the main conclusions reached in this essay:

(1) In certain familiar senses of "meaning," which are not usually regarded as trivial, an action or a human life can have meaning quite independently of whether there is a God or whether we shall live forever.

(2) Writers like Tolstoy, who, because of the horror that death inspires, conclude that death is better than life, are plainly inconsistent. Moreover, the whole question of whether my life is better than my death, unless it is a question about my preference, seems to be devoid of sense.

(3) Those who argue that no human action can be worthwhile because we all must eventually die ignore what may be called the "short-term context" of much of our lives.

(4) Some human lives are worthwhile in one or both of the two senses in which "worthwhile" is commonly used, when people raise the question of whether a given person's life is worthwhile. The pessimists who judge human life by more demanding standards are not mistaken when they deny that by *their* standards no human life is ever worthwhile. However, they are guilty of a fallacious inference if they conclude that for this reason no human life can be worthwhile by the usual standards. Nor is it clear why anybody should embrace their standards in the place of those commonly adopted.

(5) It appears that the pessimists cannot be answered if in order to answer them one has to be able to prove that in some nonarbitrary sense of the word "better," the existence of life is better than its nonexistence. But this admission does not have any of the gloomy consequences which it is sometimes believed to entail.

*The Meaning of Life*

The question whether life has any meaning is difficult to interpret, and the more one concentrates his critical faculty on it the more it seems to elude him, or to evaporate as any intelligible question. One wants to turn it aside, as a source of embarrassment, as something that, if it cannot be abolished, should at least be decently covered. And yet I think any reflective person recognizes that the question it raises is important, and that it ought to have a significant answer.

If the idea of meaningfulness is difficult to grasp in this context, so that we are unsure what sort of thing would amount to answering the question, the idea of meaninglessness is perhaps less so. If, then, we can bring before our minds a clear image of meaningless existence, then perhaps we can take a step toward coping with our original question by seeing to what extent our lives, as we actually find them, resemble that image, and draw such lessons as we are able to from the comparison.

### MEANINGLESS EXISTENCE

A perfect image of meaninglessness, of the kind we are seeking, is found in the ancient myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus, it will be remembered, betrayed divine secrets to mortals, and for this he was condemned by the gods to roll a stone to the top of a hill, the stone then immediately to roll back down, again to be pushed to the top by Sisyphus, to roll down once more, and so on again and again, *forever*. Now in this we have the picture of meaningless, pointless toil, of a meaningless existence that is absolutely *never* redeemed. It is not even redeemed by a death that, if it were to accomplish nothing more,

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would at least bring this idiotic cycle to a close. If we were invited to imagine Sisyphus struggling for awhile and accomplishing nothing, perhaps eventually falling from exhaustion, so that we might suppose him then eventually turning to something having some sort of promise, then the meaninglessness of that chapter of his life would not be so stark. It would be a dark and dreadful dream, from which he eventually awakens to sunlight and reality. But he does not awaken, for there is nothing for him to awaken to. His repetitive toil is his life and reality, and it goes on forever, and it is without any meaning whatever. Nothing ever comes of what he is doing, except simply, more of the same. Not by one step, nor by a thousand, nor by ten thousand does he even expiate by the smallest token the sin against the gods that led him into this fate. Nothing comes of it, nothing at all.

This ancient myth has always enchanted men, for countless meanings can be read into it. Some of the ancients apparently thought it symbolized the perpetual rising and setting of the sun, and others the repetitious crashing of the waves upon the shore. Probably the commonest interpretation is that it symbolizes man's eternal struggle and unquenchable spirit, his determination always to try once more in the face of overwhelming discouragement. This interpretation is further supported by that version of the myth according to which Sisyphus was commanded to roll the stone *over* the hill, so that it would finally roll down the other side, but was never quite able to make it.

I am not concerned with rendering or defending any interpretation of this myth, however. I have cited it only for the one element it does unmistakably contain, namely, that of a repetitious, cyclic activity that never comes to anything. We could contrive other images of this that would serve just as well, and no myth-makers are needed to supply the materials of it. Thus, we can imagine two persons transporting a stone—or even a precious gem, it does not matter—back and forth, relay style. One carries it to a near or distant point where it is received by the other; it is returned to its starting point, there to be recovered by the first, and the process is repeated over and over. Except in this relay nothing counts as winning, and nothing brings the contest to any close, each step only leads to a repetition of itself. Or we can imagine two groups of prisoners, one of them engaged in digging a prodigious hole in the ground that is no sooner finished than it is filled in again by the other group, the latter then digging a new hole that is at once filled in by the first group, and so on and on endlessly.

Now what stands out in all such pictures as oppressive and dejecting is not that the beings who enact these roles suffer any torture or pain, for it need not be assumed that they do. Nor is it that their labors are great, for they are no greater than the labors commonly undertaken by most men most of the time. According to the original myth, the stone is so large that Sisyphus never quite gets it to the top and must groan under every step, so that his enormous labor is all for nought. But this is not what appalls. It is not that his great struggle comes to nothing, but that his existence itself is without meaning. Even if we suppose, for example, that the stone is but a pebble that can be carried effortlessly, or that the holes dug by the prisoners are but small

ones, not the slightest meaning is introduced into their lives. The stone that Sisyphus moves to the top of the hill, whether we think of it as large or small, still rolls back every time, and the process is repeated forever. Nothing comes of it, and the work is simply pointless. That is the element of the myth that I wish to capture.

Again, it is not the fact that the labors of Sisyphus continue forever that deprives them of meaning. It is, rather, the implication of this: that they come to nothing. The image would not be changed by our supposing him to push a different stone up every time, each to roll down again. But if we supposed that these stones, instead of rolling back to their places as if they had never been moved, were assembled at the top of the hill and there incorporated, say, in a beautiful and enduring temple, then the aspect of meaninglessness would disappear. His labors would then have a point, something would come of them all, and although one could perhaps still say it was not worth it, one could not say that the life of Sisyphus was devoid of meaning altogether. Meaningfulness would at least have made an appearance, and we could see what it was.

That point will need remembering. But in the meantime, let us note another way in which the image of meaninglessness can be altered by making only a very slight change. Let us suppose that the gods, while condemning Sisyphus to the fate just described, at the same time, as an afterthought, waxed perversely merciful by implanting in him a strange and irrational impulse; namely, a compulsive impulse to roll stones. We may if we like, to make this more graphic, suppose they accomplish this by implanting in him some substance that has this effect on his character and drives. I call this perverse, because from our point of view there is clearly no reason why anyone should have a persistent and insatiable desire to do something so pointless as that. Nevertheless, suppose that is Sisyphus' condition. He has but one obsession, which is to roll stones, and it is an obsession that is only for the moment appeased by his rolling them—he no sooner gets a stone rolled to the top of the hill than he is restless to roll up another.

Now it can be seen why this little afterthought of the gods, which I called perverse, was also in fact merciful. For they have by this device managed to give Sisyphus precisely what he wants—by making him want precisely what they inflict on him. However it may appear to us, Sisyphus' fate now does not appear to him as a condemnation, but the very reverse. His one desire in life is to roll stones, and he is absolutely guaranteed its endless fulfillment. Where otherwise he might profoundly have wished surcease, and even welcomed the quiet of death to release him from endless boredom and meaninglessness, his life is now filled with mission and meaning, and he seems to himself to have been given an entry to heaven. Nor need he even fear death, for the gods have promised him an endless opportunity to indulge his single purpose, without concern or frustration. He will be able to roll stones *forever*.

What we need to mark most carefully at this point is that the picture with which we began has not really been changed in the least by adding this supposition. Exactly the same things happen as before. The only change is

in Sisyphus' view of them. The picture before was the image of meaningless activity and existence. It was created precisely to be an image of that. It has not lost that meaninglessness, it has now gained not the least shred of meaningfulness. The stones still roll back as before, each phase of Sisyphus' life still exactly resembles all the others, the task is never completed, nothing comes of it, no temple ever begins to rise, and all this cycle of the same pointless thing over and over goes on forever in this picture as in the other. The *only* thing that has happened is this: Sisyphus has been reconciled to it, and indeed more, he has been led to embrace it. Not, however, by reason or persuasion, but by nothing more rational than the potency of a new substance in his veins.

## THE MEANINGLESSNESS OF LIFE

I believe the foregoing provides a fairly clear content to the idea of meaninglessness and, through it, some hint of what meaningfulness, in this sense, might be. Meaninglessness is essentially endless pointlessness, and meaningfulness is therefore the opposite. Activity, and even long, drawn out and repetitive activity, has a meaning if it has some significant culmination, some more or less lasting end that can be considered to have been the direction and purpose of the activity. But the descriptions so far also provide something else; namely, the suggestion of how an existence that is objectively meaningless, in this sense, can nevertheless acquire a meaning for him whose existence it is.

Now let us ask: Which of these pictures does life in fact resemble? And let us not begin with our own lives, for here both our prejudices and wishes are great, but with the life in general that we share with the rest of creation. We shall find, I think, that it all has a certain pattern, and that this pattern is by now easily recognized.

We can begin anywhere, only saving human existence for our last consideration. We can, for example, begin with any animal. It does not matter where we begin, because the result is going to be exactly the same.

Thus, for example, there are caves in New Zealand, deep and dark, whose floors are quiet pools and whose walls and ceilings are covered with soft light. As one gazes in wonder in the stillness of these caves it seems that the Creator has reproduced there in microcosm the heavens themselves, until one scarcely remembers the enclosing presence of the walls. As one looks more closely, however, the scene is explained. Each dot of light identifies an ugly worm, whose luminous tail is meant to attract insects from the surrounding darkness. As from time to time one of these insects draws near it becomes entangled in a sticky thread lowered by the worm, and is eaten. This goes on month after month, the blind worm lying there in the barren stillness waiting to entrap an occasional bit of nourishment that will only sustain it to another bit of nourishment until . . . Until what? What great thing awaits

all this long and repetitious effort and makes it worthwhile? Really nothing. The larva just transforms itself finally to a tiny winged adult that lacks even mouth parts to feed and lives only a day or two. These adults, as soon as they have mated and laid eggs, are themselves caught in the threads and are devoured by the cannibalist worms, often without having ventured into the day, the only point to their existence having now been fulfilled. This has been going on for millions of years, and to no end other than that the same meaningless cycle may continue for another millions of years.

All living things present essentially the same spectacle. The larva of a certain cicada burrows in the darkness of the earth for seventeen years, through season after season, to emerge finally into the daylight for a brief flight, lay its eggs, and die—this all to repeat itself during the next seventeen years, and so on to eternity. We have already noted, in another connection, the struggles of fish, made only that others may do the same after them and that this cycle, having no other point than itself, may never cease. Some birds span an entire side of the globe each year and then return, only to insure that others may follow the same incredibly long path again and again. One is led to wonder what the point of it all is, with what great triumph this ceaseless effort, repeating itself through millions of years, might finally culminate, and why it should go on and on for so long, accomplishing nothing, getting nowhere. But then one realizes that there is no point to it at all, that it really culminates in nothing, that each of these cycles, so filled with toil, is to be followed only by more of the same. The point of any living thing's life is, evidently, nothing but life itself.

This life of the world thus presents itself to our eyes as a vast machine, feeding on itself, running on and on forever to nothing. And we are part of that life. To be sure, we are not just the same, but the differences are not so great as we like to think; many are merely invented, and none really cancels the kind of meaninglessness that we found in Sisyphus and that we find all around, wherever anything lives. We are conscious of our activity. Our goals, whether in any significant sense we choose them or not, are things of which we are at least partly aware and can therefore in some sense appraise. More significantly, perhaps, men have a history, as other animals do not, such that each generation does not precisely resemble all those before. Still, if we can in imagination disengage our wills from our lives and disregard the deep interest each man has in his own existence, we shall find that they do not so little resemble the existence of Sisyphus. We toil after goals, most of them—indeed every single one of them—of transitory significance and, having gained one of them, we immediately set forth for the next, as if that one had never been, with this next one being essentially more of the same. Look at a busy street any day, and observe the throng going hither and thither. To what? Some office or shop, where the same things will be done today as were done yesterday, and are done now so they may be repeated tomorrow. And if we think that, unlike Sisyphus, these labors do have a point, that they culminate in something lasting and, independently of our own deep interests in them, very worthwhile, then we simply have not considered the thing closely enough. Most such effort is directed only to the establishment and perpetuation of home and

family; that is, to the begetting of others who will follow in our steps to do more of the same. Each man's life thus resembles one of Sisyphus' climbs to the summit of his hill, and each day of it one of his steps; the difference is that whereas Sisyphus himself returns to push the stone up again, we leave this to our children. We at one point imagined that the labors of Sisyphus finally culminated in the creation of a temple, but for this to make any difference it had to be a temple that would at least endure, adding beauty to the world for the remainder of time. Our achievements, even though they are often beautiful, are mostly bubbles; and those that do last, like the sand-swept pyramids, soon become mere curiosities while around them the rest of mankind continues its perpetual toting of rocks, only to see them roll down. Nations are built upon the bones of their founders and pioneers, but only to decay and crumble before long, their rubble then becoming the foundation for others directed to exactly the same fate. The picture of Sisyphus is the picture of existence of the individual man, great or unknown, of nations, of the race of men, and of the very life of the world.

On a country road one sometimes comes upon the ruined hulks of a house and once extensive buildings, all in collapse and spread over with weeds. A curious eye can in imagination reconstruct from what is left a once warm and thriving life, filled with purpose. There was the hearth, where a family once talked, sang, and made plans; there were the rooms, where people loved, and babes were born to a rejoicing mother; there are the musty remains of a sofa, infested with bugs, once bought at a dear price to enhance an ever-growing comfort, beauty, and warmth. Every small piece of junk fills the mind with what once, not long ago, was utterly real, with children's voices, plans made, and enterprises embarked upon. That is how these stones of Sisyphus were rolled up, and that is how they became incorporated into a beautiful temple, and that temple is what now lies before you. Meanwhile other buildings, institutions, nations, and civilizations spring up all around, only to share the same fate before long. And if the question "What for?" is now asked, the answer is clear: so that just this may go on forever.

The two pictures—of Sisyphus and of our own lives, if we look at them from a distance—are in outline the same and convey to the mind the same image. It is not surprising, then, that men invent ways of denying it, their religions proclaiming a heaven that does not crumble, their hymnals and prayer books declaring a significance to life of which our eyes provide no hint whatever.<sup>1</sup> Even our philosophies portray some permanent and lasting good at which all may aim, from the changeless forms invented by Plato to the beatific vision of St. Thomas and the ideals of permanence contrived by the moderns. When these fail to convince, then earthly ideals such as universal justice and brotherhood are conjured up to take their places and give meaning to man's seemingly endless pilgrimage, some final state that will be ushered in when the last obstacle is removed and the last stone pushed to the hilltop. No one believes, of course, that any such state will be final, or even wants it to be in case it means that human existence would then cease to be a struggle; but in the meantime such ideas serve a very real need.

## THE MEANING OF LIFE

We noted that Sisyphus' existence would have meaning if there were some point to his labors, if his efforts ever culminated in something that was not just an occasion for fresh labors of the same kind. But that is precisely the meaning it lacks. And human existence resembles his in that respect. Men do achieve things—they scale their towers and raise their stones to their hilltops—but every such accomplishment fades, providing only an occasion for renewed labors of the same kind.

But here we need to note something else that has been mentioned, but its significance not explored, and that is the state of mind and feeling with which such labors are undertaken. We noted that if Sisyphus had a keen and unappeasable desire to be doing just what he found himself doing, then, although his life would in no way be changed, it would nevertheless have a meaning for him. It would be an irrational one, no doubt, because the desire itself would be only the product of the substance in his veins, and not any that reason could discover, but a meaning nevertheless.

And would it not, in fact, be a meaning incomparably better than the other? For let us examine again the first kind of meaning it could have. Let us suppose that, without having any interest in rolling stones, as such, and finding this, in fact, a galling toil, Sisyphus did nevertheless have a deep interest in raising a temple, one that would be beautiful and lasting. And let us suppose he succeeded in this, that after ages of dreadful toil, all directed at this final result, he did at last complete his temple, such that now he could say his work was done, and he could rest and forever enjoy the result. Now what? What picture now presents itself to our minds? It is precisely the picture of infinite boredom! Of Sisyphus doing nothing ever again, but contemplating what he has already wrought and can no longer add anything to, and contemplating it for an eternity! Now in this picture we have a meaning for Sisyphus' existence, a point for his prodigious labor, because we have put it there; yet, at the same time, that which is really worthwhile seems to have slipped away entirely. Where before we were presented with the nightmare of eternal and pointless activity, we are now confronted with the hell of its eternal absence.

Our second picture, then, wherein we imagined Sisyphus to have had inflicted on him the irrational desire to be doing just what he found himself doing, should not have been dismissed so abruptly. The meaning that picture lacked was no meaning that he or anyone could crave, and the strange meaning it had was perhaps just what we were seeking.

At this point, then, we can reintroduce what has been until now, it is hoped, resolutely pushed aside in an effort to view our lives and human existence with objectivity; namely, our own wills, our deep interest in what we find ourselves doing. If we do this we find that our lives do indeed still resemble that of Sisyphus, but that the meaningfulness they thus lack is precisely the meaningfulness of infinite boredom. At the same time, the strange meaningfulness they possess is that of the inner compulsion to be doing just

what we were put here to do, and to go on doing it forever. This is the nearest we may hope to get to heaven, but the redeeming side of that fact is that we do thereby avoid a genuine hell.

If the builders of a great and flourishing ancient civilization could somehow return now to see archaeologists unearthing the trivial remnants of what they had once accomplished with such effort—see the fragments of pots and vases, a few broken statues, and such tokens of another age and greatness—they could indeed ask themselves what the point of it all was, if this is all it finally came to. Yet, it did not seem so to them then, for it was just the building, and not what was finally built, that gave their life meaning. Similarly, if the builders of the ruined home and farm that I described a short while ago could be brought back to see what is left, they would have the same feelings. What we construct in our imaginations as we look over these decayed and rusting pieces would reconstruct itself in their very memories, and certainly with unspeakable sadness. The piece of a sled at our feet would revive in them a warm Christmas. And what rich memories would there be in the broken crib? And the weed-covered remains of a fence would reproduce the scene of a great herd of livestock, so laboriously built up over so many years. What was it all worth, if this is the final result? Yet, again, it did not seem so to them through those many years of struggle and toil, and they did not imagine they were building a Gibraltar. The things to which they bent their backs day after day, realizing one by one their ephemeral plans, were precisely the things in which their wills were deeply involved, precisely the things in which their interests lay, and there was no need then to ask questions. There is no more need of them now—the day was sufficient to itself, and so was the life.

This is surely the way to look at all of life—at one's own life, and each day and moment it contains; of the life of a nation; of the species; of the life of the world; and of everything that breathes. Even the glow worms I described, whose cycles of existence over the millions of years seem so pointless when looked at by us, will seem entirely different to us if we can somehow try to view their existence from within. Their endless activity, which gets nowhere, is just what it is their will to pursue. This is its whole justification and meaning. Nor would it be any salvation to the birds who span the globe every year, back and forth, to have a home made for them in a cage with plenty of food and protection, so that they would not have to migrate anymore. It would be their condemnation, for it is the doing that counts for them, and not what they hope to win by it. Flying these prodigious distances, never ending, is what it is in their veins to do, exactly as it was in Sisyphus' veins to roll stones, without end, after the gods had waxed merciful and implanted this in him.

A human being no sooner draws his first breath than he responds to the will that is in him to live. He no more asks whether it will be worthwhile, or whether anything of significance will come of it, than the worms and the birds. The point of his living is simply to be living, in the manner that it is his nature to be living. He goes through his life building his castles, each of these beginning to fade into time as the next is begun; yet, it would be

no salvation to rest from all this. It would be a condemnation, and one that would in no way be redeemed were he able to gaze upon the things he has done, even if these were beautiful and absolutely permanent, as they never are. What counts is that one should be able to begin a new task, a new castle, a new bubble. It counts only because it is there to be done and he has the will to do it. The same will be the life of his children, and of theirs; and if the philosopher is apt to see in this a pattern similar to the unending cycles of the existence of Sisyphus, and to despair, then it is indeed because the meaning and point he is seeking is not there—but mercifully so. The meaning of life is from within us, it is not bestowed from without, and it far exceeds in both its beauty and permanence any heaven of which men have ever dreamed or yearned for.

## NOTE

1. A popular Christian hymn, sung often at funerals and typical of many hymns, expresses this thought:

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;  
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;  
Change and decay in all around I see:  
O thou who changest not, abide with me.

*The Absurd*

Most people feel on occasion that life is absurd, and some feel it vividly and continually. Yet the reasons usually offered in defense of this conviction are patently inadequate: they *could* not really explain why life is absurd. Why then do they provide a natural expression for the sense that it is?

## I

Consider some examples. It is often remarked that nothing we do now will matter in a million years. But if that is true, then by the same token, nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now. In particular, it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter. Moreover, even if what we did now *were* going to matter in a million years, how could that keep our present concerns from being absurd? If their mattering now is not enough to accomplish that, how would it help if they mattered a million years from now?

Whether what we do now will matter in a million years could make the crucial difference only if its mattering in a million years depended on its mattering, period. But then to deny that whatever happens now will matter in a million years is to beg the question against its mattering, period; for in that sense one cannot know that it will not matter in a million years whether (for example) someone now is happy or miserable, without knowing that it does not matter, period.

What we say to convey the absurdity of our lives often has to do with space or time: we are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe; our lives are mere instants even on a geological time scale, let alone a cosmic one; we will all be dead any minute. But of course none of these evident facts can be what *makes* life absurd, if it is absurd. For suppose we lived forever; would

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not a life that is absurd if it lasts seventy years be infinitely absurd if it lasted through eternity? And if our lives are absurd given our present size, why would they be any less absurd if we filled the universe (either because we were larger or because the universe was smaller)? Reflection on our minuteness and brevity appears to be intimately connected with the sense that life is meaningless; but it is not clear what the connection is.

Another inadequate argument is that because we are going to die, all chains of justification must leave off in mid-air: one studies and works to earn money to pay for clothing, housing, entertainment, food, to sustain oneself from year to year, perhaps to support a family and pursue a career—but to what final end? All of it is an elaborate journey leading nowhere. (One will also have some effect on other people's lives, but that simply reproduces the problem, for they will die too.)

There are several replies to this argument. First, life does not consist of a sequence of activities each of which has as its purpose some later member of the sequence. Chains of justification come repeatedly to an end within life, and whether the process as a whole can be justified has no bearing on the finality of these end-points. No further justification is needed to make it reasonable to take aspirin for a headache, attend an exhibit of the work of a painter one admires, or stop a child from putting his hand on a hot stove. No larger context or further purpose is needed to prevent these acts from being pointless.

Even if someone wished to supply a further justification for pursuing all the things in life that are commonly regarded as self-justifying, that justification would have to end somewhere too. If *nothing* can justify unless it is justified in terms of something outside itself, which is also justified, then an infinite regress results, and no chain of justification can be complete. Moreover, if a finite chain of reasons cannot justify anything, what could be accomplished by an infinite chain, each link of which must be justified by something outside itself?

Since justifications must come to an end somewhere, nothing is gained by denying that they end where they appear to, within life—or by trying to subsume the multiple, often trivial ordinary justifications of action under a single, controlling life scheme. We can be satisfied more easily than that. In fact, through its misrepresentation of the process of justification, the argument makes a vacuous demand. It insists that the reasons available within life are incomplete, but suggests thereby that all reasons that come to an end are incomplete. This makes it impossible to supply any reasons at all.

The standard arguments for absurdity appear therefore to fail as arguments. Yet I believe they attempt to express something that is difficult to state, but fundamentally correct.

II

In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality: someone gives a

complicated speech in support of a motion that has already been passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to a recorded announcement; as you are being knighted, your pants fall down.

When a person finds himself in an absurd situation, he will usually attempt to change it, by modifying his aspirations, or by trying to bring reality into better accord with them, or by removing himself from the situation entirely. We are not always willing or able to extricate ourselves from a position whose absurdity has become clear to us. Nevertheless, it is usually possible to imagine some change that would remove the absurdity—whether or not we can or will implement it. The sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself.

Many people's lives are absurd, temporarily or permanently, for conventional reasons having to do with their particular ambitions, circumstances, and personal relations. If there is a philosophical sense of absurdity, however, it must arise from the perception of something universal—some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for us all. This condition is supplied, I shall argue, by the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt.

We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them.

This analysis requires defense in two respects: first as regards the unavoidability of seriousness; second as regards the inescapability of doubt.

We take ourselves seriously whether we lead serious lives or not and whether we are concerned primarily with fame, pleasure, virtue, luxury, triumph, beauty, justice, knowledge, salvation, or mere survival. If we take other people seriously and devote ourselves to them, that only multiplies the problem. Human life is full of effort, plans, calculation, success and failure: we *pursue* our lives, with varying degrees of sloth and energy.

It would be different if we could not step back and reflect on the process, but were merely led from impulse to impulse without self-consciousness. But human beings do not act solely on impulse. They are prudent, they reflect, they weigh consequences, they ask whether what they are doing is worthwhile. Not only are their lives full of particular choices that hang together in larger activities with temporal structure: they also decide in the broadest terms what to pursue and what to avoid, what the priorities among their various aims should be, and what kind of people they want to be or become. Some men are faced with such choices by the large decisions they make from time to time;

some merely by reflection on the course their lives are taking as the product of countless small decisions. They decide whom to marry, what profession to follow, whether to join the Country Club, or the Resistance; or they may just wonder why they go on being salesmen or academics or taxi drivers, and then stop thinking about it after a certain period of inconclusive reflection.

Although they may be motivated from act to act by those immediate needs with which life presents them, they allow the process to continue by adhering to the general system of habits and the form of life in which such motives have their place—or perhaps only by clinging to life itself. They spend enormous quantities of energy, risk, and calculation on the details. Think of how an ordinary individual sweats over his appearance, his health, his sex life, his emotional honesty, his social utility, his self-knowledge, the quality of his ties with family, colleagues, and friends, how well he does his job, whether he understands the world and what is going on in it. Leading a human life is a full-time occupation, to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern.

This fact is so obvious that it is hard to find it extraordinary and important. Each of us lives his own life—lives with himself twenty-four hours a day. What else is he supposed to do—live someone else's life? Yet humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand. Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis*—and the view is at once sobering and comical.

The crucial backward step is not taken by asking for still another justification in the chain, and failing to get it. The objections to that line of attack have already been stated; justifications come to an end. But this is precisely what provides universal doubt with its object. We step back to find that the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question.

The things we do or want without reasons, and without requiring reasons—the things that define what is a reason for us and what is not—are the starting points of our skepticism. We see ourselves from outside, and all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear. Yet when we take this view and recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded.

### III

One may try to escape the position by seeking broader ultimate concerns, from which it is impossible to step back—the idea being that absurdity results

because what we take seriously is something small and insignificant and individual. Those seeking to supply their lives with meaning usually envision a role or function in something larger than themselves. They therefore seek fulfillment in service to society, the state, the revolution, the progress of history, the advance of science, or religion and the glory of God.

But a role in some larger enterprise cannot confer significance unless that enterprise is itself significant. And its significance must come back to what we can understand, or it will not even appear to give us what we are seeking. If we learned that we were being raised to provide food for other creatures fond of human flesh, who planned to turn us into cutlets before we got too stringy—even if we learned that the human race had been developed by animal breeders precisely for this purpose—that would still not give our lives meaning, for two reasons. First, we would still be in the dark as to the significance of the lives of those other beings; second, although we might acknowledge that this culinary role would make our lives meaningful to them, it is not clear how it would make them meaningful to us.

Admittedly, the usual form of service to a higher being is different from this. One is supposed to behold and partake of the glory of God, for example, in a way in which chickens do not share in the glory of coq au vin. The same is true of service to a state, a movement, or a revolution. People can come to feel, when they are part of something bigger, that it is part of them too. They worry less about what is peculiar to themselves, but identify enough with the larger enterprise to find their role in it fulfilling.

However, any such larger purpose can be put in doubt in the same way that the aims of an individual life can be, and for the same reasons. It is as legitimate to find ultimate justification there as to find it earlier, among the details of individual life. But this does not alter the fact that justifications come to an end when we are content to have them end—when we do not find it necessary to look any further. If we can step back from the purposes of individual life and doubt their point, we can step back also from the progress of human history, or of science, or the success of a society, or the kingdom, power, and glory of God,<sup>1</sup> and put all these things into question in the same way. What seems to us to confer meaning, justification, significance, does so in virtue of the fact that we need no more reasons after a certain point.

What makes doubt inescapable with regard to the limited aims of individual life also makes it inescapable with regard to any larger purpose that encourages the sense that life is meaningful. Once the fundamental doubt has begun, it cannot be laid to rest.

Camus maintains in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the absurd arises because the world fails to meet our demands for meaning. This suggests that the world might satisfy those demands if it were different. But now we can see that this is not the case. There does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unsettled doubts could not arise. Consequently the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves.

IV

It may be objected that the standpoint from which these doubts are supposed to be felt does not exist—that if we take the recommended backward step we will land on thin air, without any basis for judgment about the natural responses we are supposed to be surveying. If we retain our usual standards of what is important, then questions about the significance of what we are doing with our lives will be answerable in the usual way. But if we do not, then those questions can mean nothing to us, since there is no longer any content to the idea of what matters, and hence no content to the idea that nothing does.

But this objection misconceives the nature of the backward step. It is not supposed to give us an understanding of what is *really* important, so that we see by contrast that our lives are insignificant. We never, in the course of these reflections, abandon the ordinary standards that guide our lives. We merely observe them in operation, and recognize that if they are called into question we can justify them only by reference to themselves, uselessly. We adhere to them because of the way we are put together; what seems to us important or serious or valuable would not seem so if we were differently constituted.

In ordinary life, to be sure, we do not judge a situation absurd unless we have in mind some standards of seriousness, significance, or harmony with which the absurd can be contrasted. This contrast is not implied by the philosophical judgment of absurdity, and that might be thought to make the concept unsuitable for the expression of such judgments. This is not so, however, for the philosophical judgment depends on another contrast which makes it a natural extension from more ordinary cases. It departs from them only in contrasting the pretensions of life with a larger context in which *no* standards can be discovered, rather than with a context from which alternative, overriding standards may be applied.

V

In this respect, as in others, philosophical perception of the absurd resembles epistemological skepticism. In both cases the final, philosophical doubt is not contrasted with any unchallenged certainties, though it is arrived at by extrapolation from examples of doubt within the system of evidence or justification, where a contrast with other certainties *is* implied. In both cases our limitedness joins with a capacity to transcend those limitations in thought (thus seeing them as limitations, and as inescapable).

Skepticism begins when we include ourselves in the world about which we claim knowledge. We notice that certain types of evidence convince us, that we are content to allow justifications of belief to come to an end at certain points, that we feel we know many things even without knowing or having

grounds for believing the denial of others which, if true, would make what we claim to know false.

For example, I know that I am looking at a piece of paper, although I have no adequate grounds to claim I know that I am not dreaming; and if I am dreaming then I am not looking at a piece of paper. Here an ordinary conception of how appearance may diverge from reality is employed to show that we take our world largely for granted; the certainty that we are not dreaming cannot be justified except circularly, in terms of those very appearances which are being put in doubt. It is somewhat farfetched to suggest I may be dreaming; but the possibility is only illustrative. It reveals that our claim to knowledge depends on our not feeling it necessary to exclude certain incompatible alternatives, and the dreaming possibility or the total-hallucination possibility are just representatives for limitless possibilities most of which we cannot even conceive.<sup>2</sup>

Once we have taken the backward step to an abstract view of our whole system of beliefs, evidence, and justification, and seen that it works only, despite its pretensions, by taking the world largely for granted, we are *not* in a position to contrast all these appearances with an alternative reality. We cannot shed our ordinary responses, and if we could it would leave us with no means of conceiving a reality of any kind.

It is the same in the practical domain. We do not step outside our lives to a new vantage point from which we see what is really, objectively significant. We continue to take life largely for granted while seeing that all our decisions and certainties are possible only because there is a great deal we do not bother to rule out.

Both epistemological skepticism and a sense of the absurd can be reached via initial doubts posed within systems of evidence and justification that we accept, and can be stated without violence to our ordinary concepts. We can ask not only why we should believe there is a floor under us, but also why we should believe the evidence of our senses at all—and at some point the framable questions will have outlasted the answers. Similarly, we can ask not only why we should take aspirin, but why we should take trouble over our own comfort at all. The fact that we shall take the aspirin without waiting for an answer to this last question does not show that it is an unreal question. We shall also continue to believe there is a floor under us without waiting for an answer to the other question. In both cases it is this unsupported natural confidence that generates skeptical doubts; so it cannot be used to settle them.

Philosophical skepticism does not cause us to abandon our ordinary beliefs, but it lends them a peculiar flavor. After acknowledging that their truth is incompatible with possibilities that we have no grounds for believing do not obtain—apart from grounds in those very beliefs which we have called into question—we return to our familiar convictions with a certain irony and resignation. Unable to abandon the natural responses on which they depend, we take them back, like a spouse who has run off with someone else and then decided to return; but we regard them differently (not that the new attitude is necessarily inferior to the old, in either case).

The same situation obtains after we have put in question the seriousness with which we take our lives and human life in general and have looked at ourselves without presuppositions. We then return to our lives, as we must, but our seriousness is laced with irony. Not that irony enables us to escape the absurd. It is useless to mutter: “Life is meaningless; life is meaningless . . .” as an accompaniment to everything we do. In continuing to live and work and strive, we take ourselves seriously in action no matter what we say.

What sustains us, in belief as in action, is not reason or justification, but something more basic than these—for we go on in the same way even after we are convinced that the reasons have given out.<sup>3</sup> If we tried to rely entirely on reason, and pressed it hard, our lives and beliefs would collapse—a form of madness that may actually occur if the inertial force of taking the world and life for granted is somehow lost. If we lose our grip on that, reason will not give it back to us.

## VI

In viewing ourselves from a perspective broader than we can occupy in the flesh, we become spectators of our own lives. We cannot do very much as pure spectators of our own lives, so we continue to lead them, and devote ourselves to what we are able at the same time to view as no more than a curiosity, like the ritual of an alien religion.

This explains why the sense of absurdity finds its natural expression in those bad arguments with which the discussion began. Reference to our small size and short lifespan and to the fact that all of mankind will eventually vanish without a trace are metaphors for the backward step which permits us to regard ourselves from without and to find the particular form of our lives curious and slightly surprising. By feigning a nebula’s-eye view, we illustrate the capacity to see ourselves without presuppositions, as arbitrary, idiosyncratic, highly specific occupants of the world, one of countless possible forms of life.

Before turning to the question whether the absurdity of our lives is something to be regretted and if possible escaped, let me consider what would have to be given up in order to avoid it.

Why is the life of a mouse not absurd? The orbit of the moon is not absurd either, but that involves no strivings or aims at all. A mouse, however, has to work to stay alive. Yet he is not absurd, because he lacks the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse. If that *did* happen, his life would become absurd, since self-awareness would not make him cease to be a mouse and would not enable him to rise above his mousely strivings. Bringing his new-found self-consciousness with him, he would have to return to his meagre yet frantic life, full of doubts that he was unable to answer, but also full of purposes that he was unable to abandon.

Given that the transcendental step is natural to us humans, can we avoid absurdity by refusing to take that step and remaining entirely within our sublunar lives? Well, we cannot refuse consciously, for to do that we would have to be aware of the viewpoint we were refusing to adopt. The only way to avoid the relevant self-consciousness would be either never to attain it or to forget it—neither of which can be achieved by the will.

On the other hand, it is possible to expend effort on an attempt to destroy the other component of the absurd—abandoning one's earthly, individual, human life in order to identify as completely as possible with that universal viewpoint from which human life seems arbitrary and trivial. (This appears to be the ideal of certain Oriental religions.) If one succeeds, then one will not have to drag the superior awareness through a strenuous mundane life, and absurdity will be diminished.

However, insofar as this self-etiolation is the result of effort, will-power, asceticism, and so forth, it requires that one take oneself seriously as an individual—that one be willing to take considerable trouble to avoid being creaturely and absurd. Thus one may undermine the aim of unworldliness by pursuing it too vigorously. Still, if someone simply allowed his individual, animal nature to drift and respond to impulse, without making the pursuit of its needs a central conscious aim, then he might, at considerable dissociative cost, achieve a life that was less absurd than most. It would not be a meaningful life either, of course; but it would not involve the engagement of a transcendent awareness in the assiduous pursuit of mundane goals. And that is the main condition of absurdity—the dragooning of an unconvinced transcendent consciousness into the service of an immanent, limited enterprise like a human life.

## VII

The final escape is suicide; but before adopting any hasty solutions, it would be wise to consider carefully whether the absurdity of our existence truly presents us with a *problem*, to which some solution must be found—a way of dealing with *prima facie* disaster. That is certainly the attitude with which Camus approaches the issue, and it gains support from the fact that we are all eager to escape from absurd situations on a smaller scale.

Camus—not on uniformly good grounds—rejects suicide and the other solutions he regards as escapist. What he recommends is defiance or scorn. We can salvage our dignity, he appears to believe, by shaking a fist at the world which is deaf to our pleas, and continuing to live in spite of it. This will not make our lives un-absurd, but it will lend them a certain nobility.<sup>4</sup>

This seems to me romantic and slightly self-pitying. Our absurdity warrants neither that much distress nor that much defiance. At the risk of falling into romanticism by a different route, I would argue that absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced

and interesting characteristics. Like skepticism in epistemology, it is possible only because we possess a certain kind of insight—the capacity to transcend ourselves in thought.

If a sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation (even though the situation is not absurd until the perception arises), then what reason can we have to resent or escape it? Like the capacity for epistemological skepticism, it results from the ability to understand our human limitations. It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so. Nor need it evoke a defiant contempt of fate that allows us to feel brave or proud. Such dramatics, even if carried on in private, betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.

## NOTES

1. Cf. Robert Nozick, "Teleology," *Mosaic*, XII, 1 (Spring 1971), 27/8.
2. I am aware that skepticism about the external world is widely thought to have been refuted, but I have remained convinced of its irrefutability since being exposed at Berkeley to Thompson Clarke's largely unpublished ideas on the subject.
3. As Hume says in a famous passage of the *Treatise*: "Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther" (Book 1, Part 4, Section 7; Selby-Bigge, p. 269).
4. "Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn" (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, Vintage edition, p. 90).

*Absurd Self-Fulfillment*

A recent author adds a twist to the ancient legend of Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to perpetual life spent pushing a large rock to the top of a hill from which it fell down the other side, once more to be pushed to the top, and so on forever. "Let us suppose," writes Richard Taylor, "that the gods, while condemning Sisyphus to the fate just described, at the same time, as an afterthought, waxed perversely merciful by implanting in him a strange and irrational impulse; namely, a compulsive impulse to roll stones . . . [e.g.] through implanting some substance in him that has this effect on his character and drives."<sup>1</sup> Such a modification would be merciful but also "perverse," Taylor maintains, "because from our point of view there is clearly no reason why anyone should have a persistent and insatiable desire to do something as pointless as that."<sup>2</sup>

Taylor's remodeled Sisyphus, meaningless as his activities may seem to us, at least can find his rock-pushing career *fulfilling*. Insofar as a powerful disposition to push rocks has been built into him, he is only doing what he is inclined by his nature to do when he pushes the rock, just as a dog fulfills his nature by chasing a rabbit, or a bird by building a nest. One can criticize Taylor, however, for his apparent confusion of self-fulfillment (doing what it is in one's nature to do) with compulsion. In Taylor's revision of the legend, a substance in Sisyphus's blood forces him to "want" to push stones, just as repeated injections of heroin into the veins of an unwilling prisoner would impose an addiction to heroin on him and make him "want" his subsequent fixes. The causal mechanism employed by the gods, however, need not be that crude, and we can imagine that they remake Sisyphus's nature in a more thoroughgoing way so that the disposition to push large objects, stemming from a reconstructed complex of glands and nerves and basic drives,

becomes an integral part of Sisyphus's self rather than an alien element restraining him. Let us add a twist to Taylor's twist then, and have the gods provide Sisyphus with a new nature rather than imposing an addiction on his old one. We can think of a rock-pushing Sisyphus as no more "addicted" to his characteristic activities than we are to walking upright or to speaking a language. Our new Sisyphus's activities, furthermore, are self-fulfilling, not simply because they satisfy his desires, nor simply because they involve his own willful acquiescence, but rather because they express some basic genetic disposition of his nature.

Taylor does not use the word "absurd" in describing Sisyphus's peculiar activities, but a whole tradition, one of whose most prominent recent members was Albert Camus,<sup>3</sup> finds that term eminently appropriate. The words Taylor uses are "meaningless," "pointless," and "endless." Perhaps endless repetitive cycles of pointless labor with no apparent purpose or result is only one species of absurdity, or perhaps pointlessness is only one among several grounds for judging an activity to be absurd. (The closely related but distinct characteristic of futility through purposeful but self-defeating actions may be another.) In either case, pointlessness and generic absurdity are not identical notions. But few would deny the synthetic judgment that there *is* an absurdity in pointless labors that will plainly come to nothing. Taylor isolates this absurdity by contrasting it with both painfulness and loneliness. It is not because Sisyphus's labors are arduous and body-bruising that they are absurd, for we can imagine that his rock is small and his labors undemanding. They would be no less pointless, and therefore no less absurd for that. Moreover, as Taylor suggests, we could give Sisyphus some partners so that the rock-moving activities are conducted by teams of two or more persons. That would reduce the loneliness of the enterprise but not its silliness. The essential absurdity of pointless activity is captured in a non-Sisyphean example that Taylor himself provides: "Two groups of prisoners, one of them engaged in digging a prodigious hole in the ground that is no sooner finished than it is filled in again by the other group, the latter then digging a new hole that is at once filled in by the first group and so on endlessly."<sup>4</sup>

Many philosophers have said that insofar as human existence is absurd there is a ground for certain negative attitudes—suicidal despair, detached cynicism, philosophical pessimism, Camus' haughty scorn or existential defiance. Other philosophers, addressing a somewhat different datum, have said that insofar as a given human life is self-fulfilled it is a good life, and provides a reason for certain positive attitudes toward the human condition—hope, satisfaction, acceptance, or reconciliation. Often the "optimists" say that some lives, at least, are completely fulfilled and most lives fulfilled to some degree or other. There is no antecedent necessity that they all be fulfilled or that they all be unfulfilled; it all depends on skill or luck. "Pessimists," on the other hand, claim that all lives are necessarily absurd (meaningless, pointless, futile), so their view is more sweeping. In any event, "absurdity" and "self-fulfillment" are quite different notions so that optimists and pessimists are not even talking about the same thing. Taylor suggests, quite plausibly,

that life might be *both* absurd and at its best, sometimes, self-fulfilling. What are we to make of that combination of truths? What are the consequences for optimism and pessimism? What general attitudes are appropriate if it is accepted? These questions call for closer examination of the concepts of "absurdity" and "self-fulfillment" and how they might fit together, and some comments on the question of how we can judge the rational appropriateness of cosmic attitudes.

## ABSURDITY IN INDIVIDUAL LIVES

We should attend to the undeniable examples of absurdity *in* life before raising the subject of the absurdity *of* life. Since some elements in any life are absurd, we can focus our attention on these familiar occurrences and inquire what it is we are saying about them when we judge them to be absurd. Thomas Nagel provides some useful instances of absurd events that, since they are easy to respond to playfully, are irresistibly comic: "Someone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already been passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to a recorded announcement; as you are knighted your pants fall down."<sup>5</sup> Some of Nagel's examples are human actions that can be criticized as reasonable or unreasonable in relation to the actor's presumed motives and ends. Others are mere happenings leading directly to states of affairs that themselves can be thought of as irrational relative to some larger presumed purposes: The image of a great statesman or scientist standing bare-legged with his trousers around his ankles as the queen tries to award him his knighthood conflicts irrationally with the presumed purpose of the ceremony, which in part is to create a dignified and moving spectacle. If the pants-dropping incident had been deliberately chosen it would have been subject to the charge of irrationality, since it could have been anticipated to produce results that would defeat the larger purposes for which it was chosen. In this indirect way, even mere occurrences and unchosen states of affairs can be judged "irrational," and sometimes irrational to the point of absurdity. In addition to doings, activities, careers and lives, mere happenings and states of affairs, we also judge beliefs, hypotheses, convictions, desires, purposes, and even people to be absurd, and usually we can explain what this means in a fairly straightforward way by substituting the word "irrational" and locating the absurdity in question on a map of the various species of irrationality. On other occasions, as in the fallen pants example, a mere occurrence is related indirectly to irrationality by the showing that *if* it were thought, contrary to fact, to be somebody's deliberate doing, that doing would be patently irrational.

The paradigmatic type of irrationality is false or unwarranted belief. When something analogous to flagrant falsity or manifestly fallacious argument is a defect of such nonbeliefs as desires, purposes, instrumentalities,

actions, and states of affairs, then they too can be characterized as irrational or unreasonable, although the word "absurd" seems to fit them more comfortably. *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* tells us that when the intensifier *ab* was added to the Latin word *surdus* (dull, deaf, insensible), the result was a Latin word translatable as "not to be heard from," and the derivative English word meaning "laughingly inconsistent with what is judged as true or reasonable." "Falsehood" and "invalidity," then, are not quite enough to explain absurdity. The absurd is what is *palpably* untrue or unreasonable, outlandishly and preposterously so, literally "unheard of" or not to be entertained. One element, then, that the various sorts of absurd things have in common is their extreme irrationality, whether that be the apparently knowing assertion of manifestly false propositions, or the apparently voluntary making of manifestly unreasonable decisions, or the apparently eager living of a manifestly pointless life.

A second element in all absurdity is implicit in the first, but deserves to be clearly stated on its own. Where there is absurdity there are always two things clashing or in disharmony, distinguishable entities that conflict with one another. This element is referred to variously as the "divorce,"<sup>6</sup> disparity, discrepancy, disproportion, or incongruity between discordant objects. In general, things that do not fit together—means discrepant with ends, premises incongruous with conclusions, ideals disharmonious with practice, pretensions in conflict with realities—are found wherever there is absurdity. But having located the absurdity, we may attribute it either to the relation of disharmony itself, or exclusively to one, or to the other, of the discordant objects.

In some cases we adopt the point of view of the standard and "laugh down" at the incongruous object, as when we delight in the undignified fall of the pompously powerful. In other cases we take the opposite viewpoint, that of the comically discrepant object itself, and we laugh at the standard, as, for example, when we laugh at cute children masquerading as adults, or in a quite different example, we laugh at a cute risqué story and thus have some fun with the sexual conventions violated in the tale. Perhaps not all funny things are absurd, and surely not all absurd things are funny, but discordance is an element common to many comic and absurd things.

Another form of disparity is described in Nagel's astute account of absurdity,<sup>7</sup> namely, the clash or disharmony between various perspectives from which we form attitudes and make judgments. There is an unavoidable discrepancy between the natural subjective way of viewing ourselves—as precious in our own eyes, full of genuinely important projects, whole universes in ourselves, persons who "live only once" and have to make the most of the time allotted us—and various hypothetical judgments made from a more universal perspective: we are mere specks, or drops in the ocean, or one of the teeming hive, absolutely inessential to the grand scheme of things, no more lovable in ourselves than are any of the zillions of individual insects whose infinitesimally transitory lives are equally as unimportant in the long run as our own. Our subjective point of view is an expression of the "seriousness" with which all living beings must view their situations, a necessary

expression of our biological natures. But the broader perspectives that yield a different and conflicting picture are available to any being with imagination and modest conceptual development. Judged from these perspectives, the human expenditures of effort and emotion in the pursuit of “important goals” are just so many posturings, and we mortals are absurd figures who strut and fret our hour upon the stage. The absurdity in the human condition, Nagel tells us, consists in a special kind of conspicuous discrepancy, that between unavoidable pretension or aspiration, on the one hand, and reality as perceived from a truer perspective on the other.

Not all of Nagel’s examples of absurdity within human lives are equally plausible models for the alleged absurdity of human life as such. Applied to Sisyphus, at any rate, and to some actual Sisyphean lives, Nagel’s “conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality” seems less strikingly relevant than Taylor’s conception of absurdity as ultimate futility and pointlessness. Careful reconsideration, however, will reveal that Taylor’s “futility or pointlessness of activity” and Nagel’s “discrepancy of perspectives for viewing oneself,” while irreducibly distinct types of absurdity, are nonetheless equally proper examples of the absurd genus. Taylor’s type of absurdity applies more naturally to the Sisyphean model for the human condition, but Nagel’s conception provides another model of its own, equally challenging as a picture of the absurdity of human life as a whole, and equally familiar, as a recent *New Yorker* cartoon shows. Two small figures, recognizable as a well-dressed middle-class couple, are on the patio of their suburban home, while above them a full moon and vast panoply of stars glimmer and sparkle. The discrepancy between the human beings’ inevitably extravagant sense of self-importance and their actual tiny role in the whole picture is indicated by the little man’s comment to his little wife: “Why, no! Why should I feel small? I’ve just been put in charge of the whole Eastern region.”<sup>8</sup>

Nagel’s kind of absurdity is not necessarily involved in the Sisyphus story, but if it is added to the pointless labor that *is* involved, it adds a whole new dimension of absurdity to that already present. Moreover, Sisyphus’s labors might be motivated by a genuinely sensible purpose, and thus be unabsurd in Taylor’s sense, yet absurd anyway in a sense closer to Nagel’s. Imagine, for example, that the gods have sentenced Sisyphus only to climb a large mountain and plant a small flag on the top. As soon as he succeeds in doing that, his penalty has been paid once and for all. It takes Sisyphus years (or centuries) to climb the mountain but then he finds that he has forgotten the flag. He returns to the base, recovers the flag, and spends another millennium or so climbing a peak only to discover that he is on the wrong mountain. And so on ad infinitum. Sisyphus’s labors would not be pointless in that case since they would have a sensible aim, but how genuinely absurd his constant mistakes would be whether committed in pursuit of a purpose or not! Or suppose that the gods in the original legend had not only assigned Sisyphus his endless self-defeating labor, but had also required him, before each trip to the summit, to write “I am a bad boy” one hundred times on his rock. What an absurd comedown for the proud and once mighty Sisyphus!

Now his labors are doubly absurd, both pointless and conflicting with his natural self-importance.

Moreover, to further accentuate the difference between Taylor's and Nagel's criteria, it can be noted that the traditional Sisyphus, before we began tampering with the legend, was *not* absurd by Nagel's criterion. He had no illusions or false pretensions, and his resigned "aspiration," although pointless, was perfectly realistic. If his plight, therefore, is to be taken as a model for the absurdity of the whole human enterprise, we shall have to expand Nagel's account of absurdity to include examples from within human life of the sort Taylor emphasized, for instance, the prisoners' digging and filling in of holes, or the ordering of intricately ornate wedding cakes and consuming of them before they are even wrapped, or in general giving with one hand and taking away with the other<sup>9</sup> contrary to all reason. Taylor's and Nagel's conceptions of absurdity, however, do share a generic character. They are two distinct species of absurdity but both can be subsumed, in their separate ways, under the "discrepancy" rubric. The discrepancy in Taylor's case is that between the kind of labor that is normally thought to be sheer drudgery and a purpose inadequate to justify it or to provide it with any reason whatsoever. Ultimately, pointlessness is a kind of discrepancy, or massive disproportion, between means and ends. It must also be said, in fairness to Nagel, that his conception of absurdity *can* be applied to some Sisyphean individuals. If in fact some of us are quite similar to Sisyphus, but we pretend to be otherwise, then we are absurd in Nagel's sense too.

A careful perusal of absurd elements within individual human lives will disclose still other models of absurdity in addition to Taylor's "pointlessness" and Nagel's "unrealistic pretension and aspiration," and these additional types of absurdity can also be treated as species of discrepancy, conflict, or disproportion. We must first follow up our earlier suggestion by distinguishing pointlessness from futility. A pointless action or activity is one that has no intelligible purpose the achievement of which gives it value and explanation ("point" or "meaning"). Moreover, it is not the kind of activity that carries its own reward quite independently of any further purpose, but rather the sort of activity we normally think of as sheer drudgery (like rock-pushing). Since it does not possess value in itself, but rather, if anything, a kind of negative value, and it has no envisaged consequences for the sake of which it is undertaken, it is utterly valueless, or worse. A totally pointless activity will not only lack a conscious objective beyond itself; it will also lack any unforeseen actual consequences that could confer value back on it by a kind of fluke.

Some activities have a point, but are very little less absurd than totally pointless activities since their conscious objective is manifestly incapable of justifying the drudgery that is meant to achieve it. The intrinsic disvalue of the activity is an exorbitant (hence irrational) price to pay for so trivial a reward. Sisyphus's labors would not be totally pointless if his whole motive was to receive a piece of candy from the gods every century or so. His endless labors would hardly be any less absurd in that case, and the absurdity in question would be a manifest disproportion between means and end. Following W. D. Joske, we can call

this species of absurdity *triviality*.<sup>10</sup> Obviously burdensome activities that are absurdly trivial are not much less absurd than burdensome activities that are wholly pointless.

Futile activities (still another species of absurdity) do have a point, and a reasonably proportionate one, but nonetheless are absurd because they are manifestly inefficacious means to the achievement of their nontrivial goals. If they had a chance to achieve the worthy objective that motivates them, they would not be absurd, but it is evident to us, the observers, or even in the worst case to the actors themselves, that continued participation in the intrinsically valueless activity will be fruitless, hence futile. The reasons for the absurd activity's instrumental inefficacy can be various. In the simplest cases, nature itself stands in the way and success is rendered impossible by laws of nature, as with efforts to high-jump ten feet off the ground, or by contingent individual incapacities, as when a dog repeatedly chases sea gulls on a beach with the presumed intention of catching one of them, but continually fails because of its lack of speed and other requisite physical skills, but never gives up making its absurd efforts. The most interesting class of futile activities, however, are those in which the instrumental inefficacies are the result of the self-defeating character of the actor's own techniques and strategies, especially when flagrant and manifest to any observer. The tale is told of a workman who opens his lunch pail every noon, examines his sandwiches, and comments; "Ugh, tuna fish again." Finally, after weeks of witnessing this ritual, a fellow worker asks, "Why don't you have your wife make you some other kind of sandwich?" to which the first worker replies, "Oh, I'm not married. I make my own lunches." The worker's constant failure could be charged to poor memory or some other cognitive failure, but to the observer who thinks of it as absurd, it is as if the actor deliberately takes steps every day to frustrate his own purposes.

In summary, purposeful activities can be placed on a spectrum of absurdity. At the one extreme are intrinsically worthless activities that are engaged in even though they have no vindicating purpose beyond themselves. These activities are totally pointless. Then come burdensome or disliked activities engaged in only because they are expected to produce some minor advantage for which the instrumental labors are massively disproportionate. These are absurdly trivial activities. They too constitute a whole section of the spectrum, becoming less and less absurd as their achieved goals reduce the disproportion of their means. Then come the inherently burdensome activities that do have a clearly vindicating purpose but are ill-designed to achieve them. These are absurdly futile activities when it would be plainly evident to an observer that they are hopelessly inefficacious. If there is a chance of success, the activity may be reasonable, hence unabsurd, even though in fact the vindicating objective is never achieved. To these absurdities, explained in term of means-ends disproportions, we must add Nagel's favorite types of absurdity, which are explained in terms of other poor fits, especially the failure of pretensions and aspirations to fit objective facts. In short, an absurd element within an individual life can fall within five or more categories. It can be pointless, trivial

(instrumentally disproportionate), futile, unrealistically pretentious, or otherwise incongruous or a “poor fit,” like actions that presuppose false or logically inconsistent beliefs.

## THE ALLEGED ABSURDITY OF HUMAN LIFE AS SUCH: SOME PHILOSOPHICAL INDICTMENTS

Taylor, Camus, and Nagel, each in his own way and each making his own special qualifications, looks with favor on the judgment that there is absurdity in the human condition as such. It will be useful here to discuss critically some of the reasons given by these philosophers. We can begin with Taylor who finds all human activity to be as pointless (in the long run) as that of Sisyphus. He uses the words “meaningless” and “pointless” instead of “absurd,” and as we have seen, means by them “endless repetitive activity that comes to nothing.” The endlessness, no doubt, is not essential to the meaninglessness. If Sisyphus pushed his rock continuously for four score and ten years only, before being mercifully killed by the gods, Taylor could and would judge his finite career as a rock-mover to be absurd, just as he judges the finite lives of men and mice to be absurd.

Meaninglessness for Taylor is mitigated but not cancelled by achievement, because achievements do not last. Some achievements, for example *Hamlet*, Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*, and the Notre Dame cathedral, last longer than others, and might therefore qualify as less absurd than the transient and trivial triumphs in which most of us take what pride we can. But from any sufficiently broad point of view, long compared with the span of human lives or even the lives of nations and planets, but infinitely narrower than the perspective *sub specie aeternitatis*, the difference between the durability of Notre Dame and that of a pioneer’s log cabin is utterly insignificant. All of our goals, Taylor says, are of “transitory significance,” and “having gained one of them we immediately set forth for the next as if that one had never been, with this next one being essentially more of the same.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike Sisyphus, however, most of us beget children and pass on our values, our modest achievements, and fresh opportunities to them. That fact does not impress Taylor, who replies that “Each man’s life thus resembles one of Sisyphus’s climbs to the summit of his hill and each day of it one of his steps; the difference is that whereas Sisyphus himself returns to push the stone up again, we leave this to our children.”<sup>12</sup> The enterprise is thus collective, but it still comes to nothing in the end.

What could human existence conceivably be like if it were to escape this absurdity? This is a crucial question that all philosophical pessimists must answer if their sweeping judgments of universal absurdity are to be fully intelligible. For unless we know what contrasting situation is being ruled out we cannot be sure what a given assertion is “including in.” Unless we

know what *would* count as nonabsurdity, if there were such a thing, we have nothing to contrast absurdity with. If all conceivable universes are equally and necessarily absurd on their face, so that one cannot even describe what nonabsurd existence would be like, it is not very informative, to put it mildly, to affirm that this our actual universe is absurd. It is a test of the intelligibility of a philosophical doctrine that it succeed in ruling out some contrasting state of affairs.

Taylor's doctrine fortunately seems to pass the test, more or less. He has us imagine that Sisyphus is permitted to push an assortment of stones to the top of his hill and combine them there into a beautiful and enduring temple. This would be to escape absurdity, Taylor says at first, for "activity . . . has a meaning if it has some significant culmination, some more or less lasting end that can be considered to have been the direction and purpose of the activity."<sup>13</sup> But soon he changes his mind. He does not wish to make meaningfulness a matter of "more or less," for then he would have to admit that some human activities and lives are to some degree, at least, meaningful, and comparisons of the relative meaningfulness of various individual lives would at least make sense. But that would be to vindicate rather than to destroy common sense on this question, and Taylor, his sights set high, quickly withdraws his concession by requiring that the temple must endure—not simply be "more or less lasting"—"adding beauty to the world for the remainder of time."<sup>14</sup> When we look at a meaningless life like that of the legendary Sisyphus or that of a drug-addicted teenage suicide, and compare it with one of the relatively meaningful human lives suggested by common sense, say that of Jefferson or Shakespeare, the differences at first are striking. But "if we look at them from a distance" (say from a point in time one hundred million years from now) they "are in outline the same and convey to the mind the same image"—pointless labor and emotion coming to nothing.<sup>15</sup> It is the temporal distance that make the difference. The view from remote distances in time reveals things as they truly are, whereas the detailed close-up picture is distorted and illusory.

Taylor makes another hypothetical supposition. Let us suppose that after a finite period of intense labor Sisyphus finishes a gloriously beautiful temple, and then is allowed by the gods to rest on his laurels and spend the rest of eternal time in admiring contemplation of his significant achievement. Now at last we seem to have an unchallengeable conception of nonabsurd existence, but Taylor quickly dashes our hopes. Eternal rest, he rightly claims, would be "infinite boredom," and that too would become in due time a kind of pointlessness or absurdity. Unfortunately, he does not consider other possibilities that would save his doctrine of universal absurdity from vacuity. For example, Sisyphus could be allowed to die after a brief rest period but before his proud satisfaction turns to boredom, while his temple is preserved forever by the gods, or Sisyphus could be permitted to live forever, alternating creative activity with replenishing periods of rest, while the gods guarantee the permanence of his achievements. I suspect that Taylor, like Bernard Williams,<sup>16</sup> would find even the latter arrangement no escape from infinite boredom, so that his final view, if he had finished his argument,

would be that *almost* any conceivable form of life would be absurd, either because it fails to produce permanently lasting achievements or because it leads to boredom. The qualifier “*almost*” serves to give meaningful contrast to Taylor’s absurdism since the remaining conception of nonabsurd existence rules out a relevant contrast (merciful death with the assurance of everlasting preservation of achievements).

Permanent preservation of personal achievement is not, however, a plausible requirement for nonabsurd meaningfulness. Indeed, there is something absurd in the idea that the gods would clutter up the universe to all eternity with modest monuments to everyone’s best deeds. And if only Shakespearian and Beethovenian triumphs are preserved, then by Taylor’s standards, life becomes absurd for all the rest of us.

According to Camus, human beings necessarily crave a certain kind of cosmic order, significant culminations of their efforts, and a kind of transparent rational intelligibility in the world of experience. But the world has no such order; it works to destroy the point of whatever temporary achievements it permits; and it is in its central core alien, dense, and irrational. Hence the inevitable confrontation and the inevitable absurdity.

Camus seems to know exactly what he wants from the world. He believes also that the world, by its very nature, cannot provide him with what he wants, and that he, by his very nature, cannot modify or relinquish those wants, hopeless though they be. There is therefore a “divorce” in the nature of things, an ineradicable discrepancy between human nature and the rest of nature, and it is this irreconcilable clash that generates the absurdity of the human condition. He wants a universe that cares about him personally, a world that he can identify with instead of feeling alienated from, a world that can heal the deep sense of loneliness all sensitive beings experience when they encounter nature as an “other.” Most of all, he cannot help wanting to live forever, although as a rational being he knows that death is inevitable. His unmodifiable yet unsatisfiable desires are more than mere wants; they are natural *needs*. “The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”<sup>17</sup>

Camus eloquently describes the feeling of absurdity evoked in him by forests and oceans (“At the heart of all natural beauty lies something inhuman”), and by bustling human marketplaces. Always at its core is a vital yearning that he knows has no hope of satisfaction, yet no possibility of being extinguished. “At any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any person in the face.”<sup>18</sup> One reliable evoker of that feeling is what Camus calls the “collapse of the stage setting.” Individual lives proceed according to their fixed rhythms, and then suddenly “one day the ‘why’ arises and . . . [a] weariness tinged with amazement.”<sup>19</sup> The feeling to which Camus here refers is one, I dare say, that almost all of us have experienced at one time or another, but for pessimistic philosophers it is more than a feeling, in that it contains the materials for an argument for human absurdity. I first remember experiencing the feeling and toying with the argument while observing crowds of shoppers in a supermarket. (Since then, I have come to call it the

"supermarket regress.") Suddenly the stage setting collapsed, and the shoppers' life patterns seemed to make no more sense than the hole-digging in Taylor's example of the prisoners. Why are all those people standing in line before the cash registers? In order to purchase food. Why do they purchase food? In order to stay alive and healthy. Why do they wish to stay alive and healthy? So that they can work at their jobs. Why do they want to work? To earn money. Why do they want to earn money? So that they can purchase food. And so on, around the circle, over and over, with no "significant culmination" in sight. Vindicating purpose and meaning are constantly put off to another stage that never comes, and the whole round of activity looks more like a meaningless ritual-dance than something coherent and self-justifying.

As an argument for inevitable absurdity, the supermarket regress is only as strong as its premises. One presupposition of the argument in particular is weak, namely, the assumption that no human activity is ever valuable in *itself*, but that vindicating value is always postponed until some future consequence arrives, which in turn can never be valuable in itself but only valuable as a means to something else that cannot be valuable in itself, and so on, forever. This paradox is not an accurate picture of all human activity, striking as it may seem when it naturally suggests itself to an observer of crowds of human animals mechanically pursuing their ritualized goals. In fact, the impossibility of intrinsically valuable activity is itself an illusion produced by what Moritz Schlick in a remarkable essay<sup>20</sup> called "the tyranny of purpose."

There is another kind of insight, also natural and common, that can lead one too hastily to interpret human activity as absurd. Altogether unlike Camus, we can think of ourselves as part and parcel of nature, one biological species among many others. Then we can examine the life cycles of the lesser species and come to appreciate their absurd character, here responding not to apparent circularity as in the human case, but to a value regress proper, in which justifying purposes are put off forever. Various insects,<sup>21</sup> amphibians, and fish, for example, seem to have no ultimate purpose of their own but to stay alive long enough to reproduce, so that their progeny can also stay alive long enough to reproduce, and so on forever, as if simply keeping a species in existence were an end in itself with no further purpose needed. This has seemed to many human observers to be the very model of absurdity, an utterly pointless existence.

The absurdity is accentuated in the case of species like the salmon, whose members struggle and strive heroically, swimming against the currents, battered against rocks, plundered by predators, until the survivors reach the headwaters of their native streams, tattered, torn, and dying. Even then the ordeal is not over, for the males at least must fight off their own intra-species competitors for an opportunity to entice females to lay eggs, to fertilize them, and only then to die. What is the point of all this effort? Simply to produce another generation of tiny salmon to start all over again, feeding and growing as they head down river toward the ocean, then after a time in salt water, heading back upstream amid the many dangers and against all odds, to reproduce and die. The whole process has no apparent point except its own

further continuance. To some human observers that natural cycle is a kind of collective effort to discharge a task that makes no more sense than that assigned as punishment to the solitary Sisyphus. The human life style is perhaps less fixed and rigid, and surely more varied, but insofar as it resembles that of the insects, toads, and fish, it is equally self-contained and pointless.<sup>22</sup>

The best response to this argument is that it projects human needs and sensibilities into other species. The human observer simply does not have the salmon's point of view. A well-bred salmon will love the life of a salmon, which after all, is the only life it can know. The life cycle for it may seem to be its own point, with no further purpose, no further achievement external to it, needed to establish its rational credentials. To insist that without permanently preserved achievements and lasting monuments, the life of a salmon is absurd, is a piece of parochial prejudice on the part of human beings.

Both the supermarket circle and the biological regress purport to show that human life is pointless because justification for any of its parts or phases is indefinitely postponed, never coming to a final resting place. We choose to do *A* only because it will lead to *B*, which we desire only because of its conducibility to *C*, which we value only as a means to *D*, and so on. In the biological regress argument the chain of justification proceeds in a straight line, so to speak, never coming to an end. It therefore fails to show how any component human activity can truly have a point beyond itself. In the supermarket version of the argument the chain does not proceed endlessly and infinitely only because it closes a circle at some point going round and round indefinitely, starting over again at regular intervals without ever having justified anything. Nagel thinks of these arguments as "standard" attempts to demonstrate absurdity, and although he is sympathetic to their motives and conclusions, he regards them as failures. Part of his ground for rejecting the arguments from circular and linear regression is factual. Some individual acts within life, he says, have a point even if the general statement of (say) the supermarket regression is correct. "Chains of justification come repeatedly to an end within life, and whether the process as a whole can be justified has no bearing on the finality of the end points. No further justification is needed to make it reasonable to take aspirin for a headache, attend an exhibit of the work of a painter one admires, or stop a child from putting his hand on a hot stove. No larger context or further purpose is needed to prevent these acts from being pointless."

Nagel's three examples of actions with a genuine point beyond themselves make a heterogeneous lot, but the aspirin and hot stove examples, at least, convincing as they are, do not substantially weaken the force of the supermarket circular regress. One can think of human life as an endlessly circular quest for a vindicating point that is never to be found, even though some individual acts in the generally pointless pursuit do have *their* points. It is possible after all to hold *both* that there is a point in taking aspirin and in keeping infantile hands off hot stoves *and* that in the main course of human life the activities that preoccupy us are inevitably absurd, forming an inescapable circle of activities each of which lacks a justifying point. It is not that

aspirins are absurd, only that their use is not part of the central pattern that is absurd.

It is difficult to offer a sympathetic ear to Camus' other complaints, although one must acknowledge that he does know how to capture a mood that circumstances can induce in any of us, and that circumstances might understandably produce regularly in some of us. What Camus refers to as "needs," for example, that one live forever, or that we can have a full and perspicuous understanding of all the phenomena of nature that science struggles with piecemeal, are for others—indeed for most others—quite dispensable wants that can be relinquished or modified as the evidence suggests, without cost to one's integrity.

What sort of response does Camus recommend to what he takes to be the absurdity of human life? Suicide, he says, would be a pointless gesture. Self-deception is the common way out. But embracing consoling myths is inconsistent with one's integrity. There is in fact no way of reconciling the cravings inherent in our nature, as he sees it, with the uncompromising denials of the alien cosmos. The existentialist hero acknowledges his inherent absurdity without wincing; he cherishes his consciousness of it, keeping it forever alive as the evidence of his integrity. He has no hope that things could be different, but lives to the hilt and dies well, like a blind person who cannot relinquish his desire to see though he knows the desire is hopeless.<sup>23</sup> In his defiance of what is necessary, he claims to achieve his integrity, and in his revolt his happiness. If Camus were a Columbia River salmon, he would lead the way over the rocks and up the rapids and be the first to fertilize new eggs, but he would never for a moment abandon his conviction that the whole enterprise is absurd, and his stubborn scorn would enable him to feel quite good about himself. If only a fish could be like a man!

Before leaving Camus, it is interesting to note his suggestion of how absurdity might relate to self-fulfillment. If it is in my nature as a human being—ineluctably—to crave unity, intelligibility, and immortality, then according to Camus my absurdity consists in the "divorce" between my nature and the large world of which it is a part, which defeats rather than fulfills it. It is in my nature then, quite absurdly, to be out of harmony with the universe. Camus' prescription that I defiantly embrace this absurdity and live to the hilt, amounts to a recommendation that I attempt to fulfill that nature, absurd as it is, and be defiant of the uncooperative universe. One can interpret Camus as recommending *as a means to full self-fulfillment* that I be intensely and continuously conscious of my absurdity, that is, of the clash between larger nature and my nature. The beginnings of a paradox can be found in this conception: Can it be "fulfilling" to fulfill a nature in conflict with itself? Can one find one's fulfillment in frustration, one's triumph in defeat?

The absurdity of the human condition, according to the third theory, that of Nagel, derives from the clash of perspectives from which we can view ourselves: that of purposeful actors living out our lives and that of disinterested spectators of the very lives we earnestly live. Only human beings are capable of viewing themselves from a detached and impersonal perspective

and making judgments from that viewpoint of their own insignificance. When we do view ourselves in that detached way, then the ordinary way of regarding our lives, which we cannot help but adopt if we are to pursue our lives at all, seems absurd to us. A mouse also regards his own life in the same serious everyday way that humans do, but since "he lacks the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse,"<sup>24</sup> he is not absurd. Human beings can diminish (but probably not eliminate) the absurdity of their own lives by allowing their individual animal natures to drift and respond to impulse, in short by becoming as much like mice as possible, but this would involve "considerable dissociative cost."<sup>25</sup>

Nagel is confusing when he talks as if he is making judgments about the absurdity of others' lives when he is only explaining the way in which those lives might come to *seem* absurd, either to those persons themselves or to a sensitive observer. Thus when he talks about possible "escapes" from absurdity and admits that a mindless life spent drifting with impulse is less absurd than more characteristically human lives despite its dissociative cost, he is using "absurd" to mean "seems absurd," much as psychoanalysts often equate "guilt" and "feelings of guilt." The life of a mouse is absurd when we look at it from an imaginatively extended perspective that the mouse itself cannot achieve. When Nagel denies the mouse's absurdity on the ground that *it* has no transcendental consciousness, he explains why the mouse's life cannot *seem* absurd to *it*. But the mouse's life can still seem absurd to *us*, and really be absurd nonetheless. Nagel, in short, at least in much of his discussion, takes the essential discrepancy in an absurd life to be a relation between two components of the being whose life it is—his natural and inevitable seriousness, and his awareness from a higher perspective of his own insignificance. But one could lack that kind of discrepancy, as mice do, and enjoy a more unified consciousness that in turn is discrepant with an external reality, the unaccommodating and alien universe. Nagel employs the latter conception of absurdity too when he speaks of the clash between subjective pretension and objective reality, and that is the notion that is used by Taylor and Camus when they make judgments of real, not merely apparent, absurdity.

The distinction between really being and only seeming absurd quickly suggests another, that between absurdity as a property of one's situation, and absurdity as a flaw in one's outlook or self-assessment—put tersely, between *absurd predicaments* and *absurd persons*. It does not follow, of course, from the fact that a person is in an absurd predicament that she is an absurd person, for she may have redeeming insights into, and attitudes toward her situation that put her beyond criticism or mockery. The human predicament that we all share is absurd according to Taylor because achievements do not last and there is thus a necessary and objective discrepancy between effort and outcome. It is absurd according to Camus because the universe is resistant to our inherent craving for order and intelligibility, and there is thus an ineradicable disharmony between our needs and the world's indifference. The human predicament is absurd according to Nagel because of the irresolvable clash between the importance we attach to our lives and the essential dubitability of

all schemes of justification for that importance. All three writers agree that the absurdity of our human predicament is not a matter of "more or less" and not a matter that could be different from what it is. It is otherwise with the absurdity of persons. Some people are obviously more absurd than others in that there is a greater clash between their beliefs and their evidence, their mean and their ends, or their pretensions and their real characters and situations.

A person is also absurd—and this is the interesting point—when there is a radical discrepancy between her assessment of her situation and the actual nature of that situation. If one is really in an absurd predicament, if, for example, all of one's labors are bound to come to nothing in the end whatever one chooses to do about it, and one stubbornly denies that absurdity, adopting inappropriate attitudes and embracing vain hopes, then one becomes more than a little absurd oneself. Thus Sisyphus escapes personal absurdity by correctly appraising the absurdity of his predicament, realistically abandoning hope, and coolly proceeding with his labors in an existentialist spirit of "Let's get on with it,"<sup>26</sup> thus maintaining a kind of dignity and self-respect. But Sisyphus would surely be absurd if, like Don Quixote, he talked himself into believing that his labors had an intrinsic worth and importance and were essential to the maintenance of the world order. Indeed we could imagine a number of possible Sisyphuses varying in their degree of personal absurdity or unabsurdity as their beliefs, assessments, attitudes, and pretensions vary in their degrees of fittingness to their predicament. The situation of all these hypothetical Sisyphuses, however, is the same and as thoroughly absurd as a situation can be, for whatever any Sisyphus chooses to do about it, he must engage in endless repetitive cycles of pointless and unproductive labor.

How can a person be unabsurd if his life as a whole is unavoidably absurd? Some self-attitudes do not further anyone's escape from absurdity, and in the case of the person whose situation itself is absurd and whose projects and enterprises are pointless, they positively accentuate the personal absurdity of their possessor. Vanity, excessive pride or shame, pompous self-importance, even well-grounded self-esteem if taken too seriously, are absurd in a person whose situation guarantees the pointlessness or futility of his activities. Think of Shelley's Ozymandias, for example, who built a monument for posterity directing his descendants to "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" A tick of cosmic time later only "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone / stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand / Half sunk, a shattered visage lies."<sup>27</sup> How absurd was Old Ozymandias, self-declared "King of kings"! Almost equally absurd would be the towering self-regard of an eminent physicist for having won (and deserved) the Nobel Prize. Think of his proud medal found on some desert of the next millennium by beings whose school-children have a far more advanced understanding of physics than he did. A little bit of genuine humility, perhaps, is a virtue of anyone in any situation, but for a person in an absurd situation it is essential if the absurdity of his predicament is not to rub off on his character.

We can now venture some tentative conclusions. We can conclude first of all that there are elements properly characterized as absurd in every life.

Moreover, some whole lives are predominately absurd, those, for example, spent largely in sheer drudgery to no further point, or those whose overriding pursuits were rendered futile by uncooperative circumstances or self-defeating strategies. Further arguments, however, to the conclusion that human life as such—and therefore each and every human life necessarily—is absurd are not convincing. Taylor and probably Camus (though he is less clear) are impressed by what they take to be the pointlessness (meaninglessness) of the human condition, a conclusion supported also by the arguments from the supermarket circle and the biological regress, but these arguments, because of confusions about the concept of pointlessness, are at best inconclusive. When we are speaking of activities *within* human life we characterize them as pointless when they are, first of all, apparently without worth for their own sakes, when, for example, they appear to be sheer drudgery, like pushing rocks and digging holes. If a given instance of sheer drudgery then appears to have no further point beyond itself that would confer instrumental value and intelligibility upon it, then and only then do we call it pointless. For an activity to be utterly without point or meaning then is first of all for it to have no value in its own right, and only then, for it to have no further purpose the achievement of which explains and justifies it. The supermarket circle and biological regress concentrate on showing that vindicating purposes never get wholly realized, but this would establish pointlessness only if all activities, human or animal, were sheer drudgery, without value in themselves. Some activities carry their own point within themselves, and for that reason, whatever their envisioned or actual consequences they are not "pointless." An adult salmon who has grown to maximum size and strength in the ocean, and is ready to begin his dangerous dash upstream to mating waters, is about to savor salmon existence in its purity, the salmon equivalent of "living to the hilt." "This is what being a salmon is all about," he might declare joyously. He will get battered about in the process, but if he could reason he might well conclude that the risk of injuries is justified by the inherent rewards, and like an adolescent football player preparing for his first game, he would be alive with anticipatory excitement.

Taylor asserts that human lives are absurd in the sense of having no point, but restricts the notion of a "point" to a state of affairs subsequent in time whose achievement confers instrumental value back on the life that created it, or at least is intended to do so whether successful or not. But there might be no such "point" outside of or after a person's life, yet nevertheless his life might have its own point—indeed it might *be* its own point. A fulfilled life may be absurd (pointless in Taylor's sense), yet not truly pointless because fulfillment is its point. This second kind of "point" looks backward in time, and exists because it fits some anticipatory condition, like an antecedent disposition. Actions producing the first kind of "point," in contrast, look forward to a time beyond their own termination, and to the production of lasting achievement. There is little point in that sense to the salmon's heroics, but they might yet escape absurdity if they discharge a fundamental native disposition of salmon nature—as they clearly do.

## THE CONCEPT OF SELF-FULFILLMENT

There are various technical concepts of self-fulfillment associated with the writings of such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hegel, whose histories go back to the earliest beginnings of Western philosophy and are equally venerable in Eastern thought. There also seem to be one or more notions of self-fulfillment, perhaps less clearly conceived and articulable, that are part of ordinary thought, as, for example, when people say that one kind of life, or one kind of marriage, hobby, or career, is preferred because it is more fulfilling.

In applying the ordinary concept of self-fulfillment, people seem, on different occasions, to use as many as four different models for their understanding. On the first model, fulfillment is simply the answering to *any* anticipatory condition, whether one's own or another's—promises, hopes, expectations, desires, requirements, or whatever. The second is "filling up, being made full." The third is the opposite of the second, namely, emptying, unwinding, discharging, untying—draining one's cup of life to the dregs. Each of these familiar models comes with its own metaphors to guide (or obscure) the understanding. It is the fourth model, however, that of "doing what comes naturally," that purports to be more "philosophical," and is the more important one for our present purposes. This model restricts itself to the basic dispositions of one's "nature," and where these differ or conflict, to the "higher" or "better" ones. Moreover, fulfillment on this model is not merely a discharging, but also a maturing and perfecting of our basic dispositions. Finally, fulfillment so interpreted is often said to be a "realizing of one's potential," where the word "potential" refers not only to one's basic natural proclivities to engage in activities of certain kinds, but also to one's natural capacities to acquire skills and talents, to exercise those abilities effectively, and thus to produce achievements. Insofar as one fails to "realize one's potential," one's life is thought, on this as well as the third model, to be "wasted."

This understanding of self-fulfillment is much too abstract to be useful, and the main challenge to the philosophers, from Aristotle on, who have tried to incorporate it, has been to give it specificity. Almost anything one does can be said to fulfill a prior disposition to act in precisely that way in circumstances of that kind, or to implant or strengthen the habit of acting that way in the future. Thus almost any action can be said to discharge a natural tendency, to be a doing of what it is in one's nature to do. Philosophers who have fashioned a technical concept of self-fulfillment from the vaguer everyday notion have for the most part assigned it a crucial role in the definition of "the good for man." For that reason, most of them have begun the task of specification by ruling out as self-fulfilling, actions that violate objective standards of morality or that are radically defective in other ways. If a man has the bad habit, acquired and reinforced over a lifetime, of stealing purses, then a given act of stealing a purse, even though it fulfills one of the basic dispositions of his (evil) character, cannot

be allowed to count as self-fulfilling. The same kind of fiat has excluded evil actions that discharge native propensities, for example, the angry tirades or physical assaults of a person who is irascible, hotheaded, or aggressive "by nature." Such arbitrary exclusions do not shock common sense, but there does seem to be at least as much warrant in ordinary conceptions for saying that it may be a bad thing that certain kinds of self be fulfilled, but that the discharging of basic "evil" dispositions remains fulfillment, and properly so called, anyway.

Some philosophers in the grand tradition have also excluded from their conception of self-fulfillment, activities that fulfill dispositions peculiar to individual persons, so as to give special importance to activities that fulfill those dispositions that define our common human nature. The phrase "a person's nature" is of course ambiguous. It may refer to the nature he shares with all and only human beings, his "generic nature" as it were, the nature that makes him classifiable as the kind of being he is, or it may refer to the nature that belongs uniquely to him, his "individual nature," the character that distinguishes him from all other individuals of his kind. My generic nature includes my disposition to walk upright and to speak a language,<sup>28</sup> among other things. It is part of *my* individual nature, on the other hand, to be interested in philosophy, to be punctual at meetings, to be slow at mathematics, and to be irritable when very tired or hungry. Some of the traits that characterize me but not everybody else are not thought to be part of my individual nature because they are weak and tentative habits rather than governing propensities, or because they are trivial (like my habit of scratching my head when deliberating). My individual nature is partly acquired; my generic nature is derived entirely from heredity. I come into existence with it already "loaded and cocked."

Those philosophers of fulfillment who attach special significance to our generic natures tend to draw heavily on biological as well as mechanical metaphors. In a fulfilled life our preprogrammed potentialities "unfold" like the petals of a rose, each in its time, until the plant is fully flowered and "flourishing." Then there follows an equally natural, gradual withering and expiring, and the life of one plant, at least, has been fulfilled. Another plant, much like the first, is caught in a frost and nipped in the bud, never to achieve its "own good" as determined by its natural latencies—the very paradigm of a tragic waste. John Stuart Mill refers to qualities that are "the distinctive endowment" not of the individual in question but of a human being as such: "the human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, even moral preference,"<sup>29</sup> these understood as standing to human nature in the same relation as that in which unfolding and flourishing stand to the nature of a rose.

I believe it is a mistake, however (and not one committed in common thought), to exclude individual natures from one's conception of self-fulfillment. If we are told by philosophical sages to act always so as to unfold our generic human natures, we have not been given very clear directions at all. Any number of alternative lives might equally well fulfill one's generic

nature, yet some might seem much more “fulfilling,” in a perfectly ordinary and intelligible sense, than others. William James makes the point well:

I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest. Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a *bon vivant*, and a lady-killer, as well as philosopher, a philanthropist, statesman, warrior, and African explorer, as well as a “tone-poet” and saint. But the thing is simply impossible. The millionaire’s work would run counter to the saint’s; the *bon vivant* and the philanthropist would trip each other up; the philosopher and the lady-killer could not well keep house in the same tenement of clay. Such different characters may conceivably at the outset of life be alike possible to a man. But to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed.<sup>30</sup>

All James’ possible careers might equally well fulfill his human nature, just as all the variously colored unfoldings of roses might equally well fulfill a rose’s generic nature, but a rose cannot pick its own individual character, whereas a man has some choice. Since some of James’ lives (presumably the philosophical one, to begin with) would be more fulfilling than others, it must be his individual nature qua William James that makes that so. The point would be even clearer if James had listed among the possibilities, “anchorite monk,” “operatic *basso profundo*” “brain surgeon,” and “drill sergeant.” Some of these careers obviously accord more closely than others with *anyone’s* native aptitudes, inherited temperament, and natural inclinations. How does one choose among them if one is seeking fulfillment? By “knowing oneself,” of course, but not simply by knowing well the defining traits of *any* human being. To be sure, making the choice itself is a characteristically human act and calls into play all of the generic human traits of Mill’s list—perception, discrimination, insight, and the like—but to exercise those traits effectively and well, and thus unfold one’s generic human nature, one must first know one’s individual character as so far formed, and make the decision that best fits it. Mill’s final and favorite metaphor, indeed, is that of a life fitting an individual nature in the way a shoe fits a foot: “A man cannot get a coat or a pair of boots to fit him unless they are either made to his measure or he has a whole warehouseful to choose from; and is it easier to fit him with a life than with a coat.[?]”<sup>31</sup>

Some of a person’s individual nature is native, for example, much of what we call aptitudes, temperamental dispositions, and physical strength. A fulfilling life therefore is one that “fits” these native endowments. But we make our own natures as we grow older, building on the native base. We begin, partly because of our inherited proclivities and talents, to develop tastes, habits, interests, and values. We cultivate the skills that grow naturally out of our aptitudes, and as we get better at them we enjoy them more and exercise them further so that they get better still, while we are inclined to neglect the tasks for which our skills are inadequate, and those abilities wither and decay on the vine.<sup>32</sup> The careers we then select as workers, players, and

lovers, should be those that fit our well-formed individual natures, at least insofar as each stage in the emergence of the self grew naturally out of its predecessor in the direction of our native bent.

Emphasis should be given to the further point that fulfillment of one's generic and individual natures are interconnected and interdependent. The passages in *On Liberty* in which Mill urges fulfillment of the "distinctive endowment" of generic humanity occur, ironically, in a chapter entitled "Individuality as One of the Elements of Well-Being," and nowhere in that chapter can Mill discuss individuality for long without bringing in human nature and vice versa. His view clearly is that it is essential to the generic nature of human beings that each think and decide for himself rather than blindly follow all the rest, so that in cultivating the capacities that human beings share in common, each individual will at the same time be promoting his own distinctive individuality. If I pick a career that fits my individual nature instead of blindly drifting with custom or passively acceding to the choices of another, then I have exercised my generic nature as a thinker and chooser, at the same time that I have promoted the fulfillment of my individual nature as a person with a unique profile of interests and aptitudes.

Useful as it may be for some purposes the distinction between generic and individual natures is vague and ragged about the edges, a point we can appreciate by returning to the plight of Taylor's Sisyphus. Depending on the extent to which the gods had to tamper with him, he has either had a new individual nature grafted on to his basic human nature, or else a new (hence nonhuman) generic nature installed in him. If we say the former, then we must think of his infinite rock-pushing proclivities as merely personal eccentricities, only contingently unshared by other persons who share his human nature. If we say the latter, then the individual nature of Sisyphus and his generic nature coincide, since he is now one of a kind, the sole member of his new species. A rock-pushing instinct that is so specific would be such a departure from what we normally think of as human nature, so totally unshared by any other humans that perhaps there would be a point in saying that Sisyphus has a new generic nature, humanoid but not human, and that he is now the only member of the biological species *Homo sapiens geopetris*—sapient rock-pusher. Still more plausible, perhaps, we might think of the new Sisyphus as a borderline case for our old classifications. Unless we hold to the discredited doctrine of fixed species, we can simply declare that there is no uniquely correct answer to the question of whether Sisyphus' generic nature has been changed, and that considerations of convenience and tidiness are as relevant to its resolution as are any questions of fact.

Moreover, when we consider thoughtfully the whole range of hypothetical Sisyphuses from which we might draw in order to flesh out Taylor's example, we are struck with how very vague the notion of a "nature" is, whether generic or individual. What is in Sisyphus's nature (or the nature of anyone else) is very much like what is in his (cluttered) closet or in his grab bag, including everything from aptitudes and interests to addictive compulsions. Think of all the variations on Taylor's theme: the gods might

have implanted in Sisyphus an *appetite* for stone-pushing that makes regular and frequent demands on him, like hunger or the “sex urge” in others, and corresponding in its cycles to the time it takes to push a rock of standard size up Sisyphus’ assigned mountain and then return again to the bottom of the hill. “Ye gods!” he might exclaim after each round of labors, “how I hunger for a nice big rock to push,” and the accommodating deities always have one ready for him, like the next ball up in a pinball machine. Or the gods might have designed for him a peculiar talent for rock-pushing much like others’ talents for piano-playing, tennis, or chess. The new Sisyphus starts all over as a perpetual youth, and from the start he is a veritable prodigy at rock-pushing. He comes to enjoy exercising his skills, and makes ever-new challenges for himself. He pushes the rock right-handed, then left-handed, then no-handed, then blindfolded, then does two at a time, then juggles three in the air all the way to the summit, eager to return for another rock so that he can break his record, or equal it next time while dancing a Grecian jig. Or the gods do their job by implanting an instinct for rock-pushing so that Sisyphus goes about his chores without giving them so much as a thought (except in rare reflective moments and then only to shrug his shoulders and get on with it). His work is as natural and unremarkable to him as having a language or standing upright is to us, or building a dam to a beaver, or peeling a banana to a chimpanzee. Or (perhaps more plausibly) the gods implant a drive or more general proclivity of which stone-pushing is only one of numerous possible fulfillments. If there were only opportunity to do so, Sisyphus would find it equally in his nature to push wooden logs, or plastic bags, or iron bars, or to pull, lift, carry, and throw objects, or to push them while swimming against a current, or to pile, hook, or nail them on to one another as in construction work, and the like. But pushing rocks up a mountain will do as well as any of the other activities as fulfillments of his drive to move and manipulate physical objects and he can be grateful to the gods for that. Or, the gods can use Taylor’s own suggested method, and give Sisyphus (say) a shot in the arm after each trip so that he will feel a “compulsive impulse” to push the rock up once more in order to get relief in the form of another addicting shot. This technique would keep the gods busier than the others, but they could let some internal gland, timed to secrete the essential substance into Sisyphus’s bloodstream at appropriate intervals, do the work for them. There is something especially ingenious in this last scheme, for the “shot” given at the base of the hill creates the impulse to push the rock up the hill and also the addictive need, when its first effect wears off, to be renewed by another shot, and so on, ad infinitum.

If the gods’ gift to Sisyphus is merely an appetite to push rocks he may yet fail to find self-fulfillment on balance in an indefinitely extended lifetime of rock-pushing, just as one of us might fail to be fulfilled in a life that gives us all the food we need, but nothing else. Sisyphus will have the periodic satisfactions of regular appetite satiation, and that is certainly some benefit to him, but the deepest yearnings of his nature will nevertheless be forever denied. Much the same can be said of his condition if the gods simply addict him chemically to

a substance that creates a rock-pushing itch, or if they implant in him an extra-human instinct to push rocks that fails to dovetail or integrate with the human instincts he must continue to maintain if he is to preserve his identity with his earlier self. The model that makes talk of Sisyphean self-fulfillment most plausible is probably that in which the gods impart to him talents for rock-moving that he can forever after exercise and glory in. So endowed, he can find self-fulfillment through his developed virtuosity, in the same way others find fulfillment in lives of skilled cello-playing or cabinet-making.

No conception of self-fulfillment will make much sense unless it allows that fulfillment is a matter of degree. We begin life with a large number of potential careers some of which fit our native bent more closely than others but any of which, if pursued through a lifetime, would lead to substantial fulfillment, so that the pursuit of no *one* of them is indispensable to a fulfilled life. Imagine a warm and loving woman who is superbly equipped by her nature to be a parent, and has thought of herself throughout her girlhood as a potential mother. She marries and then discovers that she is barren. Had she not been infertile she would have achieved fulfillment in a long lifetime of nearly full-time motherhood. Is it now impossible for her to be fulfilled in a life without children? Clearly not, for the very traits that make her "superbly equipped" to be a mother will make her more than a little qualified for dozens of other roles, and a fulfilled life could stem from any one of these, from social work to school-teaching,<sup>33</sup> or even from a career based on independent specific aptitudes like poetry or basket-weaving. She may be disappointed that her chief ambition is squelched and her regrets may last a lifetime, but disappointment and fulfillment can coexist with little friction, as they do to some degree in most human lives. Thus, we each have within us a number of distinct individual possibilities, several (at least) of which would be sufficient for (a degree of) fulfillment, but no one of which is necessary. But the most fulfilling ones are those that best fit one's latent talents, interests, and initial bent and with one's evolving self-ideal (as opposed simply to one's conscious desires or formulated ambitions).

Some fulfilled human lives are relatively monochromatic, having a single dominant theme; others are diversely colored, having a harmonious orchestration of themes with equal voices. All of them approach fulfillment insofar as they fill their natural allotment of years with vigorous activity. They need not be "successful," or "triumphant," or even contented on balance in order to be fulfilled, provided they are long lifetimes full of struggles and strivings, achievements and noble failures, contentments and frustrations, friendships and enmities, exertions and relaxations, seriousness and playfulness through all the programmed stages of growth and decay. Most important of all, a fulfilled human life will be a life of planning, designing, making order out of confusion and system out of randomness, a life of building, repairing, rebuilding, creating, pursuing goals, and solving problems. It is in the generic nature of the human animal to address the future, change its course, make the best of the situation. If one's house falls down, if one's cities are in rubble, if disaster comes and goes, the human inclination is to start all over again, rebuilding from scratch. There is no "fulfillment" in resignation and despair.

Sisyphus does seem very human after all, then, when he reshoulders his burden and starts back up his hill. But insofar as his situation is rigidly fixed by the gods, allowing him no discretion to select means, design strategies, and solve problems on his own, his life does not fulfill the governing human propensities. If he can fulfill his nature without these discretionary activities, then he has really assumed the nature of a different species.

In all the variations on the Sisyphus myth that we have spun thus far, the gods have assigned a very specific job to Sisyphus that requires no particular judgment or ingenuity on his part to be performed well. They have imposed a duty on him rather than assigning a responsibility.<sup>34</sup> He has a rote job to perform over and over, a mulish task for a mulish fellow, and his is not to reason why or how, but only to get on with it. Suppose, however, that the gods assign to Sisyphus an endless series of rather complex engineering problems and leave it up to him to solve them. Somehow rocks must be moved to mountain tops and there can be no excuses for failure. "Get it up there somehow," they say. "The methods are up to you. Feel free to experiment and invent. Keep a record of your intermediate successes and failures and be prepared to give us an accounting of the costs. You may hire your own assistants and within certain well-defined limits you have authority to give them commands, so long as you are prepared to answer for the consequences of their work. Now good luck to you." If Sisyphus's subsequent labors are fulfilling, they will be so in a characteristically human way. His individual nature will be fulfilled by a life (endless and pointless though it may be) that fits his native bent and employs his inherited talents and dispositions to the fullest, as well as fitting his more specific individual tendencies, for example, a special fascination (perhaps also a gift of the gods) with rocks.

## WHY DOES SELF-FULFILLMENT MATTER?

Why should it "matter" that a person is unfulfilled if, despite his stunted and dwarfed self, the product perhaps of alienating work and other "unfitting" circumstances, he finds a steady diet of satisfactions in delusory occupations, escapist literature, drugs, drink, and television? Why should it "matter," to turn the question around, that a person finds fulfillment when his life looks as absurd from a longer perspective as the life of a shellfish appears to us?

Think first of what a substantially unfulfilled life involves. A person comes into existence with a set of governing dispositions that sets him off with others as a being of a certain kind. For twenty years he grows and matures, enlarging and perfecting his inherited propensities so that he becomes utterly unique, with a profile of talents and individual traits that, as a group, distinguish him from every other being who has ever existed, and constitute his individual nature. Perhaps he is capable of seeing, from time to time, that this "nature" of his is more than a little absurd. What he does best and

most, let us imagine, is play chess and ping-pong and socialize with others who share those interests. He takes those pursuits more seriously than anything else in his life. But he knows that they are, after all, only games, of no cosmic significance whatever, and certainly of no interest to the indifferent universe, to posterity, to history, or to any of the other abstract tribunals by which humans in their more magniloquent moods are wont to measure significance. And yet, absurd as it is, it is *his* nature, and the only one he has, so somehow he must make the best of it and seek his own good in pursuit of its dominant talents. Whose nature could he try to fulfill, after all, but his own? Where else can his own good conceivably be found? It was not up to him to choose his own nature, for that would presuppose that the choosing self already had a nature of its own determining its choice. But given the nature with which he finds himself indissolubly identified for better or worse, he must follow the path discovered in it and identify his good with the goals toward which his nature is already inclined.

Now suppose that he makes a mess of it through imprudence, frivolity, or recklessness; or imagine that the world withdraws its opportunities; or that lightning strikes and leaves him critically incapacitated for the realization of his potential. That leaves him still the pleasure of his diminished consciousness, his soma pills and television programs, his comic books and crossword puzzles, but his deepest nature will forever remain unfulfilled. Now we think of that nature, with all of its elaborate neurochemical equipment underlying its distinctive drives and talents and forming its uniquely complex character, as largely unused, wasted, all for naught. All wound up, it can never discharge or wind down again. In contrast, the life of fulfillment strikes us as one that comes into being prone and equipped to do its thing, and then uses itself up doing that thing, without waste, blockage, or friction.

When any nature is left unfulfilled it is likely to strike us as a bad thing, an objectively regrettable fact. Perhaps we would withdraw or modify that judgment when we come to appreciate how absurd that nature's preoccupations really were. But from the point of view of the self whose nature it is, nonfulfillment is more than a bad or regrettable thing to be graded down in some negative but modifiable "value judgment." It may or may not be all those things in some final balancing-up, all things considered. But from the point of view of the individual involved, nonfulfillment marks the collapse of his whole universe, the denial once and for all of his own good. There is a world of difference in the use of the word "good" as a predicate of evaluation, and its use in the venerable phrase of the philosophers—"one's own good." My good is something peculiarly mine, as determined by my nature alone, and particularly by its most powerful trends and currents. Anything else that is good for me (or in my interest) is good because it contributes to my good, the fulfillment of my strongest stable tendencies. One can judge or evaluate that good from some other standpoint, employing some other standard, and the resultant judgment may use the words "good," "bad," or "indifferent." It may not be a good thing that my good be achieved or that it be achieved in a given way, or at a given cost. But it is logically irrelevant to

the question of *what my good is* whether my good is itself “good” when judged from an external position. My nonfulfillment may not be a “bad thing on balance” in another’s judgment or even in my own. My nonfulfillment may not be “objectively regrettable” or tragic. But my nonfulfillment cannot be *my good* even if it is from all other measuring points, a good thing.

It is perhaps not quite self-evident that my good consists in fulfillment. A hedonist might hold out for the position that my good consists in a balance of pleasant over unpleasant experiences while denying that the basic disposition of my nature is to seek pleasure, thus denying that pleasant experiences as such are fulfilling. I cannot refute such a heroic (and lonely) philosopher. But I would like to urge against the philosopher who is overly impressed with the fact of human absurdity, that if my good is fulfillment, it must be fulfillment of *my* nature and not of something else. That my nature is eccentric, absurd, laughable, trivial, cosmically insignificant, is neither here nor there. Such as it is, it is my nature for better or worse. The self whose good is at issue is the self I am and not some other self that I might have been. If I had had any choice in the matter I might have preferred to come into existence with the nature (that is the potential) of William James, John F. Kennedy, or Michael Jordan, but I cannot spend all my days lamenting that the only nature whose fulfillment constitutes my good is my own!

The prerequisite to self-fulfillment is a certain amount of clear-eyed, nondeluded self-love. A moment ago I spoke of one’s own nature “such as it is,” “for better or worse.” These phrases recall the wedding ceremony and its conception of marital love as loyalty and devotion without condition or reservation. Totally unconditional devotion may be too much to ask from any lover, but within wide limits, various kinds of human love of others have a largely unconditional character. Gregory Vlastos describes parental love, for example, in a way that makes it quite familiar: “Constancy of affection in the face of variations of merit is one of the surest tests of whether a parent does love a child.”<sup>35</sup> Judgments of merit have nothing to do with love so construed. A child’s failures, even moral failures, may disappoint his parents’ hopes without weakening their loyalty or affection in the slightest. A parent may admire one child more than another, or like (in the sense of “enjoy”) one more than another, as well as judge one higher than the other, but it is a necessary condition of parental love that, short of limiting extremes, it not fluctuate with these responses to merit.

The love that any stable person has toward himself will be similarly constant and independent of perceived merits and demerits. I may (realistically) assign myself very low grades for physique, intellect, talent, even character—indeed I may ascribe deficiencies even to my individual nature itself—while still remaining steadfastly loyal and affectionate to myself. Aristotle was right on target when he said that a wise man ought to have exactly that degree of self-esteem that is dictated by the facts, neither more nor less. But self-esteem is not self-love. I have self-love for myself when I accept my nature as given, without apology or regret, even as I work, within the limits it imposes, for self-improvement. We have been through a lot together, my self and I,

sharing everything alike, and as long as I have supported him, he has never let me down. I have scolded him, but never cursed his nature. He is flawed all right, and deeply so, but when the warts show, I smile, fondly and indulgently. His blunders are just what one would expect from anyone with his nature. One cannot come to hate a being with whom one has been so very intimate. Indeed, I would not know how to begin to cope with another self after all my years of dependency, "for better or worse," on this one. In this way self-identity can be conceived as a kind of arranged marriage (I did not select the self that was to be me) that in a stable person ripens into true love, but in an unstable one sours into rancor and self-destruction. And the truest expression of one's self-love is devotion toward one's own good, which is the fulfillment of one's own (who else's?) nature—absurd as that may be.

## THE CRITIQUE OF COSMIC ATTITUDES

Some lives are manifestly and incontrovertibly absurd. Lives spent moving metaphoric rocks back and forth to no further end and lives spent tangling with metaphoric windmills are cases in point. Other lives are full of achievement and design. In these lives, intermediate goals lend meaning to the pursuits that are instrumental to their achievement, and they in turn are given a point by the more ultimate goals they subserve. No goal is *the* ultimate one, however, for the most general ends are themselves means to a great variety of other ends, all tied together in an intricate and harmonious web of purpose. There may be no purpose to the whole web except its service to its own component parts, but each constituent has a place and a vindicating significance to the person whose life it is. Such a life is, relatively speaking, not absurd. There is no doubt an important practical point in distinguishing human lives in terms of their degree of absurdity, even in highlighting and emphasizing the distinctions. (Marx's doctrine of alienation is an example of the social utility of making such distinctions.) As we have seen, however, philosophers have found reason to claim that there is a kind of cosmic absurdity inherent in the human condition as such. As we stand back and look at ourselves from an extended temporal position, the distinction between absurd and nonabsurd lives begins to fade into insignificance, and finally vanishes altogether.

We also make useful distinctions between relatively fulfilled and unfulfilled selves, or fulfilling and unfulfilling lives. However we interpret "fulfillment—as the development of one's chief aptitudes into genuine talents in a life that gives them scope, or an unfolding of all basic tendencies and inclinations, or an active realization of the universally human propensities to plan, design, make order—there are wide differences among persons in the degree of fulfillment they achieve. Some lives are wasted; some are partially wasted and partially fulfilled; others are nearly totally fulfilled. Unlike the contrast between absurd and nonabsurd lives, these distinctions seem to be

time-resistant. If Hubert Humphrey's life was fulfilling to him, that is a fact like any other, and it never ceases to be true that it was a fact. From any temporal distance from which it can be observed at all it will continue to appear to be a fact (though a diminishingly interesting or important one).

Consider a human life that is near-totally fulfilled, yet from a quite accessible imaginary vantage point is apparently absurd. Insofar as the person in question is fulfilled, he ought to "feel good" about his life, and rejoice that he has achieved his good. Suppose that he realizes then how futile it all was, "coming to nothing in the end." What would be the appropriate attitude in that event to hold toward his life? Unchanged pride and satisfaction? Bitterness and despair? Haughty existential scorn? We can call such responsive attitudes taken toward one's whole life and by implication toward the whole human condition, "cosmic attitudes." One of the traditional tasks of philosophy (and what philosophy is entirely about in the minds of innocent persons unacquainted with the academic discipline of that name) is to perform a kind of literary criticism of cosmic attitudes. It used to be the custom for philosophers not only to describe the universe in its more general aspects but to recommend cosmic attitudes toward the world as so described.

I welcome the suggestion of Nagel that the appropriate responsive attitude toward human lives that are both absurd and fulfilled is *irony*,<sup>36</sup> and I shall conclude by elaborating that suggestion somewhat beyond the bare recommendation that Nagel offers.

None of the familiar senses of irony in language or in objective occurrences seem to make any sense out of the advice that we respond to absurdity with irony. What Nagel has in mind clearly is another sense in which irony is a kind of outlook on events, namely, "an attitude of detached awareness of incongruity."<sup>37</sup> This is a state of mind halfway between seriousness and playfulness. It may even seem to the person involved that he is both very serious and playful at the same time. The tension between these opposed elements pulling in their opposite ways creates at least temporarily a kind of mental equilibrium not unlike that of the boy in Lincoln's story who was "too scared to laugh and too big to cry," except that the boy squirms with discomfort whereas irony is on balance an *appreciative* attitude.<sup>38</sup> One appreciates the perceived incongruity much as one does in humor, where the sudden unexpected perception of incongruity produces laughter. Here the appreciation is more deliberate and intellectual. The situation is too unpleasant in some way—sad, threatening, disappointing—to permit the relaxed playfulness of spirit prerequisite to the comic response. There is a kind of bittersweet pleasure in it, but not the pleasure of amusement. The situation is surely not seen as funny, although perhaps it would be if only one could achieve a still more detached outlook on it. One contemplates a situation with irony when one looks the facts in the eye and responds in an appreciative way to their incongruous aspects as such. Irony is quite different from despair-cum-tears, scornful defiance-cum-anger, and amusement-cum-laughter. It is pleasant enough to be expressed characteristically in a smile, but a somewhat tired smile, with a touch both of gentleness and mischievousness in it, as befitting the expression of a tempered pleasure.

In one of the most moving scenes of the twenty-seven-part BBC documentary film on the First World War, a group of British reinforcements is shown marching toward the front. We know that they are cannon fodder marching to their own slaughter, and they know it too. They are foot-sore and bone-weary, and splattered with mud, and a steady rain is falling. The song they sing as they march is not a rousing anthem like "La Marseillaise" or "Rule, Britannia!" nor a cocky fight song like "Over There," not a jolly drinking song like "Waltzing Matilda," not a sentimental ballad, hymn of lamentation, or mournful dirge. Instead they sing to the stirring tune of "Auld Lang Syne" the famous nonsense verse they created for the occasion:

We're here because we're here  
Because we're here because we're here;  
We're here because we're here  
Because we're here because we're here . . .

The observer of the film feels a sudden pang and finds himself near tears, but quickly he perceives the absurdity in the lyrics and responds appreciatively to it, just as the troops, by selecting those words, are responding to the perceived absurdity in their situation. The sensitive observer sees how fitting the ironic response of the soldiers is (and how dreadfully false any of its standard alternatives would have been) and himself takes a quiet sad pleasure in it. The soldiers were in an inescapably absurd predicament, without hope, and only by their unflinching acceptance of the absurdity of their situation are they saved from absurdity themselves. For us, the unseen audience, there is an inspiration in their example that makes the scene noble.

I do not mean to suggest for a moment that the march of the doomed soldiers is an apt metaphor for the whole of human life. The soldiers' brief lives were tragically wasted. If they had been specially bred military animals they might have found both a personal and biological fulfillment in their peculiar demises, but they were ordinary humans whose bizarre and untimely deaths climaxed their undeveloped and unfinished lives. In contrast, many individuals do achieve fulfillment in long, active, creative lives. These lives are more than just "worthwhile"; they represent to those who lead them the achievement of the only condition that can plausibly be deemed "their good." So philosophical "pessimism," the view of Schopenhauer and others that *no* life can *possibly* be worth living given the absurdity of the human condition, must be rejected. Its logical contrary, that cosmic optimism that holds that all human lives necessarily are, or always can be, good and worthwhile, must also be rejected, in favor of the commonsense view that fulfillment requires luck, and luck is not always good in a world that contains violent passions, accidents, disease, and war.

In this chapter, however, I have tried not only to sketch a conception of the good life and the bad but also to recommend an appropriate attitude toward the human condition generally. Imagine a person who both through his own virtues and good luck has led a maximally fulfilling life into his

final declining years. He has realized his highest individual potential in a career that perfectly fit his inherited temperamental proclivities. His talents and virtues have unfolded steadily in a life that gave them limitless opportunity for exercise, and he has similarly perfected his generic human powers of discrimination, sympathy, and judgment in a life full of intermeshing purposes and goals. All of this is a source of rich satisfaction to him, until in the philosophical autumn of his days, he chances upon the legend of Sisyphus, the commentary of Camus, and the essays of Taylor and Nagel. In a flash he sees the vanity of all his pursuits, the total permeability of his achievements by time, the lack of any long-term rationale for his purposes, in a word the absurdity of his (otherwise good) life. At first he will feel a keen twinge. But unless he be misled by the sophistries of the philosophical pessimists who confuse the empty ideal of long-term coherence with the Good for Man, he will soon recover. And then will come a dawning bittersweet appreciation of the cosmic incongruities first called to his attention by the philosophers. The thought that there should be a modest kind of joke at the heart of human existence begins to please (if not quite tickle) him. Now he can die not with a whine or a snarl, but with an ironic smile.

## NOTES

1. Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 259.
2. *Ibid.*
3. The various essays in which Camus gives his most thorough account of absurdity have been translated into English by Justin O'Brien and published in one volume under the title *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955).
4. Taylor, *Good and Evil*, p. 258.
5. Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 718.
6. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 22.
7. Nagel, "Absurd," pp. 716-27. See also his *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 208-32.
8. Cartoon by Handelsman, *New Yorker*, July 6, 1981, p. 34.
9. Or first taking away and then giving, as in the unfunny example of absurdity from the Civil War: "Lincoln and Brooks lingered at the cot of a wounded soldier who held with a weak white hand a tract given him by a well-dressed lady performing good works that morning. The soldier read the title of the tract and then began laughing. Lincoln noticed that the lady of good works was still nearby, and told the soldier that undoubtedly the lady meant well. 'It is hardly fair of you to laugh at her gift.' The soldier gave Lincoln something to remember. 'Mr. President, how can I help laughing a little? She has given me a tract on the 'Sin of Dancing,' and both my legs are shot off'" (Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926], 2:293).
10. W. D. Joske, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 52 (August 1974): 93-104. Joske gives an example of a whole individual life that could seem absurd because trivial in this sense. "We find ourselves bewildered by the school master in Guthrie Wilson's novel, *The Incorruptibles*, who devotes his life to parsing and analyzing every sentence of *Paradise Lost*." A contrasting example

of a life that is absurd because futile would be one devoted full-time to an attempt to square the circle.

11. Taylor, *Good and Evil*, p. 262.
12. Ibid., p. 263.
13. Ibid., p. 260.
14. Ibid., p. 263.
15. Ibid., p. 264.
16. Bernard Williams, "The Makropoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 82–100. Jonathan Glover replies to Williams: "But I am not convinced that someone with a fairly constant character *need* eventually become intolerably bored, so long as [he] can watch the world continue to unfold and go on asking new questions and thinking, and so long as there are other people to share their feelings and thoughts with. Given the company of the right people, I would be glad of the chance to sample a few million years and see how it went" (*Causing Death and Saving Lives* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977], p. 57).
17. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 21.
18. Ibid., p. 9.
19. Ibid., p. 10.
20. Moritz Schlick, "On the Meaning of Life," in *Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979), 2:112–28.
21. See Taylor's illustration of the New Zealand Cave Gloworm (*Good and Evil*, pp. 261–62).
22. Nagel, "Absurd," p. 724.
23. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 91.
24. Nagel, "Absurd," p. 718.
25. Ibid., p. 726.
26. This is the final line of Jean-Paul Sartre's play, *No Exit* (*Huis Clos*), translated by Stewart Gilbert (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).
27. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias*, lines 2–4, 11, 12.
28. There have been feral children who have permanently lost their ability to learn a language and children born without legs who never acquire the ability to walk. But insofar as these persons are human beings, they are born with the innate *capacity* to acquire the dispositions and skills involved in walking and talking even though circumstances prevent that capacity from being realized. The capacities in question are often conditional ones: all human children have the capacity to learn a language, which is activated between the ages of two and twelve only, and only if they are made part of a language-speaking community during those years. That conditional capacity to acquire the dispositions and skills involved in language use is common to all human beings.
29. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), p. 51.
30. William James, *Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1893), 1:309; as quoted in Lucius Garvin, *A Modern Introduction to Ethics* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1953), p. 333.
31. Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 60.
32. John Rawls calls the statement of this psychological tendency "the Aristotelian Principle" and states it as follows: "Other things being equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity. The intuitive idea here is that human beings take more pleasure in doing something as they

become more proficient at it, and of two activities they do equally well, they prefer the one calling for a larger repertoire of more intricate and subtle discriminations." Rawls cites the preference among good players for chess over checkers and among good mathematicians for algebra over arithmetic (*A Theory of Justice* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971], p. 426).

33. Aptitudes and basic dispositions differ in an important way from ordinary desires, plans, and ambitions. The latter characteristically tend to be more precise and determinate than the former, and therefore less flexible and easy to "fulfill." Many ambitions are for some relatively specific object and when that object does not come into existence the ambition is denied: General interests, talents, and drives, however, can typically find substitute objects that do equally well. If one has a highly developed mechanical aptitude, for example, one can employ it equally well as an airplane or an automobile mechanic, as well as a carpenter or a plumber, or in a hundred other callings. One's ambition to be an automobile mechanic, on the other hand, is squelched once and for all, by the denial of opportunity to enter that particular field. For this reason, fulfillment is, on the whole, less difficult to achieve than successful ambition or "satisfaction."
34. The distinction between duty and responsibility is well made by J. Roland Pennock in "The Problem of Responsibility," *Nomos III: Responsibility*, ed. C. J. Friedrich (New York: Atherton, 1960), p. 13: "We normally reserve [the word 'responsibility'] for cases where the performance of duty requires discernment and choice. We might well say, to a child, 'It is your responsibility to take care of your room,' but we would not be likely to say, 'It is your responsibility to do as you are told.'"
35. Gregory Vlastos, "Justice and Equality," in *Social Justice*, ed. Richard B. Brandt (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 44.
36. Nagel, "Absurd," p. 707: "If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair."
37. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1976), based on *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*. Of the five English dictionaries I consulted, only this newest one contained any definition of irony as an attitude. Is that because this sense is relatively new or because dictionary-makers have heretofore overlooked it?
38. "The President takes the result of the New York election [a defeat for his party] philosophically, and will doubtless profit by the lesson. When Colonel Forney inquired of him how he felt he replied: 'Somewhat like the boy in Kentucky who stubbed his toe while running to see his sweetheart. The boy said he was too big to cry, and far too badly hurt to laugh'" (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, November 22, 1862).

*Living Without Appeal:  
An Affirmative  
Philosophy of Life*



From time to time, philosophers get together at congresses and symposia in which some philosophers read papers and others criticize and raise questions. To the layman, I am sure, the topics which are discussed seem highly technical and inaccessible, and the vocabulary used is, doubtless, unintelligible. Indeed, if the ordinary man were to drop in on such meetings, he would, I suspect, find the proceedings to be either totally incomprehensible or the occasion for howling laughter. To give some indication of what I am referring to, I shall list the titles of some recent philosophical papers, many of which are acknowledged to be very important works:

- The meaning of a word
- Performative-constative
- Negative existentials
- Excluders
- Reference and referents
- Proper names
- On referring
- Parenthetical verbs
- Bare particulars
- Elementarism, independence, and ontology
- The problem of counterfactual conditionals
- Is existence a predicate?
- Etc.

This paper was first read in the Last Lecture Series, at DePauw University, and was repeated, by request, three times. In a revised form, it was read as the Top Prof lecture at Roosevelt University. It was again revised for this volume.

Upon hearing (or reading) papers such as these, the ordinary man would probably exclaim "What's this all got to do with philosophy?" And he would, no doubt, be in agreement with Kierkegaard, who once wrote:

What the philosophers say about Reality is often as disappointing as a sign you see in a shop window which reads: Pressing Done Here. If you brought your clothes to be pressed, you would be fooled; for the sign is only for sale. (*Either/Or*, v. 1, p. 31)

Now I have no quarrel with what goes on at these professional gatherings. I engage in such activities myself. I believe that most philosophical problems are highly technical and that the making of minute distinctions and the employment of a specialized vocabulary are essential for the solution of such problems. Philosophy here is in the same boat as any other discipline. For this reason, there is (and perhaps always will be) something aristocratic about the pursuit of philosophy, just as there is about the pursuit of theoretical physics or Peruvian excavation. The decriers of philosophy often overlook the fact that any discipline which amounts to more than a type of verbal diarrhea must proceed by making subtle distinctions, introducing technical terminology, and striving for as much rigor and precision as is possible. And the critics fail to see that, in philosophy as in other fields, by the very nature of the discipline, some problems will be somewhat rarified, and of interest mainly to the specialist.

On the other hand, I am inclined to think that the philosopher ought occasionally to leave the study, or the philosophical association lecture hall, or even the classroom, and, having shed his aristocratic garments, speak as a man among other men. For the philosopher is, after all, human too. Like other men, he eats, sleeps, makes love, drinks martinis (or perhaps cognac), gets the flu, files income tax, and even reads the newspapers. On such more democratic occasions, he ought to employ his analytical tools as diligently as ever. But he should select as his topic some issue which is of concern to all men, or at least most men, at some time in their lives. It is my hope that I have chosen such a topic for this essay.

The problem which I wish to discuss has been formulated in a single sentence by Camus (in *The Myth of Sisyphus*), which I take as a kind of "text." The sentence to which I am referring is: "Knowing whether or not one can live *without appeal* is all that interests me."<sup>1</sup> I say that I take this as a *kind* of text because, as so often, Camus overstates the point. Thus I would not—and perhaps most of us would not—say that, knowing whether or not one can live without appeal is *all* that interests me. But I believe that most of us would say that it certainly is one of those crucial problems which each man must confront as he tries to make sense of his life in this wondrously strange existence.

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Prophets of doom and redemption seem to exist in almost every age, and ours is no exception. It is commonly held by many present-day thinkers,

scholars, and poets, that the current state of the world and of many of the individuals within it is one of disintegration and vacuity. As they see it: Men of our age grope for disrupting principles and loyalties, and often reveal a destructive tension, a lack of wholeness, or an acute anxiety. Whether or not this is a unique situation in history, as an account of the present state of things, such disintegration is commonly mentioned. And theorists in almost every discipline and pursuit have given analyses of the current predicament and offered solutions. For example, philosophers and theologians (Jaspers, Marcel, Swenson, Tillich, Schweitzer, Niebuhr), scientists and scientific writers (Einstein, DeNuoy), sociologists (Sorokin), historians (Butterfield), among others, have waved warning signs, sometimes in a last effort to "save civilization from utter destruction." I would like to consider some points which are held in common by many of these writers (and others whom I have not indicated) and then to comment about those views. In this section, I shall state the common core of this position. In the next section, I shall make my comments and show that there is another genuine alternative.

According to many of the above writers (and others whom I have not mentioned), our age is one in which a major catastrophe has taken place. This has been designated as an increasing lack of a determining principle, the severing of a determining bond, the loss of a determining passion, or the rejection of a determining ultimate. What is the nature of this ultimate? It has been described as a principle by which finite forces are held in equilibrium, a bond which relates all horizontally functioning powers vertically to a realm beyond the finite. It is said to be a unifying and controlling power by which the varied inclinations, desires, and aims of an individual may be kept in balance. It is characterized as an agency which removes those oppositions and dichotomies which tend to destroy human selfhood. It has been held, by writers such as the above, to be a *transcendent* and *unconditional ultimate*, the one indispensable factor for the attainment of a *meaningful* and *worthwhile* existence. In their view, in order to prevent the destruction of individuals and cultures, and to provide a sense of direction and wholeness, the awareness of and relationship to such an ultimate are absolutely necessary.

Many of the writers have noted that, not only in intellectual circles, but at a much wider level, many individuals are increasingly refusing to accept the reality of this controlling ultimate. As they see it, such individuals have either remained content with a kind of vacuum in "the dimension of the spiritual," or they have "transvaluated and exalted immanent, finite forces" into a substitute for the transcendent. Men have tried—say these writers—to find equilibrium and unity through "natural," non-authoritative, self-regulating, temporal aims and principles, which they hold to be capable of an innate self-integration which requires no outside aid. According to these writers, this hope is futile, for as soon as reliance upon the transcendent ultimate ceases, disintegration results. Only when finite relationships, processes, and forces are referred back to a transhistorical order can integration, wholeness, meaning, and purpose be achieved. As long as men lack confidence in, or sever the bond to, the transcendent, their accomplishments and goals, no

matter how noble or worthy, can have no final consistency or solidity. Rather, their efforts are mere remnants of an “atrophied world,” shut up within the realm of immanence, intoxicated with itself, lured by “phantasms and idolatrous forces.”

According to this view, the integrity of the individual is today threatened by the loss of belief in the transcendent ultimate and its replacement by a “devitalized” and “perverse” confidence in the all-sufficiency of the finite. The only remedy, we are told, is the recognition of the determining regulation of a dimension beyond the fleeting pace of the temporal world, by which alone existence can have worth and value.

At this point, one might be tempted to ask several questions of these writers:

(1) “Even if the above characterization of the world has some truth, must one look to transcendentalism as the remedy? Cannot a ‘natural’ philosophy or principle help us?”

The usual answer is: No. All naturalistic views reduce existence to mere finite centers and relationships. But all of these finite agencies are conditioned by others. All are therefore transitory and unstable. None can become a determining ultimate. Only a transcendent ultimate is capable of sustaining the kind of faith which gives human existence meaning and value.

(2) “But isn’t this supernaturalism all over again? And doesn’t it (as usual) imply either an unbridgeable gulf between the finite and the infinite or an external control or suppression of the finite by the so-called infinite?”

The customary reply is that this view may indeed be called supernaturalism. But (we are told) this does not imply the impossibility of any association of the finite and the infinite. For the ultimate, according to these writers, is not transcendent in the sense of being totally isolated from the finite, but, rather, is operative within the natural world. Furthermore (so the reply goes), the existence of a transcendent order does not entail either external control or suppression of the finite. It merely implies a human receptivity to a non-natural realm. That is, human achievement and value result from the impingement of the infinite upon the finite in moments of *kairos*, providing fullness and meaning but not at the price of denying the human activity which is involved. There always remains the awareness that the human subject is in a personal relation to another subject, a relation of supreme importance.

(3) “And how does one come to this relation?”

Perhaps mainly (say many of these writers) through suffering and sorrow, through a sense of sin and despair. When an individual sees that all finite centers and loyalties are fleeting and incapable of being lasting objects of faith, then he will renounce all previous efforts in despair, repent in humility, and gratefully make *the movement of faith* by which alone his life can become meaningful and worthwhile.

This, then, is the view which I propose to comment on. It is an all-or-nothing position. Its central thesis is that of a transcendent ultimate of absolute supremacy, which reigns over all finite things and powers, and *which alone is capable of providing meaning and worth to human existence*. Finite,

historical centers can at best bring temporary assistance. They all wither with time and circumstances. Only when men turn from the finite to the infinite can they find (in the words of Kierkegaard) a hope and anticipation of the eternal which holds together all the “cleavages of existence.”

II

I shall refer to the above view (which I have tried to portray justly) as transcendentalism. It contains three component theses. These are:

- (1) There *exists* a transcendent being or ultimate with which man can enter into some sort of relation.
- (2) Without such a transcendent ultimate, and the relation of faith to it, human life lacks *meaning, purpose, and integration*.
- (3) Without such meaning or integration, human life is not *worthwhile*.

It is necessary to comment upon all three of these points.

(1) First, the thesis that there *exists* such a transcendent ultimate or power. I assume that those who assert the existence of a transcendent being intend their assertion to be a *cognitive* one. That is, they claim to be saying something which states a fact and which is capable of being either true or false. Thus they would not admit that their claim is merely an expression of feelings or attitudes. I also assume that those who make this assertion intend their statement to be interpreted *literally*. That is, they mean to say that the transcendent *really exists*. The transcendent presumably does not exist in the same sense in which Santa Claus may be said to “exist.” These persons would, I assume, hold that the transcendent exists in actuality, although it may not exist in any empirical sense.

I ask: What *reasons* are there for holding that such an entity as the transcendent exists? I take it that I do not have to linger on such an answer as the testimony of a sacred book. The fact that the Bible or any other sacred writing asserts the existence of a transcendent is no more evidential to the existence of such a being than it is to the non-existence. All that a scriptural writing proves is that someone *believed* that a transcendent ultimate exists. And that is not at all the same as showing that such a being actually exists. The same may be said for the testimony of some unusual person—Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, etc. Furthermore, the fact that the testimony is made by a large number of persons does not substantiate the view. An impartial reading of history often shows that, on major issues, the majority is almost always wrong.

I also shall not linger on the traditional arguments for the existence of a god: The ontological, cosmological, teleological arguments, etc. Many

theologians themselves now acknowledge that these are not so much arguments for the existence of such a being as they are explications of the affirmation of faith. Therefore, the fact that a certain segment of the universe is orderly, that it exhibits beauty, that it shows an adaptation of means to ends does not in any way provide evidence that there is one who orders, beautifies, and adapts.

Arguments from religious experience are also unconvincing. Due to their lack of intersubjective testability, the most that such arguments can demonstrate is that someone has had an unusual experience. They do not provide any evidence that the *object* of such an experience exists. That object may, of course, exist. But the occurrence of such an experience does not verify the existence of an actual, rather than imaginary, object. Suppose that, while a dentist is drilling my tooth, I have an experience of a blinding light or an unusual voice. I do not take this to be an adequate reason for saying that I *know* that I have now communed with the Absolute. I trust that you do not do so either.

What evidence, then, is there for the existence of a transcendent? I submit that there is *none*. And my reading of religious writings and my conversations with many of those who maintain the existence of the transcendent lead me to affirm that they also would agree that there is none. For they hold that the existence of the transcendent (although a cognitive claim) is apprehended, *not* in a cognitive relationship but in the relationship of *faith*.

Thus in the usual sense of the term "evidence," there seems to be no evidence for the existence of a transcendent ultimate. Why, then, should I accept such a claim? After all, throughout the rest of my philosophical activity *and* throughout my normal, everyday activities, I constantly rely upon criteria of evidence before accepting a cognitive claim. I emphasize that this holds for my *everyday* life and not merely for any philosophical or scientific beliefs which I may entertain. Not only do I accept or reject (say) the Principle of Rectilinear Propagation of Light because of evidence, I also ask for evidence in order to substantiate such simple claims as "The stylus in my stereo tone arm is defective," or "Jones eloped with his secretary."

It is clear that both believers and non-believers share this desire for evidence with me. At least, believers agree up to the point of the transcendent-claim. If I reject this claim because of lack of evidence, I do not think that I can be justly accused of being an extremist. Rather, I should be commended for my consistency!

The transcendentalist will reply: "But the usual criteria do not apply in this case. They work only for natural entities. The transcendent is not a natural being." I answer: Then the only reasonable procedure seems to be that of suspending my judgment, for I do not know of any non-natural criteria. The transcendentalist replies: "No, merely suspending your judgment implies that you think that some evidence might eventually be found. We are in a different dimension here. An act of *faith* is required."

I reply with two points: (a) In its normal usage, the term "faith" still implies evidence and reasons. Why do I have faith in Smith, but not in Jones?

Obviously because of *reasons*. I do not have faith in people haphazardly and without evidence. (b) If I am told that faith in the transcendent is not faith in the normal sense, but a special act of commitment, then I can only honestly reply: *I have no need for such faith.* The transcendentalist retorts: "Ah, but you do, for only through faith in the transcendent can life have meaning; and surely you seek a life that is significant and worthwhile." And this leads us to the second thesis.

(2) The transcendentalist claims that without the transcendent and faith in the transcendent, human existence is without *meaning, purpose, integration.* Is this true? And if true in some sense, what follows?

(A) Let us take *meaning* first. Is there any reason to believe that without the existence of the transcendent, life has no meaning? That is, does the existence of meaning presuppose the existence of the transcendent?

It is necessary to distinguish between *objective meaning* and *subjective meaning*. An objective meaning, if there were such, would be one which is either structurally *part of* the universe, apart from human subjective evaluation; or dependent upon some *external agency* other than human evaluation. Two comments are in order: (i) If the notion of objective meaning is a plausible one, then I see no reason why it must be tied up with the existence of a transcendent being, for it certainly is not self-contradictory to hold that an objective meaning could conceivably exist even though a transcendent being did not. That is, the two concepts of "transcendent being" and "objective meaning" are not logically related in the way in which the two concepts "three" and "odd" (for example) are related. (ii) But, more fundamental, I find the notion of an objective meaning as difficult to accept as I do the notion of a transcendent being. Therefore I cannot rely upon the acceptance of objective meaning in order to substantiate the existence of the transcendent.

Further comment is needed on this point. It seems to me that there is no shred of evidence for the existence of an objective meaning in the universe. If I were to characterize the universe, attempting to give a complete description, I would do so in terms of matter in motion, or energy, or forces such as gravitation, or events, etc. Such a description is *neutral*. It can have no non-descriptive components. The same holds for a description of any segment of the universe. Kepler, for example, was entitled to say that the paths of the planets are elliptical, etc. But he was not entitled to say that this motion exhibits some fundamental, objective purpose more so than some other type of motion would. From the standpoint of present evidence, evaluational components such as meaning or purpose are not to be found in the universe as objective aspects of it. Such values are the result of human evaluation. With respect to them, we must say that the universe is valueless; it is *we* who evaluate, upon the basis of our subjective preferences. Hence, we do not discover values such as meaning to be inherent within the universe. Rather, we "impose" such values upon the universe.

When the transcendentalist holds that, without the transcendent, no objective meaning for human existence is possible, he assumes that the notion

of an objective meaning is an intelligible one. But if one can show, as I believe one can, that the idea of objective meaning is an implausible one, then his argument has no point. In no way does it give even the slightest evidence for the existence of a transcendent ultimate.

However, it is possible that some transcendentalist would want to take a different position here. There are at least two alternatives which he might hold.

(i) The transcendentalist might *agree* that there is no *objective* meaning in the universe, that meaning *is* a function of human subjectivity. His point now is that *subjective* meaning is found if and only if there exists a transcendent. I reply with two points (1) This is a grandiose generalization, which might wow an imbecile but not anyone of normal intelligence, and, like most such generalizations, it is false. (I shall return to this point in connection with the transcendentalist's third thesis.) (2) The meaning which the transcendentalist here affirms cannot be subjective meaning, for it is dependent upon some external, non-human factor, namely, the existence of the transcendent. This sort of meaning is *not* a function of human subjectivity. Thus we are back where we were. The transcendentalist's views about meaning do not provide any evidence at all for the existence of a transcendent ultimate.

(ii) I mentioned that the transcendentalist may take a second alternative. He might want to hold: "Of course, the fact of meaning in human existence does not in any way prove, demonstratively or with probability, that there *is* a transcendent being. Therefore, I won't say that meaning in life is impossible unless the transcendent exists. I will merely say that one cannot find meaning unless *one has faith in* the transcendent. The fact of meaning testifies to the necessity of *faith*."

I reply again with two points. (1) This generalization is also false. I know of many humans who have found a meaningful existence without faith in the transcendent. (2) However, even if this statement were true—even if heretofore not a single human being had found meaning in his life without faith in the transcendent—I should *reject such meaning and search for some other kind*. To me, the price which the transcendentalist pays for his meaning is too dear. If I am to find any meaning in life, I must attempt to find it without the aid of crutches, illusory hopes, and incredulous beliefs and aspirations. I am perfectly willing to admit that I *may not find any meaning at all* (although I think I can, even if it is not of the noble variety of which the transcendentalist speaks). But at least I *must try* to find it on my own. And this much I know: I can strive for a meaning only if it is one which is within the range of my comprehension as an inquiring, rational *man*. A meaning which is tied to some transcendent entity—or to faith in such—is not intelligible to me. Again, I here maintain what I hold throughout the rest of my existence, both philosophically and simply as a living person. I can accept only what is comprehensible to me, i.e., that which is within the province of actual or possible experience, or that for which I find some sound reasons or evidence. Upon these grounds, I must reject any notion of meaning which is bound with the necessity of faith in some mysterious, utterly unknowable entity. If my life should turn out to be less happy thereby, then I shall have to endure it as

such. As Shaw once said: "The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one. The happiness of credulity is a cheap and dangerous quality."

(B) I shall not say much about the transcendentalist's claim that, without the transcendent, or without faith in it, human existence is *purposeless*. For if I were to reply in detail, I should do so in about the same manner as I did with respect to the matter of meaning. An objective purpose is as difficult to detect in the universe as an objective meaning. Hence, again, one cannot argue that there must be a transcendent or that faith in such is necessary.

(C) What about the transcendentalist's claim that, without the transcendent, or, without *faith* in the transcendent, no integration is possible?

(i) In one sense of the term, this assertion, too, is obviously false. There are many persons who have attained what might be called psychological integration, i.e., self-integration, integration of personality, etc., without faith in the transcendent. I know of dozens of people whose lives are integrated in this sense, yet have no transcendental commitments.

(ii) But perhaps the transcendentalist means something much more fundamental than this psychological thesis by his claim. Perhaps he is making some sort of metaphysical assertion—a statement about man and his place in the universe. Thus his assertion must be taken to mean that *metaphysical* integration is not achievable without the transcendent or without faith in it. Like Kierkegaard, he holds that the cleavages of existence cannot be held together without the transcendent. What shall we say to this interpretation?

I am not sure that I understand what such integration is supposed to be. But insofar as I do, it seems to me that it is not possible. I am willing to admit that, if such integration were achievable, it might perhaps be attained only by virtue of something transcendent. But I find no conclusive or even reasonable evidence that such integration has been achieved either by believers in the transcendent or by non-believers. Hence one cannot infer that there is a transcendent ultimate or that faith in such an entity is necessary.

What about the mystics? you ask. It would be silly for me to say that the mystics have not experienced something very unusual which they have *interpreted* as some sort of unity with the universe, or whatever it may be. They may, indeed, have *felt* that, at rare moments, they were "swallowed up in the infinite ocean of being," to quote James. But again, peculiar and non-intersubjectively testable experiences are not reliable evidence for any truth-claim. Besides, suppose that the mystics *had* occasionally achieved such unity with the universe. Still, this is somewhat irrelevant. For the point is, that I, and many beings like myself (perhaps most of you), have not been favored with such experiences. In fact, it appears that most people who have faith in the transcendent have not had such experiences. This is precisely *why* they have faith. If they had complete certainty, no faith would be needed. Thus faith itself does not seem to be enough for the achievement of integration; and if integration were obtained, faith would be unnecessary. Hence the transcendentalist's view that integration is achieved *via* faith in the transcendent is questionable.

But even if this last thesis were true, it does me no good. Once again, I cannot place my faith in an unknown X, in that which is incomprehensible to me. Hence I must accept the fact that, for me, life will remain without objective meaning, without purpose, and without metaphysical integration. *And I must go on from there.* Rather than crying for the moon, my task must be, as Camus said, to know whether or not one can live *without appeal*.

(3) This leads us to the transcendentalist's third (and most crucial) thesis: That without meaning, purpose, and integration, life is not *worthwhile*. From which he draws the conclusion that without a *transcendent* or *faith* in it, life is not worthwhile. I shall deal only with the claim that without *meaning*, life is not worthwhile. Similar comments could be made regarding purpose and integration.

If the transcendentalist's claim sounds plausible at all, it is only because he continues to confuse objective meaning with subjective meaning. It is true that life has no objective meaning. Let us face it once and for all. But from this it does not follow that life is not *worthwhile*, for it can still be subjectively meaningful. And, really, the latter is the only kind of meaning worth shouting about. An objective meaning—that is, one which is inherent within the universe or dependent upon external agencies—would, frankly, leave me cold. It would not be *mine*. It would be an outer, neutral thing, rather than an inner, dynamic achievement. I, for one, am *glad* that the universe has no meaning, for thereby is *man all the more glorious*. I willingly accept the fact that external meaning is non-existent (or if existent, certainly not apparent), for this leaves me free to *forge my own meaning*. The extent of my creativity and thereby my success in this undertaking depends partly on the richness of my own psyche. There are some persons whose subjectivity is poor and wretched. Once they give up the search for objective meaning, they may perhaps have a difficult time in finding life to be worthwhile. Such is the fate of the impoverished. But those whose subjectivity is enlarged—rationally, esthetically, sensually, passionately—may find life to be worthwhile by means of their creative activity of subjective evaluation, in which a neutral universe takes on color and light, darkness and shadow, becomes now a source of profound joy, now a cause for deep sorrow.

What are some ways by which such worthwhileness can be found? I can speak only for myself. I have found subjective meaning through such things as *knowledge, art, love, and work*. Even though I realize that complete and perfect knowledge of matters of fact is not attainable, this does not lessen my enthusiasm to know and to understand. Such pursuits may have no practical utility; they are not thereby any less significant. To know about the nature of necessary truth or the probable structure of the atom is intrinsically fascinating, to me. And what a wealth of material lies in the arts. A Bach fugue, a Vlaminck painting, a Dostoevsky novel; life is intensely enriched by things such as these. And one must not neglect mention of one's relationships of friendship and love. Fragmentary and imperfect as these often are, they nevertheless provide us with some of our most heightened moments of joy and

value. Finally, of all of the ways which I listed, none is more significant and constantly sustaining to me than work. There have been times when I, like many others, no doubt, have suffered some tragedy which seemed unendurable. Every time, it has been my work that has pulled me through.

In short, even if life has no meaning, in an external, objective sense, this does not lead to the conclusion that it is not worth living, as the transcendentalist naively but dogmatically assumes. On the contrary, this fact opens up a greater field of almost infinite possibilities. For as long as I am *conscious*, I shall have the capacity with which to *endow* events, objects, persons, and achievements with value. Ultimately, it is through my *consciousness* and it alone that worth or value are obtained. Through consciousness, the scraping of horses' tails on cats' bowels (to use James' phrase) become the beautiful and melodic lines of a Beethoven string quartet. Through consciousness, a pile of rock can become the memorable Mount Alten which one has climbed and upon which one almost perished. Through consciousness, the arrangements of *P*s and *Q*s on paper can become the symbols of the formal beauty and certain truth of the realm of mathematical logic. Through consciousness, the gift of a carved little piece of wood, left at one's door by a friend, can become a priceless treasure. Yes, it is a *vital* and *sensitive consciousness* that counts. Thus there is a sense in which it is true, as many thinkers and artists have reminded us, that everything begins with my consciousness, and nothing has any worth except through my consciousness.

## III

I shall conclude with an ancient story. "Once a man from Syria led a camel through the desert; but when he came to a dark abyss, the camel suddenly, with teeth showing and eyes protruding, pushed the unsuspecting paragon of the camel-driving profession into the pit. The clothes of the Syrian were caught by a rosebush, and he was held suspended over the pit, at the bottom of which an enormous dragon was waiting to swallow him. Moreover, two mice were busily engaged in chewing away the roots of the already sagging plant. Yet, in this desperate condition, the Syrian was thralled to the point of utmost contentment by a rose which adorned the bush and wafted its fragrance into his face."<sup>2</sup>

I find this parable most illuminating. We are all men hanging on the thread of a few rapidly vanishing years over the bottomless pit of death, destruction, and nothingness. Those objective facts are starkly real. Let us not try to disguise them. Yet I find it marvelously interesting that man's *consciousness*, his reason and his passion, can elevate these routine, objective, external events, in a moment of lucidity and feeling, to the status of a personally appropriated ideal—an ideal which does not annul those objective facts, but which *reinterprets* them and clothes them with the apparel of *man's subjectivity*.

It is time, once again, to speak personally. What your situation is, I cannot say. But I know that I am that Syrian, and that I am hanging over the pit. My doom is inevitable and swiftly approaching. If, in these few moments that are yet mine, I can find no rose to respond to, or rather, if I have lost the ability to respond, then I shall moan and curse my fate with a howl of bitter agony. But if I can, in these last moments, respond to a rose—or to a philosophical argument or theory of physics, or to a Scarlatti sonata, or to the touch of a human hand—I say, if I can so respond and can thereby transform an external and fatal event into a moment of conscious insight and significance, then I shall go down *without hope or appeal yet passionately triumphant and with joy*.

## NOTES

1. A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, tr. by J. O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p. 45.
2. R. Hertz, *Chance and Symbol* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948), pp. 142–143. Another version of this parable appears in Tolstoy's *My Confession*.



P A R T   T H R E E

# Questioning the Question





*The Meanings of the  
Questions of Life*

When one asks "What is the meaning of life?" one begins to wonder whether this large, hazy and bewildering question itself has any meaning. Some people indeed have said boldly that the question has no meaning. I believe this is a mistake. But it is a mistake which is not without excuse. And I hope that by examining the excuse we may begin to remedy the mistake, and so come to see that whether or not life has a meaning it is not senseless to enquire whether it has or not. First, then, what has led some people to think that the whole enquiry is senseless?

There is an old story which runs something like this: A child asked an old man "What holds up the world? What holds up all things?" The old man answered "A giant." The child asked "And what holds up the giant? You must tell me what holds up the giant." The old man answered "An elephant." The child said, "And what holds up the elephant?" The old man answered "A tortoise." The child said "You still have not told me what holds up all things. For what holds up the tortoise?" The old man answered "Run away and don't ask me so many questions."

From this story we can see how it may happen that a question which looks very like sensible meaningful questions may turn out to be a senseless, meaningless one. Again and again when we ask "What supports this?" it is possible to give a sensible answer. For instance what supports the top-most card in a house of cards? The cards beneath it which are in their turn supported by the cards beneath them. What supports all the cards? The table. What supports the table? The floor and the earth. But the question "What supports all things, absolutely all things?" is different. It is absurd, it is senseless, like the question "What is bigger than the largest thing in the world?" And it is easy to see why the question "What supports all things?" is absurd. Whenever we ask, "What supports thing A or these things A, B, C," then we

can answer this question only by mentioning some thing other than the thing A or things A, B, C about which we asked "What supports it or them?" We must if we are to answer the question mention something D other than those things which form the subject of our question, and we must say that this thing is what supports them. If we mean by the phrase "all things" absolutely all things which exist then obviously there is nothing outside that about which we are now asked "What supports all this?" Consequently any answer to the question will be self-contradictory just as any answer to the question "What is bigger than the biggest of all things" must be self-contradictory? Such questions are absurd, or, if you like, silly and senseless.

In a like way again and again when we ask "What is the meaning of this?" we answer in terms of something other than this. For instance imagine that there has been a quarrel in the street. One man is hitting another man on the jaw. A policeman hurries up. "Now then" he says, "what is the meaning of all this?" He wants to know what led up to the quarrel, what caused it. It is no good saying to the policeman "It's a quarrel." He knows there is a quarrel. What he wants to know is what went before the quarrel, what led up to it. To answer him we must mention something other than the quarrel itself. Again suppose a man is driving a motor car and sees in front of him a road sign, perhaps a red flag, perhaps a skull and crossbones. "What does this mean?" he asks and when he asks this he wants to know what the sign points to. To answer we must mention something other than the sign itself, such as a dangerous corner in the road. Imagine a doctor sees an extraordinary rash on the face of his patient. He is astonished and murmurs to himself "What is the meaning of this?" He wants to know what caused the strange symptoms, or what they will lead to, or both. In any case in order to answer his question he must find something which went before or comes after and lies outside that about which he asks "What does this mean?" This need to look before or after in order to answer a question of the sort "What is the meaning of this?" is so common, so characteristic, a feature of such questions that it is natural to think that when it is impossible to answer such a question in this way then the question has no sense. Now what happens when we ask "What is the meaning of life?"

Perhaps someone here replies, the meaning, the significance of this present life, this life on earth, lies in a life hereafter, a life in heaven. All right. But imagine that some persistent enquirer asks, "But what I am asking is what is the meaning of all life, life here and life beyond, life now and life hereafter? What is the meaning of all things in earth and heaven?" Are we to say that this question is absurd because there cannot be anything beyond all things while at the same time any answer to "What is the meaning of all things?" must point to some thing beyond all things?

Imagine that we come into a theatre after a play has started and are obliged to leave before it ends. We may then be puzzled by the part of the play that we are able to see. We may ask "What does it mean?" In this case we want to know what went before and what came after in order to understand the part we saw. But sometimes even when we have seen and heard

a play from the beginning to the end we are still puzzled and still ask what does the whole thing mean. In this case we are not asking what came before or what came after, we are not asking about anything outside the play itself. We are, if you like, asking a very different sort of question from that we usually put with the words "What does this mean?" But we are still asking a real question, we are still asking a question which has sense and is not absurd. For our words express a wish to grasp the character, the significance of the whole play. They are a confession that we have not yet done this and they are a request for help in doing it. Is the play a tragedy, a comedy or a tale told by an idiot? The pattern of it is so complex, so bewildering, our grasp of it still so inadequate, that we don't know what to say, still less whether to call it good or bad. But this question is not senseless.

In the same way when we ask "What is the meaning of all things?" we are not asking a senseless question. In this case, of course, we have not witnessed the whole play, we have only an idea in outline of what went before and what will come after that small part of history which we witness. But with the words "What is the meaning of it all?" we are trying to find the order in the drama of Time. The question may be beyond us. A child may be able to understand, to grasp a simple play and be unable to understand and grasp a play more complex and more subtle. We do not say on this account that when he asks of the larger more complex play "What does it mean?" then his question is senseless, nor even that it is senseless for him. He has asked and even answered such a question in simpler cases, he knows the sort of effort, the sort of movement of the mind which such a question calls for, and we do not say that a question is meaningless to him merely because he is not yet able to carry out quite successfully the movement of that sort which is needed in order to answer a complex question of that sort. We do not say that a question in mathematics which is at present rather beyond us is meaningless to us. We know the type of procedure it calls for and may make efforts which bring us nearer and nearer to an answer. We are able to find the meaning which lies not outside but within very complex but still limited wholes whether these are dramas of art or of real life. When we ask "What is the meaning of all things?" we are bewildered and have not that grasp of the order of things the desire for which we express when we ask that question. But this does not render the question senseless nor make it impossible for us to move towards an answer.

We must however remember that what one calls answering such a question is not giving an answer. I mean we cannot answer such a question in the form: "The meaning is this."

Such an idea about what form answering a question must take may lead to a new despair in which we feel we cannot do anything in the way of answering such a question as "What is the meaning in it all?" merely because we are not able to sum up our results in a phrase or formula.

When we ask what is the meaning of this play or this picture we cannot express the understanding which this question may lead to in the form of a list of just those things in the play or the picture which give it its meaning.

No. The meaning eludes such a list. This does not mean that words quite fail us. They may yet help us provided that we do not expect of them more than they can do.

A person who is asked what he finds so hateful or so lovable in another may with words help himself and us in grasping what it is that so moves him. But he will only mislead us and himself if he pretends that his words are a complete account of all that there is in the matter.

It is the same when we ask what is it in all things that makes it all so good, so bad, so grand, so contemptible. We must not anticipate that the answer can be given in a word or in a neat list. But this does not mean that we can do nothing towards answering these questions nor even that words will not help us. Indeed surely the historians, the scientists, the prophets, the dramatists and the poets have said much which will help any man who asks himself: Is the drama of time meaningless as a tale told by an idiot? Or is it not meaningless? And if it is not meaningless is it a comedy or a tragedy, a triumph or a disaster, or is it a mixture in which sweet and bitter are forever mixed?

*Philosophy and the  
Meaning of Life*

The question of what meaning our life has, or can have, is of utmost importance to us. So heavily is it laden with our emotion and aspiration that we camouflage our vulnerability with jokes about seeking for the meaning or purpose of life: A person travels for many days to the Himalayas to seek the word of an Indian holy man meditating in an isolated cave. Tired from his journey, but eager and expectant that his quest is about to reach fulfillment, he asks the sage, "What is the meaning of life?" After a long pause, the sage opens his eyes and says, "Life is a fountain." "What do you mean, life is a fountain?" barks the questioner. "I have just traveled thousands of miles to hear your words, and all you have to tell me is that? That's ridiculous." The sage then looks up from the floor of the cave and says, "You mean it's not a fountain?" In a variant of the story, he replies, "So it's not a fountain."

The story is reassuring. The supposed sages are frauds who speak nonsense, nonsense they either never thought to question ("You mean it's not a fountain?") or do not care very much about ("So it's not a fountain"). Surely, then, we have nothing to learn from these ridiculous people; we need not seek their ludicrous "wisdom."

But why was it necessary for the joke to continue on after the sage said "life is a fountain," why was it necessary for the story to include the seeker's objection and the sage's reply? Well, perhaps the sage *did* mean something by "life is a fountain," something profound which we did not understand. The challenge and his reply show his words were empty, that he can give no deep and illuminating interpretation to his remark. Only then are we in a secure position to laugh, in relief.

However, if we couldn't know immediately that his answer "life is a fountain" was ridiculous, if we needed further words from him to exclude

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the lingering possibility of a deeper meaning to his apparently preposterous first reply, then how can we be sure that his second answer also does not have a deeper meaning which we don't understand? He says "You mean it's not a fountain?"; but who are *you* to mean? If you know so much about it, then why have you gone seeking him; do you even know enough to recognize an appropriate answer when you hear it?

The questioner apparently came in humility, seeking the truth, yet he assumed he knew enough to challenge the answer he heard. When he objects and the sage replies, "so it's not a fountain," was it to gain this victory in discussion that the questioner traveled so far? (The story is told that Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of kabbalism, as a young man sought out practitioners of kabbalah in Jerusalem, and was told he could study with them on the condition that he not ask any questions for two years. Scholem, who has a powerful, critical, and luminous intelligence, refused.)

When he set out on his trip, did the questioner hope for an intellectual formula presenting the meaning of life? He wanted to know how he should live in order to achieve a life with meaning. What did he expect to hear from this meditating man in a cave high in the mountains? "Go back to the posh suburb and continue your present life, but shift to a less pressured job and be more accessible to your children"? Presumably, the man in the cave is following what he takes to be the path to a meaningful life; what else can he answer except "follow my path, be like me"? "Are you crazy; do you think I am going to throw everything over to become a scruffy person sitting in a cave?" But does the seeker know enough to exclude that life as the most (or only) meaningful one, the seeker who traveled to see *him*?

Could *any* formula answer the question satisfactorily? "The meaning of life is to seek union with God"—oh yeah, that one. "A meaningful life is a full and productive life"—sure. "The purpose of life is to pursue the task of giving meaning to life"—thanks a lot. "The meaning of life is love"—yawn. "The meaning of life is spiritual perfection"—the upward and onward trip. "The meaning of life is getting off the wheel of life and becoming annihilated"—no thanks. No one undertakes the trip to the sage who hasn't already encountered all the known formulas and found them wanting. Does the seeker think the sage has some *other* words to tell him, words which somehow have not reached print? Or is there a secret formula, an esoteric doctrine that, once heard, will clarify his life and point to meaning? If there were such a secret, does he think the wise man will tell it to *him*, fresh from Los Angeles with two days of travel by llama and foot? Faced with such a questioner, one might as well tell him that life is a fountain, perhaps hoping to shock him into reconsidering what he is doing right then. (Since he will not understand anything, he might as well be told the truth as best he can understand it—the joke would be that life *is* a fountain. Better yet would be for that to get embodied in a joke.)

If it is not words the questioner needs—certainly no short formula will help—perhaps what he needs is to encounter the person of the sage, to be in his presence. If so, questions will just get in the way; the visitor will want to observe the sage over time, opening himself to what he may receive. Perhaps

he will come eventually to find profundity and point in the stale formulas he earlier had found wanting.

Now, let us hear another story. A man goes to India, consults a sage in a cave and asks him the meaning of life. In three sentences the sage tells him, the man thanks him and leaves. There are several variants of this story also: In the first, the man lives meaningfully ever after; in the second he makes the sentences public so that everyone then knows the meaning of life; in the third, he sets the sentences to rock music, making his fortune and enabling everyone to whistle the meaning of life; and in the fourth variant, his plane crashes as he is flying off from his meeting with the sage. In the fifth version, the person listening to me tell this story eagerly asks what sentences the sage spoke.

And in the sixth version, I tell him.

...

### GOD'S PLAN

One prevalent view, less so today than previously, is that the meaning of life or people's existence is connected with God's will, with his design or plan for them. Put roughly, people's meaning is to be found and realized in fulfilling the role allotted to them by God. If a superior being designed and created people for a purpose, in accordance with a plan for them, the particular purpose he had for them would be what people are *for*. This is distinct from the view that finds meaning in the goal of merging with God, and also from the view which holds that if you do God's will you will be rewarded—sit at his right hand, and receive eternal bliss—and that the meaning and purpose of life is to achieve this reward which is intrinsically valuable (and also meaningful?).

Our concern now is not with the question of whether there is a God; or whether, if there is, he has a purpose for us; or whether if there is and he has a purpose for us, there is any way to discover this purpose, whether God reveals his purpose to people. Rather, our question is how all this, even if true, would succeed in providing meaning for people's lives.

First, we should ask whether any and every role would provide meaning and purpose to human lives. If our role is to supply CO<sub>2</sub> to the plants, or to be the equivalent within God's plan of fixing a mildly annoying leaky faucet, would this suffice? Is it enough to be an absolutely trivial component within God's grand design? Clearly, what is desired is that we be important; having merely some role or other in God's plan does not suffice. The purpose God has for us must place us at or near the center of things, of his intentions and goals. Moreover, merely playing some role in a central purpose of God's is not sufficient—the role itself must be a central or important one. If we describe God's central purpose in analogy with making a painting, we do not want to play the role of the rag used to wipe off brushes, or the tin in which these rags are kept. If we are not the

central focus of the painting, at least we want to be like the canvas or the brush or the paint.

Indeed, we want more than an important role in an important purpose; the role itself should be positive, perhaps even exalted. If the cosmic role of human beings was to provide a negative lesson to some others ("don't act like them") or to provide needed food for passing intergalactic travelers who *were* important, this would not suit our aspirations—not even if afterwards the intergalactic travelers smacked their lips and said that we tasted good. The role should focus on aspects of ourselves that we prize or are proud of, and it should use these in ways connected with the reasons why we prize them. (It would not suffice if the exercise of our morality or intelligence, which we prize, affects our brain so that the intergalactic travelers find it more *tasty*.)

Do all these conditions guarantee meaning? Suppose our ingenuity was to be used to aid these travelers on their way, but that their way was no more important than ours. There was no more reason why we were aiding them (and perishing afterwards) than the other way around—the plan just happened to go that way. Would this cruel hoax leave us any more content than if there were no plan or externally given role at all?

There are two ways we individually or collectively could be included in God's plan. First, our fulfilling our role might depend upon our acting in a certain way, upon our choices or cooperation; second, our role might not depend at all upon our actions or choices—willy-nilly we shall serve. (In parallel to the notion of originative value, we can say that under the first our life can have originative meaning.) About the first way we can ask why we should act to fulfill God's plan, and about both ways we can ask why fitting God's plan gives meaning to our existence.<sup>1</sup> That God is good (but also sometimes angry?) shows that it would be good to carry out his plan. (Even then, perhaps, it need not be good *for us*—mighthn't the good overall plan involve sacrificing us for some greater good?) Yet how does doing what is good provide meaning? Those who doubt whether life has meaning, even if transparently clearheaded, need not have doubted that it is good to do certain things.

How can playing a role in God's plan give one's life meaning? What makes this a meaning-giving process? It is not merely that some being created us with a purpose in mind. If some extragalactic civilization created us with a purpose in mind, would that by itself provide meaning to our lives? Nor would things be changed if they created us so that we also had a feeling of indebtedness and a feeling that something was asked of us. It seems it is not enough that God have some purpose for us—his purpose itself must be meaningful. If it were sufficient merely to play some role in some external purpose, then you could give meaning to your life by fitting it to my plans or to your parents' purpose in having you. In these instances, however, one immediately questions the meaningfulness of the other people's purposes. How do God's purposes differ from ours so as to be guaranteed meaningfulness and importance? Let me sharpen this question by presenting a philosophical fable.<sup>2</sup>

## TELEOLOGY

Once you come to feel your existence lacks purpose, there is little you can do. You can keep the feeling, and either continue a meaningless existence or end it. Or you can discover the purpose your existence already serves, the meaning it has, thereby eliminating the feeling. Or you can try to dispose of the feeling by giving a meaning and purpose to your existence.

The first dual option carries minimal appeal; the second, despite my most diligent efforts, proved impossible. That left the third alternative, where, too, there are limited possibilities. You can make your existence meaningful by fitting it into some larger purpose, making yourself part of something else that is independently and incontestably important and meaningful. However, a sign of really having been stricken is that no preexisting purpose will serve in this fashion—each purpose that in other moods appears sufficiently fructifying then seems merely arbitrary. Alternatively, one can seek meaning in activity that itself is important, in something self-sufficiently intrinsically valuable. Preeminent among such activities, if there are any such, is creative activity. So, as a possible route out of my despair, I decided to create something that itself would be marvelous. (No, I did not decide to write a story beginning “Once you come to feel your existence lacks purpose.” Why am I always suspected of gimmicks?)

The task required all of my knowledge, skill, intuitive powers, and craftsmanship. It seemed to me that my whole existence until then had been merely a preparation for this creative activity, so completely did it draw upon and focus all of my experience, abilities, and knowledge. I was excited by the task and fulfilled, and when it was completed I rested, untroubled by purposelessness.

But this contentment was, unfortunately, only temporary. For when I came to think about it, although it *had* taxed my ingenuity and energy to make the heavens, the earth, and the creatures upon it, what did it all amount to? I mean, the whole of it, when looked at starkly and coldly, was itself just an object, of no intrinsic importance, containing creatures in a condition as purposeless as the one I was trying to escape. Given the possibility that my talents and powers were those of a being whose existence might well be meaningless, how could their exercise endow my existence with purpose and meaning if it issued only in a worthless object?

At this point in my thoughts I came upon the solution to my problem. If I were to create a plan, a grand design into which my creation fit, in which my creatures, by serving the pattern and purpose I had ordained for them, would find their purpose and goal, then this very activity of endowing their existence with meaning and purpose would be my purpose and would give my existence meaning and point. Also, giving their existence meaning would, retroactively, make meaningful my previous activity of creation, it having issued in something that turned out to be of value and worth.

The arrangement has served. Only occasionally, out of the corner of my mind, do I wonder whether my arbitrarily having picked a plan for them

can really have succeeded in giving meaning to the lives of the role-fulfillers among them. (It was necessary, of course, that I pick some plan or other for them, but no special purpose was served by my picking the particular plan I did. How could it have been? For my sole purpose then was to give meaning to my existence, and this one purpose was insufficient to determine any particular plan into which to fit my creatures.) However, lacking any conception of a less defective route to meaningfulness, I refuse to examine whether such a symbiotic arrangement truly is possible, whether different beings can provide meaning and point to each other's existence in a fashion so seemingly circular. Such questions press me toward the alternative I tremble to contemplate, yet to which I find my thoughts recurring. The option of ending it all, by now familiar, is less alien and terrifying than before. I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

To imagine God himself facing problems about the meaningfulness of his existence forces us to consider how meaning attaches to his purposes. Let us leave aside my fancy that since it is important that our lives be provided with meaning, God's existence is made meaningful by his carrying out that task, so that—since his plans for us thereby become meaningful—our meaning is found in fitting those plans. For if it were possible for man and God to shore up each other's meaningfulness in this fashion, why could not two people do this for each other as well? Moreover, a plan whose *only* purpose is to provide meaning for another's life (or the planner's) cannot succeed in doing the trick; the plan must have some independent purpose and meaning itself.

Nor will it help to escalate up a level, and say that if there is a God who has a plan for us, the meaning of our existence consists in finding out what this plan asks of us and has in store for us. To know the meaning of life, on this view, would consist in our knowing where we came from, why we are here, where we are going. But apart from the fact that many religions hold such knowledge of God's purposes to be impossible (see, for example, *Ecclesiastes* and *Job*), and condemn various attempts to gain such knowledge (such as occult techniques and necromancy), and apart even from the fact that this seems too much a metapurpose, no more satisfying than saying "the purpose of life is the quest for the purpose of life," this view merely postpones the question of wherein God's plan itself is meaningful.

What is it about God's purposes that makes them meaningful? If our universe were created by a child from some other vast civilization in a parallel universe, if our universe were a toy it had constructed, perhaps out of prefabricated parts, it would not follow that the child's purposes were meaningful. Being the creator of all we see is not sufficient to endow his purposes with meaningfulness. Granted, the purposes of God are the purposes of a powerful and important being (as compared to us). However, it is difficult to see why that suffices for those purposes to ground our existence in meaning. Could the purposes of scientists so give meaning to artificially created short-lived animal life they maintained in a controlled laboratory environment? The scientists, creators of the animals' universe and life, would be as gods to

them. Yet it would be unbearably poignant if the most intelligent animal, in a leap of intuition, did its equivalent of worshiping the absent scientist. . . .

These diverse possibilities about the intentional and purposeful creation of our universe . . . press home the question of how, or in virtue of what, a religious view can ground the meaning of our lives. Just as the direct experience of God might unavoidably provide one with a motive to carry out his wishes, so it might be that such an experience (of which type of creator?) always would resolve all doubts about meaning. To experience God might leave one with the absolute conviction that his existence was the fountain of meaning, watering your own existence. I do not want to discount testimony reporting this. But even if we accepted it fully, it leaves unanswered the question of how meaning is possible. What is it about God, as usually conceived, in virtue of which he can ground meaning? How *can* there be a ball of meaning? Even if we are willing to treat the testimony in the way we treat accurate perceptual reports, there still remains the problem of understanding how meaning can be encountered in experience, of how there can be a stopping place for questions about meaning. How in the world (or out of it) can there be something whose nature contains meaning, something which just glows meaning?

## NOTES

1. The question of why we should act to fulfill God's plan, in case it is up to us, may appear foolish. After all, this is God, the creator of the universe, omniscient and omnipotent. But what is it about God, in virtue of which we should carry out our part in his plan? Put aside the consideration that if we do not, he will punish us severely; this provides a prudential reason of the sort a slave has for obeying his more powerful master. Another reason holds that we should cooperate in fulfilling God's plan because we owe that to him. God created us, and we are indebted to him for existence. Fulfilling his purpose helps to pay off our debt of gratitude to him. (See Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, 1965, p. 108.) Even if we don't want to play that role, it not being the sort of activity we prize, nevertheless must we do it to repay the debt? We might think so on the following grounds. You were created for the role, and if not for God's desire that you fulfill the role, you wouldn't exist at all; furthermore, existing while performing that role is better than not existing at all, so you should be thankful you were created at all, even if only for that role. Therefore, you are obligated to carry it out.

However, we do not think this form of reasoning is cogent when it concerns parents and children. The purposes parents have when they plan to have children (provided only these stop short of making the child's life no better than nonexistence) do not fix the obligations of the child. Even if the parents' only purpose was to produce a slave, and a slave's life is better than nonexistence, the offspring does not owe to his parents acquiescence in being enslaved. He is under no obligation to cooperate, he is not owned by his parents even though they made him. Once the child exists, it has certain rights that must be respected (and other rights it can assert when able) even if the parents' very purpose was to produce something without these rights. Nor do children owe to their parents whatever they would have conceded in bargaining before conception (supposing this had been possible) in order to come into existence.

Since children don't owe their parents everything that leaves their lives still a net plus, why do people owe their ultimate creator and sustainer any more? Even if they

owe God no more, still, don't children owe their parents something for having produced and sustained them, brought them to maturity and kept them alive? To the extent that this debt to parents arises from their trouble and labor, since we don't cost an omnipotent God anything, there's nothing to pay back to him and so no need to. However, it is implausible that a child's whole debt to his parents depends merely on the fact that he was trouble. (When a parent takes great delight in his child's growth, so that any inconveniences caused are counterbalanced by the pleasures of parenthood, doesn't this child still owe something to the parent?) Still, at best, these considerations can lead to a limited obligation to our creator and sustainer—there is no arriving at Abraham by this route. To speak of a limited obligation may sound ludicrous here; "we owe everything to him." Everything may come from him, but do we owe it all back?

Our discussion thus far might leave a believer uncomprehending: he might speak as follows. "Why should one do what is wanted by an omnipotent, omniscient creator of you who is wholly good, perfect, and so on? What better reason could there be than that such a being wants you to do it? Catching the merest glimpse of the majesty and greatness and love of such a being, you would want to serve him, you would be filled with an overwhelming desire to answer any call. There would be a surrender rather than a calculation. The question 'why do it?' would not arise to someone who knew and felt what God was. That experience transforms people. You would do it out of awe and love." I do not want to deny that the direct experience of God would or might well provide an overwhelming motive to serve him. However, there remains the second question: why and how does fitting God's plan and carrying out his will provide meaning to our lives?

2. This first appeared in *Mosaic*, Vol. III, no. 1, Spring 1971 (published by the Harvard-Radcliffe Hillel Society), pp. 27–28, as one of "Two Philosophical Fables," and is reprinted here with only minor changes.

*Meaning in Life*

A meaningful life is, first of all, one that has within it the basis for an affirmative answer to the needs or longings that are characteristically described as needs for meaning. I have in mind, for example, the sort of questions people ask on their deathbeds, or simply in contemplation of their eventual deaths, about whether their lives have been (or are) worth living, whether they have had any point, and the sort of questions one asks when considering suicide and wondering whether one has any reason to go on. These questions are familiar from Russian novels and existentialist philosophy, if not from personal experience. Though they arise most poignantly in times of crisis and intense emotion, they also have their place in moments of calm reflection, when considering important life choices. Moreover, paradigms of what are taken to be meaningful and meaningless lives in our culture are readily available. Lives of great moral or intellectual accomplishment—Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Albert Einstein—come to mind as unquestionably meaningful lives (if any are); lives of waste and isolation—Thoreau’s “lives of quiet desperation,” typically anonymous to the rest of us, and the mythical figure of Sisyphus—represent meaninglessness.

To what general characteristics of meaningfulness do these images lead us and how do they provide an answer to the longings mentioned above? Roughly, I would say that meaningful lives are lives of active engagement in projects of worth. Of course, a good deal needs to be said in elaboration of this statement. Let me begin by discussing the two key phrases, “active engagement” and “projects of worth.”

A person is actively engaged by something if she is gripped, excited, involved by it. Most obviously, we are actively engaged by the things and people about which and whom we are passionate. Opposites of active engagement are boredom and alienation. To be actively engaged in something

From “Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life,” *Social Philosophy & Policy*, Vol. 24, 1997. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

is not always pleasant in the ordinary sense of the word. Activities in which people are actively engaged frequently involve stress, danger, exertion, or sorrow (consider, for example: writing a book, climbing a mountain, training for a marathon, caring for an ailing friend). However, there is something good about the feeling of engagement: one feels (typically without thinking about it) especially alive.

That a meaningful life must involve “projects of worth” will, I expect, be more controversial, for the phrase hints of a commitment to some sort of objective value. This is not accidental, for I believe that the idea of meaningfulness, and the concern that our lives possess it, are conceptually linked to such a commitment.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is this linkage that I want to defend, for I have neither a philosophical theory of what objective value is nor a substantive theory about what has this sort of value. What is clear to me is that there can be no sense to the idea of meaningfulness without a distinction between more and less worthwhile ways to spend one’s time, where the test of worth is at least partly independent of a subject’s ungrounded preferences or enjoyment.

Consider first the longings or concerns about meaning that people have, their wondering whether their lives are meaningful, their vows to add more meaning to their lives. The sense of these concerns and resolves cannot fully be captured by an account in which what one does with one’s life doesn’t matter, as long as one enjoys or prefers it. Sometimes people have concerns about meaning despite their knowledge that their lives to date have been satisfying. Indeed, their enjoyment and “active engagement” with activities and values they now see as shallow seems only to heighten the sense of meaninglessness that comes to afflict them. Their sense that their lives so far have been meaningless cannot be a sense that their activities have not been chosen or fun. When they look for sources of meaning or ways to add meaning to their lives, they are searching for projects whose justifications lie elsewhere.

Second, we need an explanation for why certain sorts of activities and involvements come to mind as contributors to meaningfulness while others seem intuitively inappropriate. Think about what gives meaning to your own life and the lives of your friends and acquaintances. Among the things that tend to come up on such lists, I have already mentioned moral and intellectual accomplishments and the ongoing activities that lead to them. Relationships with friends and relatives are perhaps even more important for most of us. Aesthetic enterprises (both creative and appreciative), the cultivation of personal virtues, and religious practices frequently loom large. By contrast, it would be odd, if not bizarre, to think of crossword puzzles, sitcoms, or the kind of computer games to which I am fighting off addiction as providing meaning in our lives, though there is no question that they afford a sort of satisfaction and that they are the objects of choice. Some things, such as chocolate and aerobics class, I choose even at considerable cost to myself (it is irrelevant that these particular choices may be related); so I must find them worthwhile in a sense. But they are not the sorts of things that make life worth living.<sup>2</sup>

“Active engagement in projects of worth,” I suggest, answers to the needs an account of meaningfulness in life must meet. If a person is or has

been thus actively engaged, then she does have an answer to the question of whether her life is or has been worthwhile, whether it has or has had a point. When someone looks for ways to add meaning to her life, she is looking (though perhaps not under this description) for worthwhile projects about which she can get enthused. The account also explains why some activities and projects but not others come to mind as contributors to meaning in life. Some projects, or at any rate, particular acts, are worthwhile but too boring or mechanical to be sources of meaning. People do not get meaning from recycling or from writing checks to Oxfam and the ACLU. Other acts and activities, though highly pleasurable and deeply involving, like riding a roller coaster or meeting a movie star, do not seem to have the right kind of value to contribute to meaning.

Bernard Williams once distinguished categorical desires from the rest. Categorical desires give us reasons for living—they are not premised on the assumption that we will live. The sorts of things that give meaning to life tend to be objects of categorical desire. We desire them, at least so I would suggest, because we think them worthwhile. They are not worthwhile simply because we desire them or simply because they make our lives more pleasant.

Roughly, then, according to my proposal, a meaningful life must satisfy two criteria, suitably linked. First, there must be active engagement, and second, it must be engagement in (or with) projects of worth. A life is meaningless if it lacks active engagement with anything. A person who is bored or alienated from most of what she spends her life doing is one whose life can be said to lack meaning. Note that she may in fact be performing functions of worth. A housewife and mother, a doctor, or a bus-driver may be competently doing a socially valuable job, but because she is not engaged by her work (or, as we are assuming, by anything else in her life), she has no categorical desires that give her a reason to live. At the same time, someone who is actively engaged may also live a meaningless life, if the objects of her involvement are utterly worthless. It is difficult to come up with examples of such lives that will be uncontroversial without being bizarre. But both bizarre and controversial examples have their place. In the bizarre category, we might consider pathological cases: someone whose sole passion in life is collecting rubber bands, or memorizing the dictionary, or making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*. Controversial cases will include the corporate lawyer who sacrifices her private life and health for success along the professional ladder, the devotee of a religious cult, or—an example offered by Wiggins<sup>3</sup>—the pig farmer who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs.

We may summarize my proposal in terms of a slogan: “Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.” The idea is that in a world in which some things are more worthwhile than others, meaning arises when a subject discovers or develops an affinity for one or typically several of the more worthwhile things and has and makes use of the opportunity to engage with it or them in a positive way.

## NOTES

1. This point is made by David Wiggins in his brilliant but difficult essay "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 62 (1976).
2. Woody Allen appears to have a different view. His list of the things that make life worth living at the end of *Manhattan* includes, for example "the crabs at Sam Woo's," which would seem to be on the level of chocolates. On the other hand, the crabs' appearance on the list may be taken to show that he regards the dish as an accomplishment meriting aesthetic appreciation, where such appreciation is a worthy activity in itself; in this respect, the crabs might be akin to other items on his list such as the second movement of the *Jupiter Symphony*, Louis Armstrong's recording of "Potatohead Blues," and "those apples and pears of Cézanne." Strictly speaking, the appreciation of great chocolate might also qualify as such an activity.
3. See Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," p. 342.

*Meaningful Lives*

Richard Taylor and Susan Wolf offer contrasting visions of a meaningful life. I find each account partially persuasive, but neither by itself entirely satisfactory.

For Wolf, a meaningful life is one in which you are actively engaged in projects of worth. To be engaged is to be “gripped, excited, involved.” If you find your life dreary, then it is not meaningful.

Enjoying activities, however, does not by itself render them meaningful; they also need to be worthwhile. As she says, “When someone looks for ways to add meaning to her life, she is looking . . . for worthwhile projects about which she can get enthused” and “whose justifications lie elsewhere,” specifically in “objective value.”

According to Wolf, worthwhile activities include “[r]elationships with friends and relatives . . . [a]esthetic enterprises (both creative and appreciative), the cultivation of personal virtues, and religious practices.” Specific examples include “writing a book, climbing a mountain, training for a marathon.” Among the activities that lack such worth are solving crossword puzzles, watching sitcoms, playing computer games, and eating chocolate, as well as “collecting rubber bands, or memorizing the dictionary, or making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*.” Controversial cases are the paths of the “corporate lawyer who sacrifices her private life and health for success along the professional ladder, the devotee of a religious cult, or . . . the pig farmer who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs, to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs.”

An obvious problem with Wolf’s position is that by her own admission she has “neither a philosophical theory of what objective value is nor a substantive theory about what has that sort of value.” She relies on supposedly shared intuitions regarding the worth of various activities, but to assume such agreement is unjustified. Some people appreciate an activity

Wolf disparages, yet dismiss one she values highly. For example, spending thousands of hours training for a marathon strikes many as wearisome; they may be far more engaged by computer games. On the other hand, grappling with a *New York Times* Sunday Magazine crossword puzzle is a popular intellectual challenge, holding far more appeal for most than reading an article on meta-ethics, a subject Wolf finds fascinating.

She might respond to these observations by claiming that the problem with crossword puzzles lies not in their essential unimportance but in their use as mere pastimes. In other words, even those who enjoy solving them don't take them seriously.

This reply, however, only deepens Wolf's difficulty, because the same activity could be judged as meaningful or meaningless depending on why a person engages in it. Consider, for instance, a physicist who does scientific research because of the enjoyment it brings but is devoted to chess problems for their intellectual challenge. For that scholar, pursuing physics would be meaningless, but composing and solving chess problems would be meaningful—hardly the conclusion Wolf is seeking.

Furthermore, suppose that in order to distract myself from the monotony of caring for my two children, I read an article on metaphysics. Why should the motive affect the worthiness of the activity?

Because Wolf's position is weakened by her commitment to an objective value that she cannot explain, we might drop that aspect of her position and accept Richard Taylor's view that a meaningful life is one that affords you long-term satisfaction, regardless of the activities you choose. Thus the life of Sisyphus would be meaningful if Sisyphus relished rolling stones up hills.

Yet even if a person's life is enjoyable, if it is morally unworthy, displaying no concern for the welfare of others, then such a life does not deserve to be judged positively by anyone with moral compunctions.

I would suggest, however, that by combining insights from Taylor and Wolf, we can understand the nature of a meaningful life. It is one in which an individual acts morally while achieving happiness.

To be happy is to be satisfied with one's life, content with one's lot, not suffering excessively from anxiety, alienation, frustration, disappointment, or depression. Satisfied people may face problems but view their lives overall more positively than negatively.

The crucial point is that how satisfaction may be achieved differs from person to person. One individual may be satisfied only by earning ten million dollars. Another may be satisfied by going each day with friends to a favorite club to swim, eat lunch, and play cards. Another may be satisfied by acting in community theatre productions. Their paths to contentment are different, yet their degree of satisfaction may be the same.

Some may be poor, yet satisfied. Others may be alone, yet satisfied. Still others may find satisfaction regardless of the depth of their learning or self-knowledge and irrespective of whatever illness or disability they may face. In any case, the judgment of satisfaction is the individual's, not anyone else's.

Does satisfaction depend on achieving one's goals? Not necessarily. You may achieve your aims only to find that doing so does not provide the satisfaction for which you had hoped. For example, you might eagerly seek and gain admission to a prestigious college only to find that its rural location, which seemed an advantage when you applied, turns out to be a disadvantage when you develop interests better pursued in an urban environment.

Furthermore, some people don't have specific goals. They can happily live here or there, engage in a variety of hobbies, or even pursue various careers. They find delight in spontaneity. Perhaps that approach doesn't appeal to you, but so what? If it works for others, why not let them have their enjoyment without derogating it?

How do you achieve satisfaction, considering that it has eluded so many? The key lies within yourself, because you cannot control the events outside you. If your satisfaction depends on whether others praise you, then they control how satisfied you will be with your life. If you wish to avoid being subject to the power of others, then you have to free yourself from dependence on their judgments.

Some, such as Philippa Foot, warn against a life spent in "childish pursuits."<sup>1</sup> But which pursuits are childish? How about collecting dolls, telling jokes, planting vegetables, selling cookies, running races, recounting adventures, or singing songs? While children engage in all these activities, so do adults, who may thereby find satisfaction in their lives. Assuming they meet their moral obligations, why disparage them or their interests?

An obituary provides information about an individual's life, detailing accomplishments. What we don't learn therein, however, is whether that individual found satisfaction. If so, and assuming the person displayed due respect for others, then that person's life was meaningful.<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES

1. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 86.

2. This theory is developed at length in Steven M. Cahn and Christine Vitrano, *Happiness and Goodness: Philosophical Reflections on Living Well* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).



P A R T   F O U R

# The End of Life





## *Death*



If death is the unequivocal and permanent end of our existence, the question arises whether it is a bad thing to die.

There is conspicuous disagreement about the matter: some people think death is dreadful; others have no objection to death *per se*, though they hope their own will be neither premature nor painful. Those in the former category tend to think those in the latter are blind to the obvious, while the latter suppose the former to be prey to some sort of confusion. On the one hand it can be said that life is all we have and the loss of it is the greatest loss we can sustain. On the other hand it may be objected that death deprives this supposed loss of its subject, and that if we realize that death is not an unimaginable condition of the persisting person, but a mere blank, we will see that it can have no value whatever, positive or negative.

Since I want to leave aside the question whether we are, or might be, immortal in some form, I shall simply use the word “death” and its cognates in this discussion to mean *permanent* death, unsupplemented by any form of conscious survival. I want to ask whether death is in itself an evil; and how great an evil, and of what kind, it might be. The question should be of interest even to those who believe in some form of immortality, for one’s attitude toward immortality must depend in part on one’s attitude toward death.

If death is an evil at all, it cannot be because of its positive features, but only because of what it deprives us of. I shall try to deal with the difficulties surrounding the natural view that death is an evil because it brings to an end all the goods that life contains. We need not give an account of these goods here, except to observe that some of them, like perception, desire, activity, and thought, are so general as to be constitutive of human life. They are widely regarded as formidable benefits in themselves, despite the fact that they are conditions of misery as well as of happiness, and that a sufficient

From Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*. Copyright © 1986 Princeton University Press, 1988 paperback edition. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

quantity of more particular evils can perhaps outweigh them. That is what is meant, I think, by the allegation that it is good simply to be alive, even if one is undergoing terrible experiences. The situation is roughly this: There are elements which, if added to one's experience, make life better; there are other elements which, if added to one's experience, make life worse. But what remains when these are set aside is not merely *neutral*: it is emphatically positive. Therefore life is worth living even when the bad elements of experience are plentiful, and the good ones too meager to outweigh the bad ones on their own. The additional positive weight is supplied by experience itself, rather than by any of its contents.

I shall not discuss the value that one person's life or death may have for others, or its objective value, but only the value it has for the person who is its subject. That seems to me the primary case, and the case which presents the greatest difficulties. Let me add only two observations. First, the value of life and its contents does not attach to mere organic survival: almost everyone would be indifferent (other things equal) between immediate death and immediate coma followed by death twenty years later without reawakening. And second, like most goods, this can be multiplied by time: more is better than less. The added quantities need not be temporally continuous (though continuity has its social advantages). People are attracted to the possibility of long-term suspended animation or freezing, followed by the resumption of conscious life, because they can regard it from within simply as a *continuation* of their present life. If these techniques are ever perfected, what from outside appeared as a dormant interval of three hundred years could be experienced by the subject as nothing more than a sharp discontinuity in the character of his experiences. I do not deny, of course, that this has its own disadvantages. Family and friends may have died in the meantime; the language may have changed; the comforts of social, geographical, and cultural familiarity would be lacking. Nevertheless these inconveniences would not obliterate the basic advantage of continued, though discontinuous, existence.

If we turn from what is good about life to what is bad about death, the case is completely different. Essentially, though there may be problems about their specification, what we find desirable in life are certain states, conditions, or types of activity. It is *being* alive, *doing* certain things, having certain experiences, that we consider good. But if death is an evil, it is the *loss of life*, rather than the state of being dead, or nonexistent, or unconscious, that is objectionable.<sup>1</sup> This asymmetry is important. If it is good to be alive, that advantage can be attributed to a person at each point of his life. It is a good of which Bach had more than Schubert, simply because he lived longer. Death, however, is not an evil of which Shakespeare has so far received a larger portion than Proust. If death is a disadvantage, it is not easy to say when a man suffers it.

There are two other indications that we do not object to death merely because it involves long periods of nonexistence. First, as has been mentioned, most of us would not regard the *temporary* suspension of life, even for substantial intervals, as in itself a misfortune. If it ever happens that people can

be frozen without reduction of the conscious lifespan, it will be inappropriate to pity those who are temporarily out of circulation. Second, none of us existed before we were born (or conceived), but few regard that as a misfortune. I shall have more to say about this later.

The point that death is not regarded as an unfortunate *state* enables us to refute a curious but very common suggestion about the origin of the fear of death. It is often said that those who object to death have made the mistake of trying to imagine what it is like to *be* dead. It is alleged that the failure to realize that this task is logically impossible (for the banal reason that there is nothing to imagine) leads to the conviction that death is a mysterious and therefore terrifying prospective *state*. But this diagnosis is evidently false, for it is just as impossible to imagine being totally unconscious as to imagine being dead (though it is easy enough to imagine oneself, from the outside, in either of those conditions). Yet people who are averse to death are not usually averse to unconsciousness (so long as it does not entail a substantial cut in the total duration of waking life).

If we are to make sense of the view that to die is bad, it must be on the ground that life is a good and death is the corresponding deprivation or loss, bad not because of any positive features but because of the desirability of what it removes. We must now turn to the serious difficulties which this hypothesis raises, difficulties about loss and privation in general, and about death in particular.

Essentially, there are three types of problem. First, doubt may be raised whether *anything* can be bad for a man without being positively unpleasant to him: specifically, it may be doubted that there are any evils which consist merely in the deprivation or absence of possible goods, and which do not depend on someone's *minding* that deprivation. Second, there are special difficulties, in the case of death, about how the supposed misfortune is to be assigned to a subject at all. There is doubt both as to *who* its subject is, and as to *when* he undergoes it. So long as a person exists, he has not yet died, and once he has died, he no longer exists; so there seems to be no time when death, if it is a misfortune, can be ascribed to its unfortunate subject. The third type of difficulty concerns the asymmetry, mentioned above, between our attitudes to posthumous and prenatal nonexistence. How can the former be bad if the latter is not?

It should be recognized that if these are valid objections to counting death as an evil, they will apply to many other supposed evils as well. The first type of objection is expressed in general form by the common remark that what you don't know can't hurt you. It means that even if a man is betrayed by his friends, ridiculed behind his back, and despised by people who treat him politely to his face, none of it can be counted as a misfortune for him so long as he does not suffer as a result. It means that a man is not injured if his wishes are ignored by the executor of his will, or if, after his death, the belief becomes current that all the literary works on which his fame rests were really written by his brother, who died in Mexico at the age of 28. It seems to me worth asking what assumptions about good and evil lead to these drastic restrictions.

All the questions have something to do with time. There certainly are goods and evils of a simple kind (including some pleasures and pains) which a person possesses at a given time simply in virtue of his condition at that time. But this is not true of all the things we regard as good or bad for a man. Often we need to know his history to tell whether something is a misfortune or not; this applies to ills like deterioration, deprivation, and damage. Sometimes his experiential *state* is relatively unimportant—as in the case of a man who wastes his life in the cheerful pursuit of a method of communicating with asparagus plants. Someone who holds that all goods and evils must be temporally assignable states of the person may of course try to bring difficult cases into line by pointing to the pleasure or pain that more complicated goods and evils cause. Loss, betrayal, deception, and ridicule are on this view bad because people suffer when they learn of them. But it should be asked how our ideas of human value would have to be constituted to accommodate these cases directly instead. One advantage of such an account might be that it would enable us to explain *why* the discovery of these misfortunes causes suffering—in a way that makes it reasonable. For the natural view is that the discovery of betrayal makes us unhappy because it is bad to be betrayed—not that betrayal is bad because its discovery makes us unhappy.

It therefore seems to me worth exploring the position that most good and ill fortune has as its subject a person identified by his history and his possibilities, rather than merely by his categorical state of the moment—and that while this subject can be exactly located in a sequence of places and times, the same is not necessarily true of the goods and ills that befall him.<sup>2</sup>

These ideas can be illustrated by an example of deprivation whose severity approaches that of death. Suppose an intelligent person receives a brain injury that reduces him to the mental condition of a contented infant, and that such desires as remain to him can be satisfied by a custodian, so that he is free from care. Such a development would be widely regarded as a severe misfortune, not only for his friends and relations, or for society, but also, and primarily, for the person himself. This does not mean that a contented infant is unfortunate. The intelligent adult who has been *reduced* to this condition is the subject of the misfortune. He is the one we pity, though of course he does not mind his condition—there is some doubt, in fact, whether he can be said to exist any longer.

The view that such a man has suffered a misfortune is open to the same objections which have been raised in regard to death. He does not mind his condition. It is in fact the same condition he was in at the age of three months, except that he is bigger. If we did not pity him then, why pity him now; in any case, who is there to pity? The intelligent adult has disappeared, and for a creature like the one before us, happiness consists in a full stomach and a dry diaper.

If these objections are invalid, it must be because they rest on a mistaken assumption about the temporal relation between the subject of a misfortune and the circumstances which constitute it. If, instead of concentrating exclusively on the oversized baby before us, we consider the person he was,

and the person he *could* be now, then his reduction to this state and the cancellation of his natural adult development constitute a perfectly intelligible catastrophe.

This case should convince us that it is arbitrary to restrict the goods and evils that can befall a man to nonrelational properties ascribable to him at particular times. As it stands, that restriction excludes not only such cases of gross degeneration, but also a good deal of what is important about success and failure, and other features of a life that have the character of processes. I believe we can go further, however. There are goods and evils which are irreducibly relational; they are features of the relations between a person, with spatial and temporal boundaries of the usual sort, and circumstances which may not coincide with him either in space or in time. A man's life includes much that does not take place within the boundaries of his body and his mind, and what happens to him can include much that does not take place within the boundaries of his life. These boundaries are commonly crossed by the misfortunes of being deceived, or despised, or betrayed. (If this is correct, there is a simple account of what is wrong with breaking a deathbed promise. It is an injury to the dead man. For certain purposes it is possible to regard time as just another type of distance.) The case of mental degeneration shows us an evil that depends on a contrast between the reality and the possible alternatives. A man is the subject of good and evil as much because he has hopes which may or may not be fulfilled, or possibilities which may or may not be realized, as because of his capacity to suffer and enjoy. If death is an evil, it must be accounted for in these terms, and the impossibility of locating it within life should not trouble us.

When a man dies we are left with his corpse, and while a corpse can suffer the kind of mishap that may occur to an article of furniture, it is not a suitable object for pity. The man, however, is. He has lost his life, and if he had not died, he would have continued to live it, and to possess whatever good there is in living. If we apply to death the account suggested for the case of dementia, we shall say that although the spatial and temporal locations of the individual who suffered the loss are clear enough, the misfortune itself cannot be so easily located. One must be content just to state that his life is over and there will never be any more of it. That *fact*, rather than his past or present condition, constitutes his misfortune, if it is one. Nevertheless if there is a loss, someone must suffer it, and *he* must have existence and specific spatial and temporal location even if the loss itself does not. The fact that Beethoven had no children may have been a cause of regret to him, or a sad thing for the world, but it cannot be described as a misfortune for the children that he never had. All of us, I believe, are fortunate to have been born. But unless good and ill can be assigned to an embryo, or even to an unconnected pair of gametes, it cannot be said that not to be born is a misfortune. (That is a factor to be considered in deciding whether abortion and contraception are akin to murder.)

This approach also provides a solution to the problem of temporal asymmetry, pointed out by Lucretius. He observed that no one finds it disturbing

to contemplate the eternity preceding his own birth, and he took this to show that it must be irrational to fear death, since death is simply the mirror image of the prior abyss. That is not true, however, and the difference between the two explains why it is reasonable to regard them differently. It is true that both the time before a man's birth and the time after his death are times when he does not exist. But the time after his death is time of which his death deprives him. It is time in which, had he not died then, he would be alive. Therefore any death entails the loss of *some* life that its victim would have led had he not died at that or any earlier point. We know perfectly well what it would be for him to have had it instead of losing it, and there is no difficulty in identifying the loser.

But we cannot say that the time prior to a man's birth is time in which he would have lived had he been born not then but earlier. For aside from the brief margin permitted by premature labor, he *could* not have been born earlier: anyone born substantially earlier than he was would have been someone else. Therefore the time prior to his birth is not time in which his subsequent birth prevents him from living. His birth, when it occurs, does not entail the loss to him of any life whatever.

The direction of time is crucial in assigning possibilities to people or other individuals. Distinct possible lives of a single person can diverge from a common beginning, but they cannot converge to a common conclusion from diverse beginnings. (The latter would represent not a set of different possible lives of one individual, but a set of distinct possible individuals, whose lives have identical conclusions.) Given an identifiable individual, countless possibilities for his continued existence are imaginable, and we can clearly conceive of what it would be for him to go on existing indefinitely. However inevitable it is that this will not come about, its possibility is still that of the continuation of a good for him, if life is the good we take it to be.<sup>3</sup>

We are left, therefore, with the question whether the nonrealization of this possibility is in every case a misfortune, or whether it depends on what can naturally be hoped for. This seems to me the most serious difficulty with the view that death is always an evil. Even if we can dispose of the objections against admitting misfortune that is not experienced, or cannot be assigned to a definite time in the person's life, we still have to set some limits on *how* possible a possibility must be for its nonrealization to be a misfortune (or good fortune, should the possibility be a bad one). The death of Keats at 24 is generally regarded as tragic; that of Tolstoy at 82 is not. Although they will both be dead for ever, Keats' death deprived him of many years of life which were allowed to Tolstoy; so in a clear sense Keats' loss was greater (though not in the sense standardly employed in mathematical comparison between infinite quantities). However, this does not prove that Tolstoy's loss was insignificant. Perhaps we record an objection only to evils which are gratuitously added to the inevitable; the fact that it is worse to die at 24 than at 82 does not imply that it is not a terrible thing to die at 82, or even at 806. The question is whether we can regard as a misfortune any limitation, like mortality, that is normal to the species. Blindness or near-blindness is not a

misfortune for a mole, nor would it be for a man if that were the natural condition of the human race.

The trouble is that life familiarizes us with the goods of which death deprives us. We are already able to appreciate them, as a mole is not able to appreciate vision. If we put aside doubts about their status as goods and grant that their quantity is in part a function of their duration, the question remains whether death, no matter when it occurs, can be said to deprive its victim of what is in the relevant sense a possible continuation of life.

The situation is an ambiguous one. Observed from without, human beings obviously have a natural lifespan and cannot live much longer than a hundred years. A man's sense of his own experience, on the other hand, does not embody this idea of a natural limit. His existence defines for him an essentially open-ended possible future, containing the usual mixture of goods and evils that he has found so tolerable in the past. Having been gratuitously introduced to the world by a collection of natural, historical, and social accidents, he finds himself the subject of a *life*, with an indeterminate and not essentially limited future. Viewed in this way, death, no matter how inevitable, is an abrupt cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible goods. Normality seems to have nothing to do with it, for the fact that we will all inevitably die in a few score years cannot by itself imply that it would not be good to live longer. Suppose that we were all inevitably going to die in *agony*—physical agony lasting six months. Would inevitability make *that* prospect any less unpleasant? And why should it be different for a deprivation? If the normal lifespan were a thousand years, death at 80 would be a tragedy. As things are, it may just be a more widespread tragedy. If there is no limit to the amount of life that it would be good to have, then it may be that a bad end is in store for us all.

## NOTES

1. It is sometimes suggested that what we really mind is the process of *dying*. But I should not really object to dying if it were not followed by death.
2. It is certainly not true in general of the things that can be said of him. For example, Abraham Lincoln was taller than Louis XIV. But when?
3. I confess to being troubled by the above argument, on the ground that it is too sophisticated to explain the simple difference between our attitudes to prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. For this reason I suspect that something essential is omitted from the account of the badness of death by an analysis which treats it as a deprivation of possibilities. My suspicion is supported by the following suggestion of Robert Nozick. We could imagine discovering that people developed from individual spores that had existed indefinitely far in advance of their birth. In this fantasy, birth never occurs naturally more than a hundred years before the permanent end of the spore's existence. But then we discover a way to trigger the premature batching of these spores, and people are born who have thousands of years of active life before them. Given such a situation, it would be possible to imagine *oneself* having come into existence thousands of years previously. If we put aside the question whether this would really be the same person, even given the identity of the spore, then the

consequence appears to be that a person's birth at a given time *could* deprive him of many earlier years of possible life. Now while it would be cause for regret that one had been deprived of all those possible years of life by being born too late, the feeling would differ from that which many people have about death. I conclude that something about the future *prospect* of permanent nothingness is not captured by the analysis in terms of denied possibilities. If so, then Lucretius' argument still awaits an answer. I suspect that it requires a general treatment of the difference between past and future in our attitudes toward our own lives. Our attitudes toward past and future pain are very different, for example. Derek Parfit's unpublished writings on this topic have revealed its difficulty to me.

*The Makropulos Case:  
Reflections on the Tedium  
of Immortality*



This essay started life as a lecture in a series ‘on the immortality of the soul or kindred spiritual subject.’ My kindred spiritual subject is, one might say, the mortality of the soul. Those among previous lecturers who were philosophers tended, I think, to discuss the question whether we are immortal; that is not my subject, but rather what a good thing it is that we are not. Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless, I shall suggest; so, in a sense, death gives the meaning to life. That does not mean that we should not fear death (whatever force that injunction might be taken to have, anyway). Indeed, there are several very different ways in which it could be true at once that death gave the meaning to life and that death was, other things being equal, something to be feared. Some existentialists, for instance, seem to have said that death was what gave meaning to life, if anything did, just because it was the fear of death that gave meaning to life; I shall not follow them. I shall rather pursue the idea that from facts about human desire and happiness and what a human life is, it follows both that immortality would be, where conceivable at all, intolerable, and that (other things being equal) death is reasonably regarded as an evil. Considering whether death can reasonably be regarded as an evil is in fact as near as I shall get to considering whether it should be feared: they are not quite the same question.

My title is that, as it is usually translated into English, of a play by Karel Čapek which was made into an opera by Janaček and which tells of a woman called Elina Makropulos, *alias* Emilia Marty, *alias* Ellian Macgregor, *alias* a number of other things with the initials ‘EM’, on whom her father, the Court physician to a sixteenth-century Emperor, tried out an elixir of life. At the time of the action she is aged 342. Her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference and coldness. Everything is joyless: ‘in the end it is the

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same', she says, 'singing and silence.' She refuses to take the elixir again; she dies; and the formula is deliberately destroyed by a young woman among the protests of some older men.

EM's state suggests at least this, that death is not necessarily an evil, and not just in the sense in which almost everybody would agree to that, where death provides an end to great suffering, but in the more intimate sense that it can be a good thing not to live too long. It suggests more than that, for it suggests that it was not a peculiarity of EM's that an endless life was meaningless. That is something I shall follow out later. First, though, we should put together the suggestion of EM's case, that death is not necessarily an evil, with the claim of some philosophies and religions that death is necessarily not an evil. Notoriously, there have been found two contrary bases on which that claim can be mounted: death is said by some not to be an evil because it is not the end, and by others, because it is. There is perhaps some profound temperamental difference between those who find consolation for the fact of death in the hope that it is only the start of another life, and those who equally find comfort in the conviction that it is the end of the only life there is. That both such temperaments exist means that those who find a diagnosis of the belief in immortality, and indeed a reproach to it, in the idea that it constitutes a consolation, have at best only a statistical fact to support them. While that may be just about enough for the diagnosis, it is not enough for the reproach.

Most famous, perhaps, among those who have found comfort in the second option, the prospect of annihilation, was Lucretius, who, in the steps of Epicurus, and probably from a personal fear of death which in some of his pages seems almost tangible, addresses himself to proving that death is never an evil. Lucretius has two basic arguments for this conclusion, and it is an important feature of them both that the conclusion they offer has the very strong consequence—and seems clearly intended to have the consequence—that, for oneself at least, it is all the same whenever one dies, that a long life is no better than a short one. That is to say, death is never an evil in the sense not merely that there is no-one for whom dying is an evil, but that there is no time at which dying is an evil—sooner or later, it is all the same.

The first argument<sup>1</sup> seeks to interpret the fear of death as a confusion, based on the idea that we shall be there after death to repine our loss of the *praemia vitae*, the rewards and delights of life, and to be upset at the spectacle of our bodies burned, so forth. The fear of death, it is suggested, must necessarily be the fear of some experiences had when one is dead. But if death is annihilation, then there are no such experiences: in the Epicurean phrase, when death is there, we are not, and when we are there, death is not. So, death being annihilation, there is nothing to fear. The second argument<sup>2</sup> addresses itself directly to the question of whether one dies earlier or later, and says that one will be the same time dead however early or late one dies, and therefore one might as well die earlier as later. And from both arguments we can conclude *nil igitur mors est ad nos, neque pertinet hilum*—death is nothing to us, and does not matter at all.<sup>3</sup>

The second of these arguments seems even on the face of things to contradict the first. For it must imply that if there *were* a finite period of death, such that if you died later you would be dead for less time, then there *would* be some point in wanting to die later rather than earlier. But that implication makes sense, surely, only on the supposition that what is wrong with dying consists in something undesirable about the condition of being dead. And that is what is denied by the first argument.

More important than this, the oddness of the second argument can help to focus a difficulty already implicit in the first. The first argument, in locating the objection to dying in a confused objection to being dead, and exposing that in terms of a confusion with being alive, takes it as genuinely true of life that the satisfaction of desire, and possession of the *praemia vitae*, are good things. It is not irrational to be upset by the loss of home, children, possessions—what is irrational is to think of death as, in the relevant sense, *losing* anything. But now if we consider two lives, one very short and cut off before the *praemia* have been acquired, the other fully provided with the *praemia* and containing their enjoyment to a ripe age, it is very difficult to see why the second life, by these standards alone, is not to be thought better than the first. But if it is, then there must be something wrong with the argument which tries to show that there is nothing worse about a short life than a long one. The argument locates the mistake about dying in a mistake about consciousness, it being assumed that what commonsense thinks about the worth of the *praemia vitae* and the sadness of their (conscious) loss is sound enough. But if the *praemia vitae* are valuable; even if we include as necessary to that value consciousness that one possesses them; then surely getting to the point of possessing them is better than not getting to that point, longer enjoyment of them is better than shorter, and more of them, other things being equal, is better than less of them. But if so, then it just will not be true that to die earlier is all the same as to die later, nor that death is never an evil—and the thought that to die later is better than to die earlier will not be dependent on some muddle about thinking that the dead person will be alive to lament his loss. It will depend only on the idea, apparently sound, that if the *praemia vitae* and consciousness of them are good things, then longer consciousness of more *praemia* is better than shorter consciousness of fewer *praemia*.

Is the idea sound? A decent argument, surely, can be marshalled to support it. If I desire something, then, other things being equal, I prefer a state of affairs in which I get it from one in which I do not get it, and (again, other things being equal) plan for a future in which I get it rather than not. But one future, for sure, in which I would not get it would be one in which I was dead. To want something, we may also say, is to that extent to have reason for resisting what excludes having that thing: and death certainly does that, for a very large range of things that one wants.<sup>4</sup> If that is right, then for any of those things, wanting something itself gives one a reason for avoiding death. Even though if I do not succeed, I will not know that, nor what I am missing, from the perspective of the wanting agent it is rational to aim for states of

affairs in which his want is satisfied, and hence to regard death as something to be avoided; that is, to regard it as an evil.

It is admittedly true that many of the things I want, I want only on the assumption that I am going to be alive; and some people, for instance some of the old, desperately want certain things when nevertheless they would much rather that they and their wants were dead. It might be suggested that not just these special cases, but really all wants, were conditional on being alive; a situation in which one has ceased to exist is not to be compared with others with respect to desire-satisfaction—rather, if one dies, all bets are off. But surely the claim that all desires are in this sense conditional must be wrong. For consider the idea of a rational forward-looking calculation of suicide: there can be such a thing, even if many suicides are not rational, and even though with some that are, it may be unclear to what extent they are forward-looking (the obscurity of this with regard to suicides of honour is an obscurity in the notion of shame). In such a calculation, a man might consider what lay before him, and decide whether he did or did not want to undergo it. If he does decide to undergo it, then some desire propels him on into the future, and *that* desire at least is not one that operates conditionally on his being alive, since it itself resolves the question of whether he is going to be alive. He has an unconditional, or (as I shall say) a *categorical* desire.

The man who seriously calculates about suicide and rejects it, only just has such a desire, perhaps. But if one is in a state in which the question of suicide does not occur, or occurs only as total fantasy—if, to take just one example, one is happy—one has many such desires, which do not hang from the assumption of one's existence. If they did hang from that assumption, then they would be quite powerless to rule out that assumption's being questioned, or to answer the question if it is raised; but clearly they are not powerless in those directions—on the contrary they are some of the few things, perhaps the only things, that have power in that direction. Some ascetics have supposed that happiness required reducing one's desires to those necessary for one's existence, that is, to those that one has to have granted that one exists at all; rather, it requires that some of one's desires should be fully categorical, and one's existence itself wanted as something necessary to them.

To suppose that one can in this way categorically want things implies a number of things about the nature of desire. It implies, for one thing, that the reason I have for bringing it about that I get what I want is not merely that of avoiding the unpleasantness of not getting what I want. But that must in any case be right—otherwise we should have to represent every desire as the desire to avoid its own frustration, which is absurd.

About what those categorical desires must be, there is not much of great generality to be said, if one is looking at the happy state of things: except, once more against the ascetic, that there should be not just enough, but more than enough. But the question might be raised, at the impoverished end of things, as to what the minimum categorical desire might be. Could it be *just* the desire to remain alive? The answer is perhaps 'no.' In saying that, I do not want to deny the existence, the value, or the basic necessity of a sheer reactive

drive to self-preservation: humanity would certainly wither if the drive to keep alive were not stronger than any perceived reasons for keeping alive. But if the question is asked, and it is going to be answered calculatively, then the bare categorical desire to stay alive will not sustain the calculation—that desire itself, when things have got that far, has to be sustained or filled out by some desire for something else, even if it is only, at the margin, the desire that future desires of mine will be born and satisfied. But the best insight into the effect of categorical desire is not gained at the impoverished end of things, and hence in situations where the question has actually come up. The question of life being desirable is certainly transcendental in the most modest sense, in that it gets by far its best answer in never being asked at all.

None of this—including the thoughts of the calculative suicide—requires my reflection on a world in which I never occur at all. In the terms of ‘possible worlds’ (which can admittedly be misleading), a man could, on the present account, have a reason from his own point of view to prefer a possible world in which he went on longer to one in which he went on for less long, or—like the suicide—the opposite; but he would have no reason of this kind to prefer a world in which he did not occur at all. Thoughts about his total absence from the world would have to be of a different kind, impersonal reflections on the value *for the world* of his presence or absence: of the same kind, essentially, as he could conduct (or, more probably, not manage to conduct) with regard to anyone else. While he can think egoistically of what it would be for him to live longer or less long, he cannot think egoistically of what it would be for him never to have existed at all. Hence the sombre words of Sophocles<sup>5</sup> ‘Never to have been born counts highest of all . . .’ are well met by the old Jewish reply—‘how many are so lucky? Not one in ten thousand.’

Lucretius’ first argument has been interestingly criticised by Thomas Nagel, on lines different from those that I have been following. Nagel claims that what is wrong with Lucretius’ argument is that it rests on the assumption that nothing can be a misfortune for a man unless he knows about it, and that misfortunes must consist in something nasty *for* him. Against this assumption, Nagel cites a number of plausible counter-instances, of circumstances which would normally be thought to constitute a misfortune, though those to whom they happen are and remain ignorant of them (as, for instance, certain situations of betrayal). The difference between Nagel’s approach and mine does not, of course, lie in the mere point of whether one admits misfortunes which do not consist of or involve nasty experiences: anyone who rejects Lucretius’ argument must admit them. The difference is that the reasons which a man would have for avoiding death are, on the present account, grounded in desires—categorical desires—which he has; he, on the basis of these, has reason to regard possible death as a misfortune to be avoided, and we, looking at things from his point of view, would have reason to regard his actual death as his misfortune. Nagel, however, if I understand him, does not see the misfortune that befalls a man who dies as necessarily grounded in the issue of what desires or sorts of desires he had; just as in the betrayal case, it could be a misfortune for a man to be betrayed,

even though he did not have any desire not to be betrayed. If this is a correct account, Nagel's reasoning is one step further away from Utilitarianism on this matter than mine,<sup>6</sup> and rests on an independent kind of value which a sufficiently Utilitarian person might just reject; while my argument cannot merely be rejected by a Utilitarian person, it seems to me, since he must if he is to be consistent, and other things being equal, attach disutility to any situation which he has good reason to prevent, and he certainly has good reason to prevent a situation which involves the non-satisfaction of his desires. Thus, granted categorical desires, death has a disutility for an agent, although that disutility does not, of course, consist in unsatisfactory experiences involved in its occurrence.

The question would remain, of course, with regard to any given agent, whether he had categorical desires. For the present argument, it will do to leave it as a contingent fact that most people do: for they will have a reason, and a perfectly coherent reason, to regard death as a misfortune, while it was Lucretius' claim that no-one could have a coherent reason for so regarding it. There may well be other reasons as well; thus Nagel's reasoning, though different from the more Utilitarian type of reason I have used against Lucretius, seems compatible with it and there are strong reasons to adopt his kind of consideration as well. In fact, further and deeper thought about this question seems likely to fill up the apparent gap between the two sorts of argument; it is hard to believe, for one thing, that the supposed contingent fact that people have categorical desires can really be as contingent as all that. One last point about the two arguments is that they coincide in not offering—as I mentioned earlier—any considerations about worlds in which one does not occur at all; but there is perhaps an additional reason why this should be so in the Utilitarian-type argument, over and above the one it shares with Nagel's. The reason it shares with Nagel's is that the type of misfortune we are concerned with in thinking about X's death is X's misfortune (as opposed to the misfortunes of the state or whatever); and whatever sort of misfortune it may be in a given possible world that X does not occur in it, it is not X's misfortune. They share the feature, then, that for anything to be X's misfortune in a given world, then X must occur in that world. But the Utilitarian-type argument further grounds the misfortune, if there is one, in certain features of X, namely his desires; and if there is no X in a given world, then *a fortiori* there are no such grounds.

But now—if death, other things being equal, is a misfortune; and a longer life is better than a shorter life; and we reject the Lucretian argument that it does not matter when one dies; then it looks as though—other things always being equal—death is at any time an evil, and it is always better to live than die. Nagel indeed, from his point of view, does seem to permit that conclusion, even though he admits some remarks about the natural term of life and the greater misfortune of dying in one's prime. But wider consequences follow. For if all that is true, then it looks as though it would be not only always better to live, but better to live always, that is, never to die. If Lucretius is wrong, we seem committed to wanting to be immortal.

That would be, as has been repeatedly said, with other things equal. No-one need deny that since, for instance, we grow old and our powers decline, much may happen to increase the reasons for thinking death a good thing. But these are contingencies. We might not age; perhaps, one day, it will be possible for some of us not to age. If that were so, would it not follow then that, more life being *per se* better than less life, we should have reason so far as that went (but not necessarily in terms of other inhabitants) to live for ever? EM indeed bears strong, if fictional, witness against the desirability of that; but perhaps she still laboured under some contingent limitations, social or psychological, which might once more be eliminated to bring it about that really other things were equal. Against this, I am going to suggest that the supposed contingencies are not really contingencies; that an endless life would be a meaningless one; and that we could have no reason for living eternally a human life. There is no desirable or significant property which life would have more of, or have more unqualifiedly, if we lasted for ever. In some part, we can apply to life Aristotle's marvellous remark about Plato's Form of the Good:<sup>7</sup> 'nor will it be any the more good for being eternal: that which lasts long is no whiter than that which perishes in a day.' But only in part; for, rejecting Lucretius, we have already admitted that more days may give us more than one day can.

If one pictures living for ever as living as an embodied person in the world rather as it is, it will be a question, and not so trivial as may seem, of what age one eternally is. EM was 342; because for 300 years she had been 42. This choice (if it was a choice) I am personally, and at present, well disposed to salute—if one had to spend eternity at any age, that seems an admirable age to spend it at. Nor would it necessarily be a less good age for a woman: that at least was not EM's problem, that she was too old at the age she continued to be at. Her problem lay in having been at it for too long. Her trouble was it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character; for EM has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times, and no doubt some changes of style to suit the passing centuries, seems always to have been much the same sort of person.

There are difficult questions, if one presses the issue, about this constancy of character. How is this accumulation of memories related to this character which she eternally has, and to the character of her existence? Are they much the same kind of events repeated? Then it is itself strange that she allows them to be repeated, accepting the same repetitions, the same limitations—indeed, *accepting* is what it later becomes, when earlier it would not, or even could not, have been that. The repeated patterns of personal relations, for instance, must take on a character of being inescapable. Or is the pattern of her experiences not repetitious in this way, but varied? Then the problem shifts, to the relation between these varied experiences, and the fixed character: how can it remain fixed, through an endless series of very various experiences?

The experiences must surely happen to her without really affecting her; she must be, as EM is, detached and withdrawn.

EM, of course, is in a world of people who do not share her condition, and that determines certain features of the life she has to lead, as that any personal relationship requires peculiar kinds of concealment. That, at least, is a form of isolation which would disappear if her condition were generalised. But to suppose more generally that boredom and inner death would be eliminated if everyone were similarly becalmed, is an empty hope: it would be a world of Bourbons, learning nothing and forgetting nothing, and it is unclear how much could even happen.

The more one reflects to any realistic degree on the conditions of EM's unending life, the less it seems a mere contingency that it froze up as it did. That it is not a contingency, is suggested also by the fact that the reflections can sustain themselves independently of any question of the particular character that EM had; it is enough, almost, that she has a human character at all. Perhaps not quite. One sort of character for which the difficulties of unending life would have less significance than they proved to have for EM might be one who at the beginning was more like what she is at the end: cold, withdrawn, already frozen. For him, the prospect of unending cold is presumably less bleak in that he is used to it. But with him, the question can shift to a different place, as to why he wants the unending life at all; for, the more he is at the beginning like EM is at the end, the less place there is for categorical desire to keep him going, and to resist the desire for death. In EM's case, her boredom and distance from life both kill desire and consist in the death of it; one who is already enough like that to sustain life in those conditions may well be one who had nothing to make him want to do so. But even if he has, and we conceive of a person who is stonily resolved to sustain for ever an already stony existence, his possibility will be of no comfort to those, one hopes a larger party, who want to live longer because they want to live more.

To meet the basic anti-Lucretian hope for continuing life which is grounded in categorical desire, EM's unending life in this world is inadequate, and necessarily so relative to just those desires and conceptions of character which go into the hope. That is very important, since it is the most direct response, that which should have been adequate if the hope is both coherent and what it initially seemed to be. It also satisfied one of two important conditions which must be satisfied by anything which is to be adequate as a fulfilment of my anti-Lucretian hope, namely that it should clearly be *me* who lives for ever. The second important condition is that the state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all. That is a vague formula, and necessarily so, for what exactly that relation will be must depend to some extent on what kind of aims and (as one might say) prospects for myself I now have. What we can say is that since I am propelled forward into longer life by categorical desires, what is promised must hold out some hopes for those desires. The limiting case of this might be that the promised life held out some hope just to that desire

mentioned before, that future desires of mine will be born and satisfied; but if that were the only categorical desire that carried me forward into it, at least this seems demanded, that any image I have of those future desires should make it comprehensible to me how in terms of my character they could be my desires.

This second condition, the EM kind of survival failed, on reflection, to satisfy; but at least it is clear why, before reflection, it looked as though it might satisfy the condition—it consists, after all, in just going on in ways in which we are quite used to going on. If we turn away now from EM to more remote kinds of survival, the problems of those two conditions press more heavily right from the beginning. Since the major problems of the EM situation lay in the indefinite extension of one life, a tempting alternative is survival by means of an indefinite series of lives. Most, perhaps all, versions of this belief which have actually existed have immediately failed the first condition: they get nowhere near providing any consideration to mark the difference between rebirth and new birth. But let us suppose the problem, in some way or another, removed; some conditions of bodily continuity, minimally sufficient for personal identity, may be supposed satisfied. (Anyone who thinks that no such conditions could be sufficient, and requires, for instance, conditions of memory, may well find it correspondingly difficult to find an alternative for survival in this direction which both satisfies the first requirement, of identity, and also adequately avoids the difficulties of the EM alternative.) The problem remains of whether this series of psychologically disjoint lives could be an object of hope to one who did not want to die. That is, in my view, a different question from the question of whether it will be him—which is why I distinguished originally two different requirements to be satisfied. But it is a question; and even if the first requirement be supposed satisfied, it is exceedingly unclear that the second can be. This will be so, even if one were to accept the idea, itself problematical, that one could have reason to fear the future pain of someone who was merely bodily continuous with one as one now is.

There are in the first place certain difficulties about how much a man could consistently be allowed to know about the series of his lives, if we are to preserve the psychological disjointness which is the feature of this model. It might be that each would in fact have to seem to him as though it were his only life, and that he could not have grounds for being sure what, or even that, later lives were to come. If so, then no comfort or hope will be forthcoming in this model to those who want to go on living. More interesting questions, however, concern the man's relation to a future life of which he did get some advance idea. If we could allow the idea that he could fear pain which was going to occur in that life, then we have at least provided him with one kind of reason which might move him to opt out of that life, and destroy himself (being recurrent, under conditions of bodily continuity, would not make one indestructible). But physical pain and its nastiness are to the maximum degree independent of what one's desires and character are, and the degree of identification needed with the later life to reject that aspect

of it is absolutely minimal. Beyond that point, however, it is unclear how he is to bring this later character and its desires into a relation to his present ones, so as to be satisfied or the reverse with this marginal promise of continued existence. If he can regard this future life as an object of hope, then equally it must be possible for him to regard it with alarm, or depression, and—as in the simple pain case—opt out of it. If we cannot make sense of his entertaining that choice, then we have not made sense of this future life being adequately related to his present life, so that it could, alternatively, be something he might want in wanting not to die. But can we clearly make sense of that choice? For if we—or he—merely wipe out his present character and desires, there is nothing left by which he can judge it at all, at least as something *for him*; while if we leave them in, we—and he—apply something irrelevant to that future life, since (to adapt the Epicurean phrase), when they are there, it is not, and when it is there, they are not. We might imagine him considering the future prospects, and agreeing to go on if he found them congenial. But that is a muddled picture. For whether they are congenial to him as he is now must be beside the point, and the idea that it is not beside the point depends on carrying over into the case features that do not belong to it, as (perhaps) that he will remember later what he wanted in the earlier life. And when we admit that it is beside the point whether the prospects are congenial, then the force of the idea that the future life could be something that he *now* wanted to go on to, fades.

There are important and still obscure issues here,<sup>8</sup> but perhaps enough has been said to cast doubt on this option as coherently satisfying the desire to stay alive. While few will be disposed to think that much can be made of it, I must confess that out of the alternatives it is the only one that for me would, if it made sense, have any attraction—no doubt because it is the only one which has the feature that what one is living at any given point is actually *a life*. It is singular that those systems of belief that get closest to actually accepting recurrence of this sort seem, almost without exception, to look forward to the point when one will be released from it. Such systems seem less interested in continuing one's life than in earning one the right to a superior sort of death.

The serial and disjoint lives are at least more attractive than the attempt which some have made, to combine the best of continuous and of serial existence in a fantasy of very varied lives which are nevertheless cumulatively effective in memory. This might be called the *Teiresias* model. As that case singularly demonstrates, it has the quality of a fantasy, of emotional pressure trying to combine the uncombinable. One thing that the fantasy has to ignore is the connexion, both as cause and as consequence, between having one range of experiences rather than another, wishing to engage in one sort of thing rather than another, and having a character. Teiresias cannot have a character, either continuously through these proceedings, or cumulatively at the end (if there were to be an end) of them: he is not, eventually, a person but a phenomenon.

In discussing the last models, we have moved a little away from the very direct response which EM's case seemed to provide to the hope that

one would never die. But perhaps we have moved not nearly far enough. Nothing of this, and nothing much like this, was in the minds of many who have hoped for immortality; for it was not in this world that they hoped to live for ever. As one might say, their hope was not so much that they would never die as that they would live after their death, and while that in its turn can be represented as the hope that one would not really die, or, again, that it was not really oneself that would die, the change of formulation could point to an after-life sufficiently unlike this life, perhaps, to earth the current of doubt that flows from EM's frozen boredom.

But in fact this hope has been and could only be modelled on some image of a more familiar untiring or unresting or unflagging activity or satisfaction; and what is essentially EM's problem, one way or another, remains. In general we can ask, what it is about the imaged activities of an eternal life which would stave off the principle hazard to which EM succumbed, boredom. The Don Juan in Hell joke, that heaven's prospects are tedious and the devil has the best tunes, though a tired fancy in itself, at least serves to show up a real and (I suspect) a profound difficulty, of providing any model of an unending, supposedly satisfying, state or activity which would not rightly prove boring to anyone who remained conscious of himself and who had acquired a character, interests, tastes and impatiences in the course of living, already, a finite life. The point is not that for such a man boredom would be a tiresome consequence of the supposed states or activities, and that they would be objectionable just on the utilitarian or hedonistic ground that they had this disagreeable feature. If that were all there was to it, we could imagine the feature away, along no doubt with other disagreeable features of human life in its present imperfection. The point is rather that boredom, as sometimes in more ordinary circumstances, would be not just a tiresome effect, but a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one's relation to the environment. Nothing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom *unthinkable*. What could that be? Something that could be guaranteed to be at every moment utterly absorbing? But if a man has and retains a character, there is no reason to suppose that there is anything that could be that. If, lacking a conception of the guaranteedly absorbing activity, one tries merely to think away the reaction of boredom, one is no longer supposing an improvement in the circumstances, but merely an impoverishment in his consciousness of them. Just as being bored can be a sign of not noticing, understanding or appreciating enough, so equally not being bored can be a sign of not noticing, or not reflecting, enough. One might make the immortal man content at every moment, by just stripping off from him consciousness which would have brought discontent by reminding him of other times, other interests, other possibilities. Perhaps, indeed, that is what we have already done, in a more tempting way, by picturing him just now as at every moment totally absorbed—but that is something we shall come back to.

Of course there is in actual life such a thing as justified but necessary boredom. Thus—to take a not entirely typical example—someone who was, or who thought himself, devoted to the radical cause might eventually admit

to himself that he found a lot of its rhetoric excruciatingly boring. He might think that he ought not to feel that, that the reaction was wrong, and merely represented an unworthiness of his, an unregenerate remnant of intellectual superiority. However, he might rather feel that it would not necessarily be a better world in which no-one was bored by such rhetoric and that boredom was, indeed, a perfectly worthy reaction to this rhetoric after all this time; but for all that, the rhetoric might be necessary. A man at arms can get cramp from standing too long at his post, but sentry-duty can after all be necessary. But the threat of monotony in eternal activities could not be dealt with in that way, by regarding immortal boredom as an unavoidable ache derived from standing ceaselessly at one's post. (This is one reason why I said that boredom in eternity would have to be *unthinkable*.) For the question would be unavoidable, in what campaign one was supposed to be serving, what one's ceaseless sentry-watch was for.

Some philosophers have pictured an eternal existence as occupied in something like intense intellectual enquiry. Why that might seem to solve the problem, at least for them, is obvious. The activity is engrossing, self-justifying, affords, as it may appear, endless new perspectives, and by being engrossing enables one to lose oneself. It is that last feature that supposedly makes boredom unthinkable, by providing something that is, in that earlier phrase, at every moment totally absorbing. But if one is totally and perpetually absorbed in such an activity, and loses oneself in it, then as those words suggest, we come back to the problem of satisfying the conditions that it should be me who lives for ever, and that the eternal life should be in prospect of some interest. Let us leave aside the question of people whose characteristic and most personal interests are remote from such pursuits, and for whom, correspondingly, an immortality promised in terms of intellectual activity is going to make heavy demands on some theory of a 'real self' which will have to emerge at death. More interesting is the content and value of the promise for a person who is, in this life, disposed to those activities. For looking at such a person as he now is, it seems quite unreasonable to suppose that those activities would have the fulfilling or liberating character that they do have for him, if they were in fact all he could do or conceive of doing. If they are genuinely fulfilling, and do not operate (as they can) merely as a compulsive diversion, then the ground and shape of the satisfactions that the intellectual enquiry offers him, will relate to *him*, and not just to the enquiry. The *Platonic introjection*, seeing the satisfactions of studying what is timeless and impersonal as being themselves timeless and impersonal, may be a deep illusion, but it is certainly an illusion.

We can see better into that illusion by considering Spinoza's thought, that intellectual activity was the most active and free state that a man could be in, and that a man who had risen to such activity was in some sense most fully individual, most fully himself. This conclusion has been sympathetically expounded by Stuart Hampshire, who finds on this point a similar doctrine in Spinoza and in Freud:<sup>9</sup> in particular, he writes '[one's] only means of achieving this distinctness as an individual, this freedom in relation to

the common order of nature, is the power of the mind freely to follow in its thought an intellectual order.' The contrast to this free intellectual activity is 'the common condition of men that their conduct and their judgements of value, their desires and aversions, are in each individual determined by unconscious memories'—a process which the same writer has elsewhere associated with our having any character at all as individuals.<sup>10</sup>

Hampshire claims that in pure intellectual activity the mind is most free because it is then least determined by causes outside its immediate states. I take him to mean that rational activity is that in which the occurrence of an earlier thought maximally explains the occurrence of a later thought, because it is the rational relation between their contents which, granted the occurrence of the first, explains the occurrence of the second. But even the maximal explanatory power, in these terms, of the earlier thought does not extend to total explanation: for it will still require explanation why this thinker on this occasion continued on this rational path of thought at all. Thus I am not sure that the Spinozist consideration which Hampshire advances even gives a very satisfactory sense to the *activity* of the mind. It leaves out, as the last point shows, the driving power which is needed to sustain one even in the most narrowly rational thought. It is still further remote from any notion of creativity, since that, even within a theoretical context, and certainly in an artistic one, precisely implies the origination of ideas which are not fully predictable in terms of the content of existing ideas. But even if it could yield one sense for 'activity', it would still offer very little, despite Spinoza's heroic defence of the notion, for *freedom*. Or—to put it another way—even if it offered something for freedom of the intellect, it offers nothing for freedom of the individual. For when freedom is initially understood as the absence of 'outside' determination, and in particular understood in those terms as an unquestionable *value*, my freedom is reasonably not taken to include freedom from my past, my character and my desires. To suppose that those are, in the relevant sense, 'outside' determinations, is merely to beg the vital question about the boundaries of the self, and not to prove from premisses acceptable to any clear-headed man who desires freedom that the boundaries of the self should be drawn round the intellect. On the contrary, the desire for freedom can, and should, be seen as the desire to be free in the exercise and development of character, not as the desire to be free of it. And if Hampshire and others are right in claiming that an individual character springs from and gets its energies from unconscious memories and unclear desires, then the individual must see them too as within the boundaries of the self, and themselves involved in the drive to persist in life and activity.

With this loss, under the Spinozist conception, of the individual's character, there is, contrary to Hampshire's claim, a loss of individuality itself, and certainly of anything that could make an eternity of intellectual activity, so construed, a reasonable object of interest to one concerned with individual immortality. As those who totally wish to lose themselves in the movement can consistently only hope that the movement will go on, so the consistent Spinozist—at least on this account of Spinozism—can only hope that the

intellectual activity goes on, something which could be as well realised in the existence of Aristotle's prime mover, perhaps, as in anything to do with Spinoza or any other particular man.

Stepping back now from the extremes of Spinozist abstraction, I shall end by returning to a point from which we set out, the sheer desire to go on living, and shall mention a writer on this subject, Unamuno, whose work *The Tragic Sense of Life*<sup>11</sup> gives perhaps more extreme expression than anyone else has done to that most basic form of the desire to be immortal, the desire not to die.

I do not want to die—no, I neither want to die nor do I want to want to die; I want to live for ever and ever and ever. I want this 'T' to live—this poor 'T' that I am and that I feel myself to be here and now, and therefore the problem of the duration of my soul, of my own soul, tortures me.<sup>12</sup>

Although Unamuno frequently refers to Spinoza, the spirit of this is certainly far removed from that of the 'sorrowful Jew of Amsterdam.' Furthermore, in his clear insistence that what he desperately wants is this life, the life of this self, not to end, Unamuno reveals himself at equal removes from Manicheanism and from Utilitarianism; and that is correct, for the one is only the one-legged descendant of the other. That tradition—Manichean, Orphic, Platonic, Augustinian—which contrasts the spirit and the body in such a sense that the spiritual aims at eternity, truth and salvation, while the body is adjusted to pleasure, the temporary, and eventual dissolution, is still represented, as to fifty per cent, by secular Utilitarianism: it is just one of the original pair of boots left by itself and better regarded now that the other has fallen into disrepair. Bodies are all that we have or are: hence for Utilitarianism it follows that the only focus of our arrangements can be the efficient organisation of happiness. Immortality, certainly, is out, and so life here should last as long as we determine—or eventually, one may suspect, others will determine—that it is pleasant for us to be around.

Unamuno's outlook is at the opposite pole to this and whatever else may be wrong with it, it salutes the true idea that the meaning of life does not consist either in the management of satisfactions in a body or in an abstract immortality without one. On the one hand he had no time for Manicheanism, and admired the rather brutal Catholic faith which could express its hopes for a future life in the words which he knew on a tombstone in Bilbao:<sup>13</sup>

Aunque estamos in polvo convertidos  
en Ti, Señor, nuestra esperanza fía,  
que tornaremos a vivir vestidos  
con la carne y la piel que nos cubría.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, his desire to remain alive extends an almost incomprehensible distance beyond any desire to continue agreeable experiences:

For myself I can say that as a youth and even as a child I remained unmoved when shown the most moving pictures of hell, for even, then nothing appeared quite so horrible to me as nothingness itself.<sup>15</sup>

The most that I have claimed earlier against Lucretius is not enough to make that preference intelligible to me. The fear of sheer nothingness is certainly part of what Lucretius rightly, if too lightly, hoped to exorcise; and the *mere* desire to stay alive, which is here stretched to its limit, is not enough (I suggested before) to answer the question, once the question has come up and requires an answer in rational terms. Yet Unamuno's affirmation of existence even through limitless suffering<sup>16</sup> brings out something which is implicit in the claim against Lucretius. It is not necessarily the prospect of pleasant times that create the motive against dying, but the existence of categorical desire, and categorical desire can drive through both the existence and the prospect of unpleasant times.

Suppose, then, that categorical desire does sustain the desire to live. So long as it remains so, I shall want not to die. Yet I also know, if what has gone before is right, that an eternal life would be unliveable. In part, as EM's case originally suggested, that is because categorical desire will go away from it: in those versions, such as hers, in which I am recognisably myself, I would eventually have had altogether too much of myself. There are good reasons, surely, for dying before that happens. But equally, at times earlier than that moment, there is reason for not dying. Necessarily, it tends to be either too early or too late. EM reminds us that it can be too late, and many, as against Lucretius, need no reminding that it can be too early. If that is any sort of dilemma, it can, as things still are and if one is exceptionally lucky, be resolved, not by doing anything, but just by dying shortly before the horrors of not doing so become evident. Technical progress may, in more than one direction, make that piece of luck rarer. But as things are, it is possible to be, in contrast to EM, *felix opportunitate mortis*—as it can be appropriately mis-translated, lucky in having the chance to die.

## NOTES

1. *de Rerum Natura* III, 870 *seq*, 898 *seq*
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1091
3. *Ibid.*, p. 830
4. Obviously the principle is not exceptionless. For one thing, one can want to be dead: the content of that desire may be obscure, but whatever it is, a man presumably cannot be *prevented* from getting it by dying.
5. *Oedipus at Colonus* 1224 *seq*.
6. Though my argument does not in any sense imply Utilitarianism; for some further considerations on this, see the final paragraphs of this paper.
7. *Ethica Nicomachea* 1096<sup>b</sup> 4.
8. For a detailed discussion of closely related questions, though in a different framework, see Derek Parfitt, 'Personal Identity', *Philosophical Review*, LXXX (1971), pp. 3–27.
9. *Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom*, reprinted in *Freedom of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 183 *seq*; the two quotations are from pp. 206–7.

10. *Disposition and Memory, Freedom of Mind*, pp. 160 seq; see especially pp. 176–7.
11. *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, translated by J. E. Crawford Flitch (London: 1921). Page references are to the Fontana Library edition, 1962.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
14. [Though we have become dust  
In thee, O Lord, our hope we entrust,  
That we shall live again clad  
In the flesh and skin that once covered us.]
15. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
16. An affirmation which takes on a special dignity retrospectively in the light of his own death shortly after his courageous speech against Millán Astray and the obscene slogan 'Viva la Muerte!' See Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1961), pp. 442–4.

## *Why Immortality Is Not So Bad*



### I

I shall begin by laying out some of the key elements of Bernard Williams's fascinating and influential discussion of immortality, 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality.' Williams discusses a character in a play by Karel Čapek (which was made into an opera by Janaček). This character had various names with the initials EM. When she was 42 years of age, her father gave her an elixir of life which rendered her capable of living forever (at the biological age of 42). At the time of action of the play, EM is aged 342. As Williams puts it, 'her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference and coldness. Everything is joyless . . . In the end, she refuses the elixir and dies, and the formula is destroyed 'by' a young woman (despite the protests of some older men!).'

For my purposes here, it will be useful to begin by distilling from Williams's rich and intriguing discussion his general framework for analyzing models of immortality. This framework involves positing two criteria which must be met if a given model of immortality is to be appealing to an individual. First, the future person (posited by the model) must be genuinely identical to the individual. (This means not just being qualitatively similar or having several identical *properties*; it means being genuinely identical—the same particular person.) Second, the life of the future person must be attractive (in a certain way) to the individual—the life of the future person must be 'suitably related' to the goals and projects of the individual.

This framework is really very simple and natural. It says that, in order for a model of immortality to be attractive to an individual, the model must posit a future scenario in which the individual can recognize *himself*—someone

John Martin Fischer, "Why Immortality Is Not So Bad," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 2(2): 257–270. Footnotes abridged.

genuinely identical to the individual. Further, the life of oneself in the future must be appealing; presumably, it cannot involve constant torture, onerous labor, tedium and so forth. The two conditions presented by Williams can be dubbed the ‘identity condition’ and the ‘attractiveness condition.’

Now the problems with EM-type immortality are supposed by Williams to pertain primarily to the second condition, although he also adduces considerations pertinent to the first. With regard to the second condition, Williams constructs a dilemma. Either EM’s character (her basic goals, projects, dispositions and interests) remain the same over time, or they change. If they remain the same, then indefinitely many experiences will lead to detachment or boredom: ‘a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her.’ But if the character changes, it is unclear whether the second condition is satisfied, because it is unclear how to assess the new projects and goals in light of the old ones.

Williams’s point is that it is not merely a contingent fact that eternal life would be unattractive; this unattractiveness is alleged to be an *essential* feature of eternal life.<sup>1</sup> Williams says;

. . . perhaps, one day, it will be possible for some of us not to age. If that were so, would it not follow then that, more life being *per se* better than less life, we should have reason so far as that went . . . to live for ever? EM indeed bears strong, if fictional, witness against the desirability of that, but perhaps she still laboured under some contingent limitations, social or psychological. . . . Against this, I am going to suggest that the supposed contingencies are not really contingencies; that an endless life would be a meaningless one; and that we could have no reason for living eternally a human life. There is no desirable or significant property which life would have more of, or have more unqualifiedly, if we lasted for ever. In some part, we can apply to life Aristotle’s marvellous remark about Plato’s Form of the Good: ‘nor will it be any the more good for being eternal: that which lasts long is no whiter than that which perishes in a day.’ [Ethica Nicomachea 1096b4]

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I wish to examine Williams’s thesis that immortality is essentially unappealing for creatures like us. First, I shall briefly consider Williams’s suggestions about the identity condition. Then I shall turn to the attractiveness condition. Consider the following passage from Williams’s essay:

Some philosophers have pictured an eternal existence as occupied in something like intense intellectual enquiry. . . . The activity is engrossing, self-justifying, affords, as it may appear, endless new perspectives, and by being engrossing enables one to lose oneself. . . . But if one is totally and perpetually absorbed in such an activity, and loses oneself in it, then as those words

## Why Immortality Is Not So Bad

suggest, we come back to the problem of satisfying the condition that it should be me who lives for ever.

Similarly, Williams argues against the appeal of the Spinozistic idea that intellectual activity is the most active and free state that a person could be in. Specifically, Williams argues against Stuart Hampshire's formulation of a doctrine he alleges is shared by both Spinoza and Freud, that

'one's only means of achieving this distinctness as an individual, this freedom in relation to the common order of nature, is the power of the mind freely to follow in its thought an intellectual order.' The contrast to this free intellectual activity is 'the common condition of men that their conduct and their judgments of value, their desires and aversions, are in each individual determined by unconscious memories.'

But since Williams believes that such unconscious motivations are indeed part of the self, he accuses the Spinozistic conception of freedom of aspiring to be free from the self, which entails a loss of individuality itself. Thus, again, Williams claims that to lose oneself in intellectual activity is literally to *lose oneself*. If such activity were the dominant component of immortality, it could not be of interest to an individual in the sense in which the individual is especially interested in *his or her own future*; thus, Williams is here primarily concerned with his first criterion for the desirability of immortality—the *identity* criterion. Williams goes on to say:

As those who totally wish to lose themselves in the movement can consistently only hope that the movement will go on, so the consistent Spinozist—at least on this account of Spinozism—can only hope that the intellectual activity goes on, something which could be as well realised in the existence of Aristotle's prime mover, perhaps, as in anything to do with Spinoza or any other particular man.

But it seems to me that an activity in which it is tempting to say that one 'loses oneself' is one in which the *content* of one's experiences is focused outward: one is thinking about something besides oneself. An engrossing and absorbing activity causes one to 'lose oneself' in the sense that one is not *self-absorbed*. But it is quite another matter to claim that the experiences involved in such activities are themselves not *one's own*. Even though one has 'lost oneself in something in the sense that one is not narcissistically focused even in part on oneself, it does not follow that one cannot look at a future with such experiences as genuinely *one's own future*.

I would suggest, then, that Williams's remarks about 'losing oneself in the movement' do not call into question the possibility of an immortal life in which a certain particular individual continues to exist (and can envisage him or herself in the future). Even if one's life is heavily invested in activities in which one 'loses oneself', one can still understand these activities to be part of one's own future; the crucial distinction here is between the *content* of the relevant experiences and their *ownership*.

III

I now turn to Williams's second condition—the attractiveness condition. As pointed out above, Williams here constructs a dilemma: either one's character remains fixed, or it is allowed to change over time. I shall begin with the first horn of Williams's dilemma; that is, I shall be assuming that the individual in question has roughly speaking a fixed character over time.

The specific problem with the first sort of immortality (in which character is held fixed) is its putatively inevitable tendency to become boring and alienating. Williams puts the point as follows:

In general we can ask, what it is about the imaged activities of an eternal life which would stave off the principle hazard to which EM succumbed, boredom. The Don Juan in Hell joke, that heaven's prospects are tedious and the devil has the best tunes, though a tired fancy in itself, at least serves to show up a real and (I suspect) a profound difficulty, of providing any model of an unending, supposedly satisfying, state or activity which would not rightly prove boring to anyone who remained conscious of himself and who had acquired a character, interests, tastes and impatiences in the course of living, already, a finite life.

There are various philosophical defenses of the thesis that immortality (of the sort under consideration here) would be necessarily boring and thus would run afoul of the attractiveness condition. I certainly cannot here fully defend the idea that there are some pictures of such immortality which are *not* necessarily unattractive in this (or any other) way, but I wish to make a gesture in this direction by pointing to what appear to me to be some salient errors in Williams's defense of the thesis that such immortality is necessarily boring.

(1) The first error can be seen to come from (or at least be encouraged by) a particular formulation employed by Williams. He says that the defenders of the desirability of immortality must provide a 'model of an unending, supposedly satisfying, state or activity which would not rightly prove boring to anyone who remained conscious of himself and who had acquired a character, interests, tastes and impatiences in the course of living, already, a finite life.' The use of the phrase 'an unending, supposedly satisfying, state or activity', is infelicitous insofar as it suggests (but of course does not strictly speaking entail) that the endless life in question must consist in a *single* state or activity. Later, Williams says that the defender of the desirability of immortality must point to 'something that makes boredom *unthinkable* . . . something that could be guaranteed to be at every moment utterly absorbing. But if a man has and retains a character, there is no reason to suppose that there is anything that could be that.' Again, this passage (especially the use of the singular pronouns 'something' and 'anything') at least suggests that the endless life must consist in some *single* utterly absorbing thing. Finally, Williams considers an eternal existence occupied in activities of intense intellectual

inquiry. He says that ‘it seems quite unreasonable to suppose that [these activities] would have the fulfilling or liberating character that they do have for [an individual who actually engages in such activities], if they were in fact all he could do or conceive of doing.’

But why suppose that any one *single* supposedly absorbing activity must be pursued *at the expense of all others*? Why can’t such activities be part of a *package* in an immortal life, just as we suppose that they should be in a mortal life? Certainly, an immortal life could consist in a certain *mix* of activities, possibly including friendship, love, family, intellectual, artistic and athletic activity, sensual delights, and so forth. We could imagine that any *one* of these would be boring and alienating, pursued relentlessly and without some combination of the others. In general, single-minded and unbalanced pursuit of any single kind of activity will be unattractive. But of course from the fact that one’s life will be *unending* it does not follow that it must be *unitary* or *unbalanced*. That one’s life is endless clearly does not have the implication that one must endlessly and single-mindedly pursue some particular sort of activity.

(2) It might be useful again to consider Williams’s demand for ‘something that makes boredom *unthinkable* . . . something that could be guaranteed to be at every moment utterly absorbing.’ His claim is that ‘nothing less will do for eternity.’ But the justification for this demand is unclear. Why, in particular, should there be an asymmetry (of the sort implied by the demand) in the standards for the attractiveness of a finite life and an infinite life? Surely, we think of certain mortal lives which involve considerable stretches of boredom and even pain nevertheless worth living and even very appealing. Given this, why think that an immortal life with such features would not be on balance appealing? Why think that because a life is *unending*, it must be *uniformly* pleasing in order to be on balance attractive? The inference here is not more compelling than the inference noted above from the unending nature of immortal life to some single *unitary* activity which it putatively must contain.

Suppose one says that one finds some activity ‘endlessly fascinating.’ This could mean various different things. First, it could mean that whenever one turns to the activity (in the normal course of one’s life), one finds it on balance fascinating. Second, it could mean that whenever one turns to the activity (in the normal course of one’s life), one finds it *filled with* fascinating moments—perhaps even densely packed with fascinating moments. Finally, I suppose it *could* (just possibly) mean that one pursues the activity *forever* and finds it at every moment fascinating. Thus, with regard to the schema, ‘endlessly—’, one must distinguish at least three different notions: *reliability*, *density* and *infinite extensibility*.

Now imagine that an unending life contains some activity which one finds ‘endlessly fascinating.’ It surely does not follow from the fact that an *unending* life contains an endlessly fascinating activity that the activity must be endlessly fascinating in the sense of infinite extensibility. An unending life can contain an endlessly fascinating activity in the sense of reliability or density. Further, I see no reason simply to *assume* (as Williams seems to) that in order for an endless

life to be attractive, it must contain an activity (or even set of activities) that is endlessly fascinating (or endlessly appealing in any way) in the sense of infinite extensibility. I should think that it is even an open question whether in order for an endless life to be attractive, it must contain an activity that is endlessly fascinating (or endlessly appealing in any way) in *any* of the senses.

(3) I wish now to develop a distinction which I believe is important to assessing the appeal of immortality. Having laid out the distinction, I will suggest that the tendency to think that immortality must be boring and alienating may come in part from attending solely to one of the categories involved in the distinction; this is another mistake of the proponents of the thesis that immortality is necessarily boring.

Some pleasurable experiences, it seems, are in some sense ‘self-exhausting.’ In the case of these pleasures, once (or perhaps a few times) is enough. That is to say, when one experiences such pleasures one tends not to want to repeat them—even at some point relatively far in the future. Some such pleasures are frankly *disappointing*; in the case of these, we find that some highly touted or much anticipated pleasure is just not what it was made out to be, and we simply conclude that it is not worth pursuing these in the future. But there are other such pleasures which are not necessarily disappointing; rather, they may be entirely fulfilling but in some way ‘complete in themselves.’ More specifically, they seem to be complete in the sense that, having experienced such a pleasure, one has no desire to experience it again at any point in the future.

I take it that everyone has had their share of disappointments, so it is not necessary to dwell on these. But it will be useful to consider some examples of the ‘non-disappointing’ self-exhausting pleasures. Suppose, for instance, that you have the goal of doing something just (or at least primarily) to prove to yourself that you can do it. Imagine, for example, that you are somewhat afraid of heights, and you have been working hard to overcome this phobia. You form the goal of climbing Mt Whitney just to show yourself that you have overcome the fear—just to show yourself that you can control your life and overcome obstacles. Upon climbing the mountain, you may in fact be very pleased and proud. Indeed, you may be deeply satisfied. But also you may have absolutely no desire to climb Mt Whitney (or any other mountain) again. You have accomplished your goal, but there is no impetus toward repeating the relevant activity or the pleasure that issues from it.

I speculate that there are quite a few activities and resulting pleasures that are relevantly similar to those in the above case. Some of these are activities in which one sets out to prove something to oneself or other people. Others may be activities in which one sets a goal which is essentially ‘comparative’ in some way—one wants to win a race or some prize, one wants to be the brightest, most productive, most popular, fastest, and so forth (in some given context). Frequently (although certainly not invariably), upon reaching such essentially comparative goals, one finds them either disappointing or ‘complete in themselves’; in any case, there is relatively little energy or impetus to repeat the accomplishments. (Of course, the energizing aspect of such

accomplishments will vary with the nature of the accomplishment and the individual's personality; for some individuals, such achievements only whet the appetite for more, whereas this is not the case for others.)

I suspect, then, that the class of self-exhausting pleasures (both disappointing and not) is rather large. But these are *not* the *only* sort of pleasures. There are also 'repeatable pleasures.' Here an individual may well find the pleasure highly fulfilling and completely satisfying at the moment and yet wish to have more (i.e., to *repeat* the pleasure) at some point in the future (not necessarily immediately). Certain salient sensual pleasures leap immediately to mind: the pleasures of sex, of eating fine meals and drinking fine wines, of listening to beautiful music, of seeing great art, and so forth. These, or many of them, seem to be—at least for many people—repeatable pleasures. (Note that the distinction between self-exhausting and repeatable pleasures must be *relativized to particular individuals*; this having been said, there will presumably be some similarities across different individuals.)

It is not evident that the distinction between self-exhausting and repeatable pleasures can be understood or explained in terms of other notions. That is, it is not clear that the repeatable pleasures are 'higher', 'more noble', 'more intrinsically compelling', 'more complex', 'more intense', and so forth. It just seems to be a fact about us that we find that some pleasures are self-exhausting and some are repeatable, and it is not clear how even to begin to give an illuminating reductive account of this distinction.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, even repeatable pleasures may become boring or unappealing if distributed too closely (or in an otherwise inappropriate pattern). I suppose that even the most delectable lobster thermidor would quickly become revolting if consumed at every meal. But, as noted above, it is a mistake to suppose that the pleasures must be experienced in this way. Given the appropriate distribution of such pleasures, it seems that an endless life that included some (but perhaps not only) repeatable pleasures would *not* necessarily be boring or unattractive. Perhaps some of the proponents of the 'necessary boredom' thesis tend to attend solely or primarily to the self-exhausting pleasures (and associated activities). But once it is seen that there are also repeatable pleasures, the prospects of a certain sort of immortality are not nearly so grim.

I wish to say a bit more about the distinction between self-exhausting and repeatable pleasures. As the discussion proceeds, I hope it will become evident just how implausible it is to deny that there are repeatable pleasures (or that there can continue to be repeatable pleasures that form part of a mix of pleasurable experiences that extends indefinitely into the future). As a help in further discussing the nature and role of repeatable pleasures, I shall now relate the story of André and his beloved goose liver:<sup>3</sup>

We had just been served the usual airline fare. The man sitting next to me, call him André, tasted his food deliberately, paused thoughtfully for a moment as if he were extracting what little pleasure could be found in the morsel, and then pronounced judgment: 'Surprising, yes this is really rather nice.' He

had a cultured European accent and the appearance of a man dissipated not by wanton and reckless living, but by the civilized excess of too much of the good life. I said something to the effect that I thought all airplane food was awful and this seemed to be no exception. André looked at me with a type of patient parental disappointment. My comment had revealed how little I knew about life. ‘Well, of course, this “food” is terrible—not really food at all. But this is an airplane, isn’t it? And the point is that this turkey is much superior to what one normally finds in such environs. That is the pleasure in it.’ It became clear that André’s senses were far more refined than mine. He had trained himself to glean what little enjoyment could be found even in something so bland as a turkey sandwich on United.

He began to relate the various meals he had eaten at different times. And this was how we at last came to the topic of the beloved goose liver. A goose liver, you see, properly nurtured and prepared, simply is better than the best of any other food. André became quiet for a time—lost in reveries like one remembering old and dear friends. He began slowly, reverently to recall for me the rare times when he had found his beloved goose liver. There were the times growing up in Hungary—a country which, as everyone knows, really is the best country at producing goose liver. Later there were great moments when he would return to Hungary to visit his relatives; they would scrimp and save in order to have the week’s wages necessary to procure the goose liver. Certainly this was extravagant, but so great was his joy eating the meal that everyone at the table felt it was a small price to pay.

There were other rare occasions in places like Vienna and New York where André would find and become reacquainted with his beloved goose liver in new surroundings. But such moments carried with them tremendous opportunities for disappointment. Not infrequently, the prized liver would be ruined by a clumsy chef who completely lacked the proper respect for the bounty he was preparing. Once, however, André was travelling through a little town in the Swiss Alps. He happened upon an average-looking restaurant around dinner time. There on the menu was the daily special—goose liver. He inquired after the details of the dish—was it fresh, how was it prepared, and so forth. The answers encouraged him to order the meal. Upon its arrival at his table, André was surprised beyond his wildest dreams. He exclaimed to the waitress that he must meet the chef, for there were only two or three men in the world (he knew them all) who could prepare the beloved goose liver so expertly. How was it possible that the masterpiece could be produced so casually here? Much to André’s surprise, when the chef was brought to the table, he turned out to be one of the famous chefs who had prepared André a meal years earlier. (The chef had some family business in the area and was cooking in the restaurant as a favor to the owner who was his friend.) The chef was, of course, delighted to find someone who truly appreciated the treasure which had been laid before him, and the two talked late into the night. André extended his stay in the town three days. He ordered goose liver every night.

Evidently, André’s enthusiasm is food. Surely, the pleasures of the goose liver are *repeatable* pleasures for André. And it seems that André does not need such exotic culinary adventures to achieve significant repeatable pleasures; indeed, he gets such pleasures from a wide variety of gastronomic experiences, both

elaborate and pedestrian. Further, I see no reason to think that André's pleasures would cease to be repeatable, if part of an immortal life (in which the pleasures are appropriately distributed. Goose liver for breakfast, lunch and dinner would no doubt rather rapidly turn even André's stomach.)

To extend the point. Really, it seems that there are many repeatable pleasures; when one thinks about it—and specific accounts such as that of André help to bring home the point—Williams's necessary boredom thesis becomes very implausible. Think, for instance, of the pleasures of listening to great music. I get extraordinary pleasure from listening to Bach's Second Partita for the Unaccompanied Violin. (Whereas I am certainly not immune to gastronomical delights, Bach's Second Partita is my beloved goose liver.) And I see no reason why it would cease to be a repeatable pleasure, if part of an immortal life (in which there were an appropriate mix of activities and pleasures). Certainly, there are other such pleasures, such as the pleasures of visiting a great art museum, or a great and beautiful city, such as Paris, Venice or San Francisco. (I cannot imagine *ever* getting tired of the view of the city of San Francisco from the Golden Gate Bridge, or the feeling of the fog engulfing me in Golden Gate Park, or the beautiful plaintive sound of the foghorns in the distance. I have *no* tendency to think that these pleasures would become less compelling, unless pursued in a singleminded or compulsive fashion.)

In this section I have in a very sketchy way suggested a distinction between self-exhausting and repeatable pleasures. Although I have not analyzed or developed the distinction in detail, I have suggested that it is a mistake to suppose that all pleasures are relevantly similar to the self-exhausting sort. I wish briefly here to allude to a treatment of these issues which (like Williams's) is insufficiently attentive to the distinction in question. In Kierkegaard's pseudonymous essay 'The Rotation Method', the aestheticist 'A' properly rejects the idea that there must be *one* activity which is the sole source of pleasure and which is pursued relentlessly over the course of a lifetime. Rather, 'A' endorses a system of rotating pleasures just as an efficient farmer might rotate his crops to achieve a better result. But even with the rotation method 'A' finds life boring:

Starting from a principle is affirmed by people of experience to be a very reasonable procedure; I am willing to humor them, and so begin with the principle that all men are bores. Surely no one will prove himself so great a bore as to contradict me in this.

. . . All men are bores. The word itself suggests the possibility of a subdivision. It may just as well indicate a man who bores others as one who bores himself. Those who bore others are the mob, the crowd, the infinite multitude of men in general. Those who bore themselves are the elect, the aristocracy; and it is a curious fact that those who do not bore themselves usually bone others, while those who bore themselves entertain others.<sup>4</sup>

But whereas Kierkegaard's hedonist 'A' avoids some of the errors discussed above by adopting the rotation method, he evidently does *not* avoid the error of ignoring or underestimating the repeatable pleasures. Given the existence

of such pleasures, a life with a suitable arrangement of them need not be boring. And I do not see why an immortal life with such a mix of repeatable pleasures would necessarily be boring.

Kierkegaard wished to convince us to turn away from hedonism and toward spiritual and religious experiences. I have suggested that he ignored the possibility of a range of pleasures which clearly are accessible even to persons who do not have spiritual or religious experiences. But for those who do indeed have such experiences, there would seem to be even more reason to embrace immortal life; surely, the deep and resonant rewards of spiritual and religious experience would not somehow become wooden or etiolated, if part of an endless life. What reason is there to suppose that such experiences would change their character in such circumstances?

Williams usefully distinguishes between ‘conditional’ and ‘categorical’ desires. The conditional desires are desires for certain things, given that one will continue to live. Someone surely will want adequate clothing, food, shelter, and so forth, on the condition that he or she will continue to be alive. But such a person may not prefer to continue to live. Preferences which imply an answer to the question of whether one wishes to be alive are categorical desires. Presumably—although Williams does not explicitly say this—there can be both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ categorical desires. A positive categorical desire implies the desire to continue to live, whereas a negative categorical desire implies the desire not to continue to live.

Perhaps the distinction between self-exhausting and repeatable pleasures can go some distance toward illuminating Williams’s claim that one would lose one’s positive categorical desires in an immortal life. Granted, this might be true if one focused exclusively on self-exhausting pleasures. After a while—perhaps a long while—these desires would lose their capacity to ground categorical desires and to propel one into the future. But I see no reason to think that the repeatable pleasures would lose their energizing and ‘propulsive’ character. Further, spiritual and religious experiences would seem to be relevantly similar to the repeatable pleasures in this respect; they seem capable of providing the basis for positive categorical desires, even in an immortal life.<sup>5</sup>

So far I have been concerned to discuss the first horn of Williams’s dilemma pertinent to the attractiveness condition (presented above). That is, I have discussed the necessary boredom thesis in the context of a relatively fixed character. Let me now say just a few very brief words about the second horn, according to which the relevant individual’s character changes over time. Williams suggests that it is now unclear that the individual will find such immortality attractive, given that it is unclear that there is the appropriate relationship between the individual’s current character and future goals, values and interests.

This sort of case notoriously raises fascinating but complex issues.<sup>6</sup> But the basic point is that it seems that an individual could value such an existence if he or she felt that the change in character would result from *certain sorts of sequences*. That is, if I felt that my future character will be different

from my present one as a result of appropriate reflection at future times upon my experiences given my ‘then-current’ character, then I might well value such an existence. One’s attitudes toward future changes of character depend on *how* and *why* the changes take place.

Surely in our ordinary, finite lives we envisage certain changes in our values and preferences over time. For example, one may currently value excitement and challenge; thus, one might wish to live in an urban area with many career and avocational opportunities (but with lousy weather and a high crime rate). Still, one might envisage a time in the future when one will be older and will prefer warm weather, serenity and security. One can certainly envisage a time when one will prefer to live in a condominium in a warm, safe place, even if one currently thrives on life in Manhattan. And one need not look at the future stages of one’s life (in which significant changes in values and preferences have taken place) as unattractive; certainly, they are not so unattractive as to render death preferable!

Thus, there are quite ordinary cases in our finite lives in which we envisage changes in our characters—our values and preferences—and which are not so unattractive as to render death preferable. Why, then, could not the same be true of immortal existence? As above, why set such radically different standards for immortal life and mortal life?

Granted, if one’s character is changed by brainwashing, coercion, deception or various other methods, one might find the resultant existence thoroughly unattractive. But why assimilate all changes of character to these? And a devoted conservative republican may find it unthinkable that she become a liberal democrat, even by rather less exotic means of transformation. But it is not evident to me that such a person would actually prefer death. And even so, there is no reason to assimilate *all* changes of character to such a change; all that is required, in order to defend the thesis that immortality is not necessarily unattractive (on this horn of the dilemma), is that there be certain changes of character plausibly envisaged as part of an immortal life which would not be so unattractive as to render death preferable.

## IV

In this paper I have explored some of the philosophical puzzles pertaining to immortality. More specifically, I have used Bernard Williams’s important and influential discussion as a springboard for analyzing what I take to be certain problems with the claim that immortality is necessarily unattractive. I have argued that it is unfair to suppose that, in order for immortality to be attractive, it must consist of some *single* activity pursued at the expense of others. Further, it is unfair to demand that, in order for immortality to be attractive, it must consist of *entirely* pleasurable or agreeable experiences; why suppose the standards for immortal life are in this respect different from the standards for mortal life? Also, one may be entirely ‘lost’ in an engrossing

activity in the sense of not *focusing* (primarily) upon oneself; it is quite another matter to say that the relevant experiences are not *one's own*. Finally, it is important to distinguish two different kinds of pleasures; self-exhausting pleasures and repeatable pleasures. A life without repeatable pleasures might well eventually become boring. But it is a mistake to suppose that an immortal life must contain only self-exhausting pleasures at the expense of repeatable pleasures. The repeatable pleasures—perhaps together with spiritual and religious experiences—could provide a reasonable basis for positive categorical desires even in an immortal life. It has been a recurrent theme of my discussion that it is quite unfair to set radically different standards for finite life and immortal life.

## NOTES

1. Presumably, the essential boredom thesis is meant to apply to creatures of a certain sort—creatures relevantly similar to us. Otherwise, it would follow from the thesis that God's existence is boring and unattractive (insofar as God is essentially everlasting).
2. It is an interesting philosophical question: *Why* are some pleasures self-exhausting and others repeatable.
3. For the story of André I am indebted to Mark Ravizza.
4. Soren Kierkegaard, 'The Rotation Method', in *Either/Or*, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (New York: The Modern Library, 1946), pp. 21, 23–4.
5. It has been brought to my attention that there may indeed be some experiences in life that we savor and value (to the extent we actually do) precisely because we know that we will not enjoy them forever. It is difficult for me to know whether this is really the case, and to what extent (if so). But let me grant that it is true. This admission would not in itself undermine my strategy of argumentation, for even if certain pleasures are expunged or diminished, the repeatable ones may still make immortal life worthwhile. And it is also worth noting that there certainly are painful and unpleasant experiences associated precisely with the fact that we *cannot* have certain relationships and experiences forever: loss and death notoriously impose great pain and suffering upon us. I see no reason to suppose that the diminution in pleasures issuing from immortality would be greater than the diminution in pain and suffering.
6. See, for example, Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

*The Afterlife*

I will begin by asking you to consider a crude and morbid thought experiment. Suppose you knew that, although you yourself would live a normal life span, the earth would be completely destroyed thirty days after your death in a collision with a giant asteroid. How would this knowledge affect your attitudes during the remainder of your life? . . .

. . . [T]he prospect of the earth's imminent destruction would induce in us reactions of grief, sadness, and distress. But we must also consider how, if at all, it would affect our subsequent motivations and our choices about how to live. To what extent would we remain committed to our current projects and plans? To what extent would the activities in which we now engage continue to seem worth pursuing? Offhand, it seems that there are many projects and activities that might become less important to us. By this I mean several things. First, our reasons to engage in them might no longer seem to us as strong. At the limit, we might cease to see any reason to engage in them. Second, our emotional investment in them might weaken. For example, we might no longer feel as eager or excited at the prospect of engaging in them; as frustrated if prevented from engaging in them; as pleased if they seemed to be going well; as disappointed if they seemed not to be going well; and so on. At the limit, we might become emotionally detached from or indifferent to them. Third, our belief that they were worthwhile activities in which to engage might weaken or, at the limit, disappear altogether.

It is difficult to be sure exactly which projects and activities would seem to us diminished in importance in these respects, and no doubt there are interesting differences in the ways that different individuals would react. On the face of it, however, there are several types of projects and activities that would appear fairly obviously to be vulnerable to such changes in our attitudes. Consider, to take one representative example, the project of trying to

From Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, Oxford University Press, 2013. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

find a cure for cancer. This project would seem vulnerable for at least two reasons. First, it is a project in which it is understood that ultimate success may be a long way off. Even the very best research that is done today may be but a step on a long road that will lead to a cure only in the indeterminate future, if at all. The doomsday scenario, by cutting the future short, makes it much less likely that such a cure will ever be found. Second, the primary value of the project lies in the prospect of eventually being able to cure the disease and to prevent the death and suffering it causes. But the doomsday scenario means that even immediate success in finding a cure would make available such benefits only for a very short period of time. Under these conditions, scientists' motivations to engage in such research might well weaken substantially. This suggests that projects would be specially vulnerable if either (a) their ultimate success is seen as something that may not be achieved until some time well in the future, or (b) the value of the project derives from the benefits that it will provide to large numbers of people over a long period of time. Cancer research is threatened because it satisfies both of these conditions. But there are many other projects and activities that satisfy at least one of them. This is true, for example, of much research in science, technology, and medicine. It is also true of much social and political activism. It is true of many efforts to build or reform or improve social institutions. It is true of many projects to build new buildings, improve the physical infrastructure of society, or protect the environment. No doubt you will be able to supply many other examples of your own.

The effect of the doomsday scenario on other types of projects is less clear. For example, many creative and scholarly projects have no obvious practical aim, such as finding a cure for cancer, but they are nevertheless undertaken with an actual or imagined audience or readership of some kind in mind. Although the doomsday scenario would not mean that audiences would disappear immediately, it would mean that they would not be around for very long. Would artistic, musical, and literary projects still seem worth undertaking? Would humanistic scholars continue to be motivated to engage in basic research? Would historians and theoretical physicists and anthropologists all carry on as before? Perhaps, but the answer is not obvious.

Nor is it merely projects of the kinds I have been discussing, as opposed to more routine aspects of human life, whose appeal might weaken or disappear. Consider, for example, procreative activity. Would people still be as motivated to have children if they knew that those children would die no later than thirty days after their own death? It seems unlikely that they would. But if they would not, then neither would they be as motivated to engage in the wide, varied, and life-altering array of activities associated with raising and caring for children. By contrast, the projects and activities that would seem least likely to be affected by the doomsday scenario are those focused on personal comfort and pleasure. But it is perhaps not altogether obvious what would be comforting and pleasant under doomsday conditions.

The upshot is that many types of projects and activities would no longer seem worth pursuing, or as worth pursuing, if we were confronted with

the doomsday scenario. Now it is noteworthy that the attractions of these same projects and activities are not similarly undercut by the mere prospect of our own deaths. People cheerfully engage in cancer research and similar activities despite their recognition that the primary payoff of these activities is not likely to be achieved before their own deaths. Yet, if my argument is correct, their motivation to engage in these same activities would be weakened or even completely undermined by the prospect that, in consequence of the earth's destruction, there would be no payoff *after* their deaths. In other words, there are many projects and activities whose importance to us is not diminished by the prospect of our own deaths but would be diminished by the prospect that everyone else will soon die. So if by the afterlife we mean the continuation of human life on earth after our own deaths, then it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in some significant respects, the existence of the afterlife matters more to us than our own continued existence. It matters more to us because it is a condition of other things mattering to us. Without confidence in the existence of the afterlife, many of the things in our own lives that now matter to us would cease to do so or would come to matter less. . . .

. . . I want to take a brief detour to discuss the views of Alvy Singer. Alvy Singer, as you may remember, is the character played by Woody Allen in his movie *Annie Hall*. The movie contains a flashback scene in which the nine-year-old Alvy is taken by his mother to see a doctor. Alvy is refusing to do his homework on the ground that the universe is expanding. He explains that "the universe is everything, and if it's expanding, someday it will break apart and that would be the end of everything!" Leaving aside Alvy's nerdy precocity, the scene is funny because the eventual end of the universe is so temporally remote—it won't happen for "billions of years," the doctor assures Alvy—that it seems comical to cite it as a reason for not doing one's homework. But if the universe were going to end soon after the end of his own natural life, then the arguments I have been rehearsing imply that Alvy might have a point. It might well be a serious question whether he still had reason to do his homework. Why should there be this discrepancy? If the end of human life in the near term would make many things matter less to us now, then why aren't we similarly affected by the knowledge that human life will end in the longer term? The nagging sense that perhaps we should be is also part of what makes Alvy's refusal to do his homework funny.

Yet I take it as a datum that, in general, and allowing for occasional episodes of Alvy-like angst, we are not so affected. . . . What we require to maintain our equanimity, it seems, is not that humanity should be immortal, but merely that it should survive for a healthy and indefinitely long period after our own deaths. I don't think that we would object to immortality . . . but we don't insist on it. I'm not sure that we can be said exactly to have a *reason* for this, though I'm open to suggestions. My speculation instead is that we simply don't know how, in these contexts, to work with or even fully to grasp concepts like "the end of the universe" or "billions of years." Those ideas require us to adopt a conceptual and spatiotemporal perspective whose vast

scale is difficult to align with the much more restricted frame of reference relative to which we make judgments of significance in our daily lives. The result is that we are simply confounded when we try to integrate such ideas into our thinking about what matters. It's not so much that we are not troubled, or cannot be talked into being troubled, about what will happen in the extremely remote future, it's just that we don't really know how to think about it at all, in part because there are so few contexts in which we have occasion to do so. . . .

Let me . . . close by providing a brief summary of my main contentions. I have argued that the survival of people after our deaths matters greatly to us, both in its own right and . . . because, to an extent that we rarely acknowledge, our conviction that things matter is sustained by our confidence that life will go on after we ourselves are gone. In this respect, as I have argued, the survival of humanity matters more to each of us than we usually realize; indeed, in this respect, it matters more to us even than our own survival.

*How the Afterlife Matters*

I believe that Scheffler underestimates how much of what really matters to us is quite independent of our attitude toward the existence of the afterlife. He suggests that trying to find a cure for cancer would lose its importance to us if we believed that there were to be no afterlife in which people would benefit from the cure. But the challenge of solving a deep medical problem might very well lead people to work on the problem, and to consider both *solving* it and *trying* to solve it very important to them, even if the solution of the problem would actually benefit no one; thus, a person might happily try to solve chess problems, even if there were never to be anyone to admire his or her skill in doing so.

Scheffler also believes that artistic creation would tend to lose its importance to us if we lost confidence in the existence of the afterlife, because there would be no future audiences to enjoy the product of our activity. But, surely, producing a marvelous painting—or string quartet or novel—may be enormously satisfying to the artist even if there is no one, beyond the thirty days before doomsday, who will be around to appreciate and admire his or her creative work. In any event, the doomsday scenario allows the population to continue existing within those thirty days. . . . So, regardless of what happens, so far as the afterlife is concerned, *those* people will still be around to supply appreciative audiences and grateful patients.

Some of the things that are of the greatest importance to us—such as music, friendship, and intellectual and creative activity—may be important to us quite regardless of either the existence of the afterlife or our confidence in its existence. Nevertheless, I think Scheffler *is* justified in suggesting that the importance to us of these things might then actually be less. At least, our valuing of them would very likely be *different*. They would lose that *part* of their value to us, if any, that does depend on our anticipation of the future.

From Harry G. Frankfurt, "How the Afterlife Matters," in Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, Oxford University Press, 2013. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

We would be left with that part of their value to us which is available to us when we focus just on their present reality—on appreciating their intrinsic and hence always current characteristics. Perhaps it might even be an improvement in our lives, if we concentrated our attention and our appreciation more on the value that things possess in themselves, rather than primarily on their value as means to other things.

So, a great deal of what is valuable to us, and that matters in our lives, might continue to be valuable and to matter to us even if we had *no successors* and did not think we would have any successors. Perhaps it is true that a great deal of what matters most to us would *not* do so, or perhaps it would matter to us both differently and less if the current human population had, or were expected to have, no descendants. However, *some* of the things that are very important to us might continue to be very important to us even without the existence of the afterlife and without confidence in its existence. This includes not just comfort and pleasure, of course, but whatever we value for its own sake and thus whose value to us does not depend entirely on the importance to us of something other than itself.

In fact, if we were faced with a doomsday scenario, some things might matter to us not only as much, but more than before. Faced with a global catastrophe, which would entail our own deaths, we might very well be moved to stop wasting the time left to us, and to repair certain patterns of behavior into which we had lapsed when we thought we had plenty of time left. We might be moved to care more about nourishing the intimate relationships we have with members of our family or friends. We might be moved to care more about taking a trip we had long wanted to take but had kept postponing, and so on.

In any case, it seems to me that people would not all respond in the same way to an expectation that humanity had only a brief time left. People respond differently, after all, to the expectation that they themselves have only a brief time to live. Some become morose and lose interest in practically everything that was previously important to them. Others decide to make the most of the time remaining to them, and they devote themselves to enjoying what is valuable and important to them. It seems likely to me that people would also differ in the ways in which they would confront the prospective end of all human life.

*The Significance of  
Doomsday*

As Scheffler reminds us, . . . when the nerdy protagonist in Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall* was in grade school, his mother took him to a doctor because he was refusing to do his homework on the grounds that the universe is expanding and will someday break apart. . . . According to Scheffler's analysis, the scene is funny not only because of Alvy's precocity but also because he takes an event so far distant in the future to be a reason not to do his homework. As Scheffler reminds us, the doctor attempts to reassure Alvy by saying that won't happen for "billions of years."

As an aside, it may be worth mentioning that, even if it's true that the earth's exploding won't occur for billions of years, we can expect that our species' extinction will come much, much earlier than that. According to the biologist Ernst Mayr, the average life of a species is 100,000 years, and we have already existed about that long. So, we should not expect to go on for another billion years or even another 100,000. Not even close.

But let us return to Alvy's concern and Scheffler's response. According to Scheffler, it is simply a datum that in general we do not respond to our recognition that the earth will someday be destroyed with angst or nihilism or ennui. But, he concedes, "if the universe were going to end soon after the end of his own natural life, then . . . Alvy might have a point." I doubt that the precocious Alvy would be satisfied by this response. The fact that people *don't* get upset by the prospect of our eventual extinction does not mean that they *shouldn't*. "If I would have a point in refusing to do my homework under the doomsday scenario," Alvy might insist, "why don't I have a point anyway?" It seems to me that Alvy is within his rights, at least within the seminar room, to ask for more of an answer.

In fact, the more I think about Alvy's question, . . . the less confident I am that it is answerable. For if Alvy would be justified in not doing his

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homework if the doomsday scenario were true, this would presumably be because, as Scheffler suggests, humanity must have a future—and indeed a future of more than thirty days—if anything (that could give Alvy a reason to do his homework) is to matter. But why would this be true? If the answer were that in order for anything to matter, it would have to make a *permanent* difference to the world, then Alvy’s resistance to homework would be justified by the fact that the earth would explode in a billion years. If it is suggested instead that for anything to matter, it would have to make a long-lasting but *not* permanent difference (or, perhaps better, a difference to a long-lasting but not permanent community), then one might point out that from a cosmic perspective, even a billion years (much less 100,000) is not really “long-lasting.”

Happily, though, we can also run this puzzle the other way: If the fact that humans will eventually die out does not render dancing the tango (or walking in the woods or writing a philosophy lecture) meaningless *today*, why should the fact that we will die out in thirty or fifty or a hundred years render it meaningless either? Though I acknowledge the possibility that wish-fulfillment is distorting my reasoning powers, I have to say that I find the rational pull coming from this direction fairly persuasive. That is, since the eventual extinction of humanity does not render our current efforts at creating beauty, gaining wisdom, and helping each other valueless, neither does, or would or should, our more imminent extinction. Probably we would be initially disoriented, unsettled, and depressed by the falsification of so major an assumption that we have until now taken for granted. But just as we are disoriented, unsettled, and depressed by the loss of our life’s savings or the unexpected death of a loved one—or to offer a closer analogy, just as we are disoriented, unsettled, and depressed by the loss of faith in a benevolent God and a personal afterlife—we should, at least as a community, eventually, snap out of it and get back to our lives and our world. According to this line of thought, then, if we came to believe that our extinction was imminent, it would be more reasonable to resist the initial tendency to grow detached, apathetic, and depressed than to give in to it. Such reasoning, over time, ought to bring back the meaning and value to many of our activities that we initially thought doomsday would undermine.

Moreover, since the doomsday scenario is just a scenario—that is, an imaginary thought experiment—this reasoning should also bring back for us the meaning and value of the activities that would truly have been rendered pointless by imminent extinction. Now, once again, we have a reason to cure cancer, to find more sustainable energy sources, to build buildings, plant trees, repair infrastructures, and so on. Rationality, if I am right about where rationality on this topic leads, has given us our lives back, restoring the meaning and value to most, if not all, of the activities around which we previously fashioned our lives.

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