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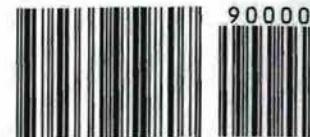
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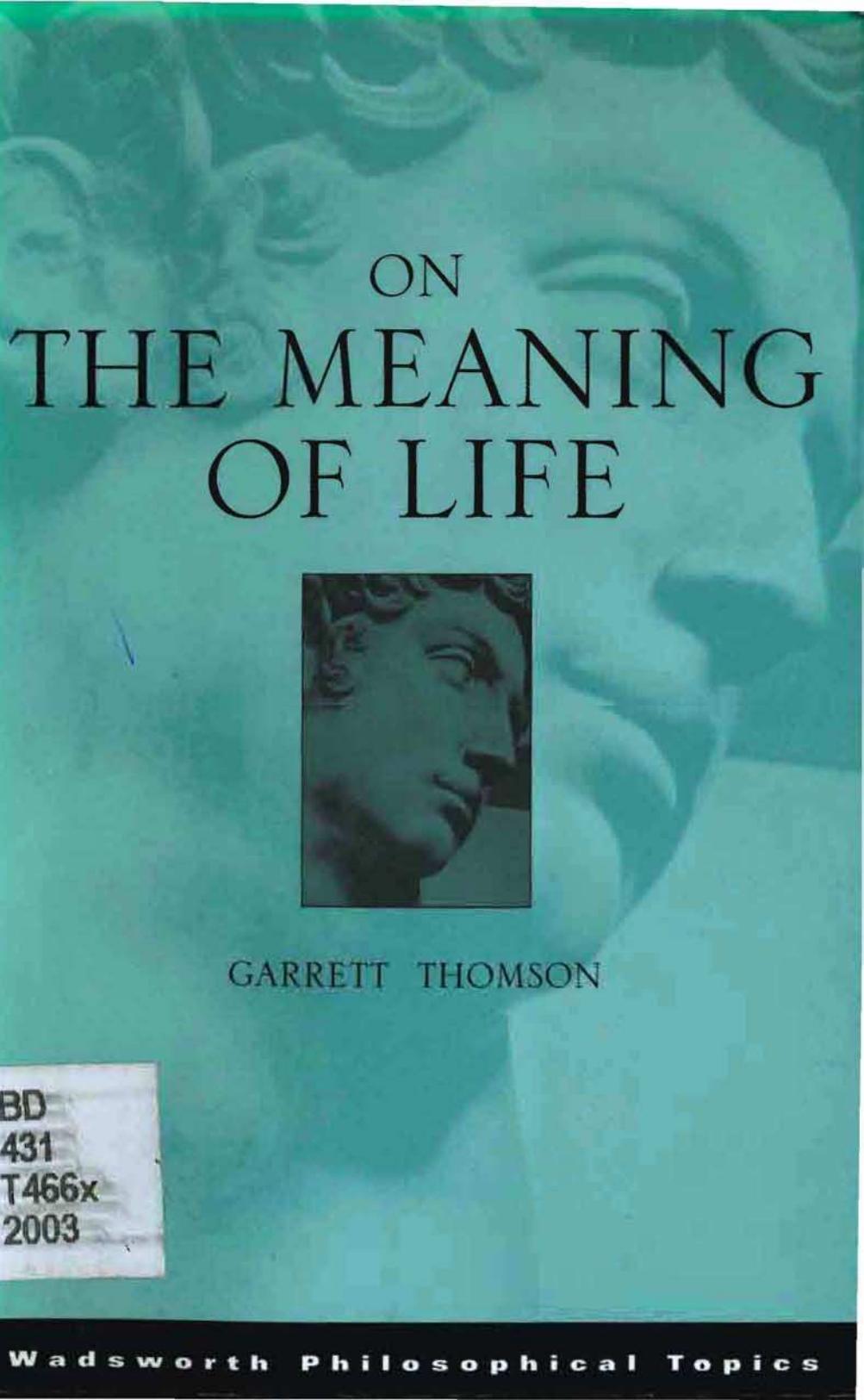
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ON THE MEANING OF LIFE

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Wadsworth Philosophical Topics



ON THE MEANING OF LIFE



GARRETT THOMSON

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Preface

When I was nineteen and had just entered university to study philosophy, I met a professor who had recently retired. It was my first day at university and this friendly old gentleman was among those who welcomed me to the department. His name was Prof. Karl Britton, the author of a book entitled *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*. He seemed a kindly and wise man and I read his book. It was quite difficult to understand. Now, years later, it is my turn to write a book about the same subject. I would never have guessed that my future would include this book, and I hope that you, the reader, enjoy reading it as much as I have writing it.

The question ‘Does life have a meaning?’ has some unusual and attractive pedagogical characteristics. First, it is a paradigmatic philosophical question, one that requires analysis and argumentation. Yet it is also a very practical question. A poor understanding of the issues concerned can impoverish our way of living, whereas a good comprehension can heighten the quality of our lives. The combination of these two features, philosophical and practical, makes this a very interesting subject to study, especially when many philosophical questions seem remote from everyday life concerns.

Second, the question serves as a hub for an inquiry into many different types of philosophy. From this central point, one can study several major systems of thought: analytic, existentialism, phenomenology, eastern, and post-modern. The question also touches many topics in philosophy. It lies at the intersection of metaphysics and ethics, philosophy of biology and religion. Also, because it requires us to know ourselves, it involves psychology and epistemology. The

meaning of life will take us from Big Bang to everyday life; from Buddhism to the theory of evolution; and from moral realism to Heidegger. It requires us to examine hermeneutics and phenomenology, as well as important themes in analytic thinking.

Because of all this, this book has two main aims. The first is to explore different perspectives on the meaning of life, and to contrast western and eastern, existential and phenomenological and other approaches.

The second aim is to argue for specific answers to the nature of the meaning of life. In part, the question of the meaning of life is a request to clarify the nature of value, and as such, the question takes us beyond the commonly accepted dichotomy that claims that all value are either moral values or economic.

This book should interest and be accessible to the general reader. Additionally, it can serve as a text for courses on the introduction to philosophy and on values and ethics.

I would like to thank my mother, June Thomson, who read an earlier version of this manuscript and suggested many changes to help improve it. Also, thank you to Prof. Tom Tierney and Prof. William Vaughan, who both made extensive and useful comments on Chapter 11. Professors Martin Gunderson, Adrian Moore, Philip Turetzky made very helpful comments on earlier versions of parts of this book. Professors Richard Bell and Ronald Hustwit also made very useful comments on first drafts. Thank you. I would also like to thank Prof. Dan Kolak for his help, which improved this work. Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to my son, Andrew.

ON THE MEANING OF LIFE

1

Untangling the Questions

In medieval Europe it was generally assumed that humans were a special creation, with an immortal soul made in the image of God. According to this conception, humans were essentially different from the animals and the rest of the natural, physical world. Furthermore, in this world picture, it was thought that the earth occupied a central position at rest in the cosmos and that the heavens move around it. In both a literal and metaphorical sense, the universe revolved around us. It was also thought that nature was full of special signs revealing divine purpose, for us to guide our earthly lives by. The natural world was full of hidden meanings.

Compare this to the modern scientific view of the universe. The universe is incredibly large: there are billions of galaxies and our galaxy has billions of stars and our solar system is located towards the outer part of one of the spiral arms of this galaxy. All life on our planet, including our own, is no more than the product of blind causal processes, and the whole universe consists only of material or physical things. We humans are not so different in kind from the other animals.

The universe has existed for about 18 billion years, but it has no special objective or plan, and thus human life has no special purpose. Furthermore, because everything is made of matter, we have no immaterial soul and so, very soon, each one of us shall die. There is probably no God, and there are no special signs, just inert matter.

These two conceptions of the cosmos and human life are very different from each other. This change took place more or less in two jumps: one in the seventeenth century following the invention of

physics, and the other, at the end of the nineteenth century following Darwin's theory of evolution.

Our purpose is not to evaluate in what ways the advent of science has been beneficial or harmful, but rather to evaluate its consequences for our conception of the meaning of life. In a relatively short historical time span, the question of life's meaning has acquired a new urgency. This is partly because the modern scientific view has largely replaced the medieval view and in the process has acquired an incredible authority. Yet to challenge that modern scientific account is not to necessarily endorse the medieval view. Sometimes, we set the two in opposition as if there were no third or fourth or more alternatives. One theme of this book is to explore some of those other options.

Preliminary Obstacles

I would like to start by clearing out of the way some of the obstacles we might have to approaching this question in a real or authentic way. We need to establish some attitudes and the general approach to this investigation before going on to examine the question itself. First, the question 'Does life have a meaning?' is surrounded by a host of others, such as 'How did the universe come into being?' 'In what sense does life evolve?' 'What significance does death have?' 'Does anything matter?' We shall examine these associated disputes only in so far as they are relevant to the original query, which is difficult enough as it stands without help from its cousins.

The difficulty of the original question arises mostly because it needs clarification. It is not a straightforward empirical question that can be settled by observation. The question itself needs to be analyzed and better understood, because it is not clear what it means and what would count as an answer. We need to make it specific, so that it can be answered. Without such clarity, it would be premature to study different replies; they might be addressed to distinct questions.

The question 'What is the meaning of life?' may seem naive. In part, this is because there is a dangerous word in the title of this book: 'the.' With that single word, we make the assumption that life has either one meaning or else none at all. It claims uniqueness. It is in part because of this, that the whole phrase has become a battleground for ideologies or world-views. By apparently gaining the right to use this phrase, a thinker can seem to declare exclusivity for his or her evaluations. We tend to assume that the negative reply to the question, 'What is the meaning of life?' will imply that life is meaningless. However, the greatest challenge to the idea that life has a meaning is that it has many rather than none.

Also, the question is inhibiting, because it appears to be a request for some short formula, such as 'To obey God' or 'To find happiness,' which could be put in a fortune cookie or on the back of a matchbox. It is naive to think that some simple formula could be a suitable reply. The question is complex in many ways and, therefore, we should not expect nor aim for a simplistic answer, which in any case would not provide real insight.

For reasons such as these, the meaning of life is the subject of some not so funny jokes. The whole topic stimulates cynicism. The question and its cousins are often a battleground for ideologies. For example, the paradigmatic Christian and scientist are supposed to have fundamentally opposed theories about the meaning of life. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking about these issues in such pre-packaged ideological terms. However, we should not allow ourselves to approach this question in such a pre-determined way. We do not want to rule out any ideology without argument, but we do not want to begin the investigation with some set ideological objectives already in mind. Furthermore, ideologies sell their ideas in packets; you have to either accept or reject the whole package. This attitude is not conducive to a deep and careful investigation of the subject matter.

Moreover, many people approach this question with cynicism because they assume that the question is unanswerable, and therefore, presume that it is a waste of time and effort to tackle the issues. However, we cannot assume that the question is unanswerable before we have tried to understand it. The same applies to the distinct claim that any answer to the question is bound to be unknowable.

Unanswerable Questions

Are there any unanswerable questions? Notice that an unanswerable question is one that does not have an answer and this is quite different from a question to which no one knows the answer. I suggest that there are three types of so-called 'unanswerable questions,' but all of which are really pseudo-questions. The first kind consists of questions such as 'What is the answer to this question?' which are somehow logically ill formed. Next, there are questions that are based on false assumptions, such as 'Did you hide the stolen goods at home or at work?' asked of someone who did not receive stolen goods. Third, there are questions that contain many questions rolled into one, such as 'What is the relation between the mind and the brain?' The question 'What is the meaning of life?' might fall into any one of these categories, especially the second and the third. However, in that case it is not so much an unanswerable question, but rather a pseudo-question,

which needs to be replaced by others. Indeed, this is what an analysis should do: improve the question.

Improving questions is a very different process from answering them. We can ask new and better questions only if we improve our understanding of the old ones. Better responses require better questions. Much of the work that goes into solving a problem such as 'When is killing wrong?' is clarifying the question, showing what 'morally wrong' means and signifies. Could computers ever think for themselves? Does God exist? Before answering such questions, we have to unpack them and see what they contain. This applies even more so to the important question: What is the meaning of life?

There is another reason why we need to analyze a question such as this one. Suppose there is a meaning to life that we can state in a few sentences. However, even a straightforward and positive short answer would not be satisfying and would probably not illuminate much precisely because we need to understand the question better. What implications would the answer have for the way we live? Suppose that life has no meaning; what would be the implications of this for our lives? Understanding does not just consist in having an answer. It is also necessary to appreciate the significance of the answers.

Unknowable Answers

Another route to cynicism is the prejudice that the answer to questions such as 'What is the meaning of life?' must be unknowable. Notice that claiming that an answer is unknowable is quite different from asserting that no one knows the answer. For example, no one knows whether there are living beings in the Andromeda galaxy, but this is not something unknowable. For something to be unknowable, it must be the case that in principle it is impossible to know it.

To claim that it is in principle impossible to know something is to assert something very strong. For example, to affirm that it is in principle impossible to know whether God exists, it is necessary to say what God is and to show that all arguments in favor of and against the existence of God fail. Actually, one would have to demonstrate even more: namely, all possible arguments for and against the existence of God, including those never thought of before, fail. Consequently, it would rash for us to assume that the meaning of life is unknowable, especially at the beginning of this study. Instead, keeping our minds open, let us begin to analyze the question.

No Universal Answers

There might be another reason for rejecting the question, 'What is the meaning of life?' It assumes that, at least at some level of generality, there is some universally applicable answer to the question. However, to be clear what this point involves, this assumption does not necessarily rule out individual differences in the meaning of life. For example, suppose that part of the meaning of life is to develop one's talents - this is a universal answer that admits of individual differences.

This assumption is also different from the idea that any answer given in our Western technological culture is bound to be at best incomplete because of the cultural assumptions that it embodies. Despite the qualifications, the question assumes that there is a universally applicable answer, and this assumption would be mistaken, for instance, if the question is culturally specific. As an example, perhaps this question only arises within contemporary Western societies, within that tradition that sometimes claims to be no tradition at all: Western skepticism, which challenges traditional world-views.

However, we should be careful about making an invalid step. Let us assume, for the moment, that people have been concerned only about the meaning of life within our recent Western culture. Even if this is true, then we cannot automatically conclude that any answer to the question is only applicable within that context. The context in which we ask a question is not necessarily the same as the context to which the answer applies.

In his article 'Why the question of the meaning of life has arisen in the last two and a half centuries?' Landau argues that this is because of various changed social factors (Landau, 1997). First, we have lost faith in the absolute nature of both the religious and scientific world-views. Second, he claims that our society or culture emphasizes the ideals of pleasure and comfort, but that many people do not feel that these values are sufficiently important to give life meaning. Our personal expectations do not yet match the ideals advanced by our culture.

Such considerations may explain why we in this culture feel the question of life's meaning is so poignant, but this does not mean that the question does not also apply to other cultures and to the people of other times. In this sense, the question may be universal, even if it has not been universally asked. T. E. Lawrence claimed that it is the

Paradox of our times that we demand great actions of ourselves in a time when we also recognize their utter irrelevance (quoted in Solomon, p.85).

If our actions are 'utterly irrelevant' today, then they were also so in the past, even though we may not have recognized them as such. Of course, any answer we provide will necessarily be framed in terminology of our culture, and in this way it will be limited. But this does not automatically exclude it from being applicable to other cultures. This point will receive more study later in the book (see Chapter 13).

Some Contexts of Questioning

One way to think about the question 'What is the meaning of life?' is to examine the contexts in which it is often asked. By reflecting on these contexts, we may hope to capture the practical points behind the question. Usually people ask about meaning when they feel that their lives lack it, and so we might start by looking at the ways in which life might seem meaningless. For example, a person who is very deeply depressed for a long time would feel despair or hopelessness and may well wonder whether life is even worth living. To give a slightly less extreme example, if one's life is crammed by routine, one might feel that one's life is meaningless because it serves no external important purpose and, because of this, it has no internal purpose. In such circumstances, one's life may feel boring, trivial, and mundane. Additionally, if one feels unreal or that one's life is inauthentic or a lie, then a person may feel that his or her life makes no sense because it is fragmented or perhaps broken. This might happen to a person when he or she becomes unemployed.

Everyday instances of people questioning the meaning of life are not necessarily so dramatic. A person might be living what appears to be a perfectly satisfying and even successful life, and yet underneath, he or she may feel that his or her life is empty or hollow. This need not manifest in a crisis, even though it did in the famous cases of the great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) and the British philosopher and reformer, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). I believe that some people feel that their lives are meaningless, but suppress the feeling and carry on despite this.

Finally, for example, after contemplating the galaxies or seeing a documentary about the birth of the universe, one might feel a sense of value vertigo that generates a genuine puzzlement about the place of

humanity in the cosmic scheme. One may conclude that, from this perspective, human life has no real meaning or that it is absurd (see Nagel, 1986).

In summary, there seems to be four distinct kinds of question, which may be combined, one might ask with the question 'What is the meaning of life?'

1. Why should I live when I could commit suicide?

This was the question that haunted Albert Camus, the French existentialist thinker, who called this the most fundamental question of all. In this book, we shall not examine it in great detail, because it is already covered by the second question.

2. What should I do with the rest of my life?

This is how the question has been understood most often: as seeking guidance for future action. Furthermore, it has usually been taken as a request for a purpose of some kind (or a set of purposes) around which one should organize one's life. However, this second question does not necessarily have to be understood as the search for a purpose (see Chapter 4). It can also be a search for non-instrumental value (see Chapter 6). The question 'How can I improve my life?' can be regarded as a variant of this second question because it is like asking 'What should I do with the rest of my life in order that it be improved (or in order that it be less full of suffering)?'

3. What sense can I make of my life up to now?

This question is different from the first two, because we can imagine it being asked by a person on his or her deathbed. In such a context, one would not have any interest in asking the first two questions! This third question is apparently asking for a pattern to a person's life, a narrative that makes one's life intelligible. This might take two forms: metaphysical or personal. Traditionally, many metaphysical systems have attempted to give us a generic portrait of human life that would count as its meaning (see Chapter 11). Also, the question can be a request for a personal narrative that makes sense specifically of one's own life (see Chapter 12).

4. What could have been different about my life?

The search for meaning might be construed as an attempt to discover the lost possibilities, or could-have-beens, of one's life. An allied question is 'Would it have been better not to have been born?' One might ask such questions either to reassure oneself that one's life has not been so bad, or else to have a sense of the immense and great possibilities that one could have experienced and did not.

First Steps towards an Analysis

To bring more order to these points, I shall distinguish at least three things that we might be asking with the question 'What is the meaning of life?' However, first, here are some preliminary clarifications. The question can be asked at three levels: of the universe itself, of life in general and of a specific individual's life. The more general forms of the question are probably requests for a metaphysics that makes sense of our existence. A general portrait of the universe might reveal to us some important insight into how we should live. Such a characterization of the universe might shed some new light on what we are and what our lives should consist in. In other words, it provides a connection between what we are and how we should live. For example, the question 'Why does something exist rather than nothing?' would be relevant insofar as its answer has implications for the project of making sense of our own lives. Many of the great metaphysical and religious systems of the past have tried to perform this kind of role. For example, Buddhism offers us a general understanding of the nature of the universe and life, and based on this, offers a set of prescriptions regarding how the individual should live to achieve a state of enlightenment or Nirvana (see Chapter 5 below).

In view of the above considerations, we can advance the following principle:

An understanding of the meaning of life must have some practical implications for the way that we conduct our lives.

This helps us to rule out some readings of the question as irrelevant to our enquiry. For instance, sometimes 'What is the meaning of that?' is a request for information about its causal relationships. As an example, what do these clouds mean? The answer 'Black clouds mean rain' cites the effect of black clouds. What do these spots mean? The answer 'Such spots mean that you have a contagious disease' refers to their cause. In these cases, the meaning of something picks out its causes and effects. However, for this study we are not interested in the causal facts about our lives unless they have practical significance.

We need to distinguish between the meaning of life in general and the meaning that a person's life can have for him or her. In this study we would only be interested in the first insofar as it had important implications for the second. There are two different ways an answer to

the question 'Is life meaningful?' might be connected to the practical issue of the way we live.

1. According to the first type of connection, there is some feature or set of features of life in general, or specifically human life, in virtue of which they are meaningful. The meaningfulness is guaranteed by some characteristic of life itself. According to this first way of understanding the question, if life is meaningful, then it is so for everyone regardless of what we actually do. Of course, even if this were true, people may not perceive or feel that meaningfulness. One might feel or consider that one's life is meaningless but, in such a case, one's perceptions would be mistaken or without foundation. According to this idea, whatever we do, our lives are guaranteed to be meaningful; the practical issue is whether we perceive and appreciate that meaningfulness.
2. The second type of connection postulates a feature or set of characteristics that individual lives may or may not have, or may have in varying degrees, in virtue of which a life would be meaningful. For example, if the meaning of life is to live according to one's true or deepest talent, then some people may have meaningful lives and others not. According to this way of interpreting the question, a person's life may actually be meaningless, but he or she may transform it into something meaningful.

There is an important difference between these two kinds of theory and, unfortunately, the language we employ to discuss these issues actually may confuse them. For example, we refer to someone 'having found the meaning of his or her life.' This phrase 'finding the meaning' is ambiguous; it could signify that the person has discovered the meaning that was there all along. Alternatively, it could signify that the person has changed his or her actions or way of life, so that it has actually acquired meaning that was not present before. We find a similar kind of ambiguity in the phrase 'for them' or 'for him.' 'His life has no meaning for him' might signify that it really does have a meaning even if he does not appreciate or recognize that meaning. However, in contrast, it also might indicate the person is living a meaningless existence.

I do not insist on these apparently small points for the sake of pedantry. If we are to make any progress in deepening our understanding of this question, we must know when to be careful with words. In any case, these points will have a greater importance later on in this study.

Untangling the Questions

Let us return to the main point. We should understand the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ in a manner that has some practical implications concerning the way we live. Given this, there are three general ways to understand the question:

1) Does life have a purpose or point?

This probably is the way the question is most usually understood and accordingly, a meaningful life would be one which serves or has some kind of purpose, and a meaningless life would be one that is pointless or purposeless. If the question is to be understood in this way then there are important subsidiary questions, such as ‘Whose purpose?’ and ‘What kinds of purpose could constitute the meaning of life?’ This interpretation and its subsidiaries will be the topic of Chapter 3.

2) Does life have some value?

The question might be asked also as ‘Is life worthwhile?’ According to this interpretation, something meaningful is non-instrumentally valuable. In other words, there seems to be a conceptual link between the two notions. For example, it might be that meaning is constituted by a certain kind of value or that the meaningfulness of something implies that it has value. Is life absurd?

If the question is to be understood in this way, then there are important subsidiary questions such as ‘What kind of value would constitute the meaning of life?’ For example, for life to have value, does it have some absolute value (in some as yet unspecified sense of the term ‘absolute’)? Or rather perhaps for life to be meaningful, its value must be real rather than being no more than a human invention. This interpretation and its subsidiaries will be examined in later chapters.

3) Does my life signify something?

Sentences and texts have meaning in the sense of signifying something. Non-linguistic behavior, such as gestures and rituals, also can have a similar type of meaning. Does a person’s life have a meaning or significance in an analogous way? We understand the meaning of a person’s life by making it intelligible. In this vein, we ask questions such as ‘How should we understand human life?’ and ‘How should a person interpret his or her own life?’ which pertain to the idea of making sense of a life. Furthermore, there is also the possibility that the meaning of a person’s life might be the message or lesson that it contains for others. In other words, how should other people interpret my life?

I would argue that these are three most basic ways to understand the question, given the principle and qualifications mentioned earlier.

Untangling the Questions

This is because there are only three kinds of value: instrumental, non-instrumental and expressive. Of course, this does not preclude there being different kinds of non-instrumental value. Nor does it preclude the possibility that the meaning of life might be some special combination of all three types of value.

The Nine Mistakes

My ultimate aim in this book is to help the reader understand and answer the questions: ‘Does my life have meaning?’ and ‘If so, what is that meaning?’ In part, I shall do this by taking a polemical approach to some of the issues involved. I shall suggest and argue that there are nine importantly mistaken ways to think about meaning, each of which leads us to deny the meaning of life, even though each is way of thinking about value and meaning common in our society. My aim is to show why these ways of thinking are mistaken and how they lead us to deny, each in its own way, the value and meaning of life. Roughly speaking, I will dedicate one chapter to each mistake. I realize that most of the points I shall make are contentious and, therefore, I invite the reader to take issue with my arguments. For the sake of clarity, I shall try to signal which of these claims are most likely to be thought contentious.

I shall do this in the hope of stimulating the reader to think for his or herself about these issues. However, I do this also because, as I shall argue, there is a very important general philosophical point that needs to be argued for and illustrated. In our society, we tend to think of values in terms of either morality or self-interest and this I think is an error. Furthermore, there is still a strong tendency in our society to regard moral values as based on some kind of authoritarian commands (either from God or society) and to conceive the notion of self-interest in purely economic terms. I think this is also an error.

I think that both are important mistakes and that, as a consequence of them, we tend to think of values either in purely economic or else in moral terms. Instead, we should try to understand better well-being without making it a purely economic concept, and value without turning it into a purely moral concept. This does not mean abandoning morality and economics, only cultivating an understanding of values generally and the meaning of our lives that goes beyond but includes both. The more polemical parts of this book are motivated in part by this very general philosophical conviction and also by pedagogical concerns.

Reading

There are few contemporary philosophy books devoted exclusively to the meaning of life. One is Oswald Hanfling's *The Quest for Meaning*. The best collection of articles on this theme is E.D. Klemke, *The Meaning of Life*, Oxford, 1981. I also recommend *Life and Death*, edited by J. Westphal and C. Levinson, Hackett, 1993. There is also a collection by Steven Sanders and David Cheney, eds, *The Meaning of Life*, Prentice Hall, 1980.

2

The Infinite

The idea that the existence of God is necessary for life to have meaning has a long history in western philosophy. St. Augustine (354-430), one of the founders of medieval theology, claims that only God can give life ultimate meaning. In his *Confessions*, after describing his grief following the death of a very close friend, he compares the relation between God and life to the relation of a speaker to a sentence. Just as the speaker causes the words to come together into one meaningful whole sentence, so similarly, God unites the parts of life into a single whole. St. Augustine writes:

If all could be perceived in one act of perception, it would obviously give more delight than any of the individual parts (*Confession*, section VIII, Westphal and Levenson, p.28).

Early Christian theology, such as Augustine's, was heavily influenced by Plato (428-347 BC.). Around the time of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), some of the major works of Aristotle (384-322 BC.) were becoming known in Europe for the first time, having been translated from the Arabic. In trying to reconcile Christian thought with Aristotle's, Aquinas created what was to become the official theology of the Catholic Church. God is the highest good, and all things ultimately have this good as their final end. Aristotle argued that the distinctive function of humans is to reason and that the good life for a human must be accordance with this function. Aquinas adopts this principle and

The Infinite

concludes that the ultimate end of life of human life is the contemplation of God (See *Summa Contra Gentiles*).

Does Life have a Meaning without God?

Can life be meaningful independent of whether God exists or not? To be clear, we are not asking whether God exists. In addition, appeal to the life of atheists cannot count as evidence for the claim 'Even if God does not exist, life has meaning.' People who do not believe in God may feel that their life is meaningful. However, this is not adequate evidence for the claim that life has meaning independently of the existence of God. This is because we should distinguish the statement that God does not exist from the claim that some people believe that he does not. Furthermore, the fact that people feel that life is meaningful does not necessarily mean that it is. The same condition applies to the feeling that life is meaningless. Consequently, if God does exist, and if this is sufficient for the meaningfulness of life, then the lives of even non-believers would be meaningful. Of course, non-believers would not acknowledge this meaning, but that is a different point.

Please also note that we are not asking whether God created life. If God created all life, then, obviously, without God there would be no life to even have meaning. However, this would not automatically imply that the meaning of life pertains to God. Without your great grandparents, you would not have existed, but that does not mean that the meaning of your life pertains to them.

To assess the claim that life has a meaning independently of whether God exists, we must examine the different senses or uses of 'meaning.' 'Life has meaning' could mean that life has a purpose, or that it has non-instrumental value, or that it has some expressive value. I shall discuss this last alternative in Chapters 11 and 12 and, for the moment, we shall concentrate on the idea of meaning as purpose.

Consider the following statement 'The important thing is to develop and grow according to one's own nature, so that one can fully become oneself. That is the point of it all.' Notice the last sentence. What does it add? It contributes the idea that we have a mandate, something to achieve in our lives and that everyone should fulfill this mandate. Usually, this idea takes the following form: 'God created human beings for a purpose. When He created us, it was with a particular end in mind, and although we cannot know why God did this, we can know the end and this should form the central aim of our lives. After all, that is why we are here.'

The appeal to God's aim in creating us is supposed to justify a corresponding affirmation about how we should live: God created us for

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such and such an end and, therefore, our life's task should be to reach that end. How does this justification function? At first, we might see this as an appeal to authority. The novelist Annie Dillard quotes the Book of Micah, 6, 8 from the *Bible* to express her view of the meaning of life:

What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Annie Dillard in Friend, 1991, p.11)

The quotation makes the key issue what God requires from us. Dillard seems to accept this assumption; she continues: 'We are here to witness the creation...' presumably under the following presumption: God put us here to do X and this is what He requires from us, and so this is the meaning of life.

However, the problem with the idea of basing the meaning of life on God's commands because of His authority is that values are not based on authority. Statements about what is valuable are not true or false by the decisions of some authority, because we can logically assess the decisions of an authority as being good or bad and true or false. If such statements were true or false based on the decisions of an authority, then we could not make such assessments. In short, an authority does not decide what is true or false in the sense of making a statement true or false. Instead, authorities are such because they know what is true. Their authority comes from knowing. Consequently, if God exists and is an authority, then this by itself does not justify the idea that the meaning of life consists in following God's purpose per se. In other words, God's will does not define meaningfulness; it reflects it because He is omniscient.

As a second shot, we might take the appeal to God as an ownership claim. Now the idea to be considered is something like this: because artifacts are manufactured for a purpose, their makers and owners have the right to insist that they function according to that purpose. By analogy, because God made us for a purpose, He has the rights of an owner to insist that we function according that purpose. Consequently, we have a duty to live accordingly.

There are two major problems with this line of thought. First, the meaning of life cannot consist in fulfilling a purpose, or so I shall argue in the next chapter. Second, the analogy is weak. We cannot think of ourselves as mere possessions, even those of a divine Being. Put simply, a mere possession and instrument does not have a life. The question 'What is the meaning of life for a cup?' is based on a mistake. It would have to be replaced by 'What is the meaning of a cup for us?' Consequently, appeal to God's purposes in creating us will at best inform us of the meaning of human life for God, without necessarily

telling us what the meaning of a person's life is for the individual living it.

There is a third and more successful way to make sense of the appeal to God. Suppose God has a purpose for us either collectively or individually or both. Suppose God is a wise divine being. Consequently, it is reasonably certain that God's purpose must be right for us, because God would not make such a serious mistake as to assign us a purpose for which we are not suited. In other words, God's purpose is bound to be good for us because, for example, it suits our nature or contains the elements necessary for a happy life. However, if this is the case, then the value of that purpose is based on some potentially God-independent criteria. Once again, we arrive at the conclusion that even if God exists and if He wills what is good, then His will does not constitute the good, but rather reflects it.

Is there a Point to Having a Point?

Let us return to the general idea. We examined a brief sketch of how humans should live their lives, and added at the end: 'That is the point of it all.' Consider this quote from Mozart:

We live in this world to compel ourselves industriously to enlighten one another by means of reasoning and to apply ourselves always to carrying forward the sciences and the arts
(W. Mozart quoted in Wiggins, p.89)

Notice how Mozart addresses the issue in terms of what the point of our existence is. The quote might as well have read: 'We are put in this world to...' or 'We are created to....' This kind of claim has quite a different sense from 'We should compel ourselves to...' or 'It is my nature to compel myself to...' or, even more simply, 'We should compel ourselves to...'

The proposition that life has X as a God-given purpose ought to be distinguished from the claim that we ought to adopt X as a purpose. The first specifies the actual purpose God supposedly had in creating life, and the second indicates that we should have such and such as the prime or main purpose of our lives. The first purports to be a factual proposition, and the second is a normative claim. For example, the assertion that the meaning of life is self-realization is usually interpreted as the statement that God created us so that we might realize our true nature. However, as an alternative, it might mean that the main goal that each person should have in his or her life is self-realization.

There are two major reasons for insisting on this distinction. First, as we have already seen, we cannot just assume that the assertion that God created us for purpose X by itself justifies the normative claim that people should devote their lives to X. Second, the normative 'should'-claim might be supported by other considerations. For example, the suggestion that people should devote an important part of their lives to self-realization might be defended on the grounds that self-realization is more important or beneficial than the other aims a person might have. Or, it might be defended on the basis of what self-realization is. In both cases, the idea that we should adopt X (e.g. self-realization) as a major aim of our lives does not depend on the assertion that God created us for that purpose.

The point of asserting that X is the God-given purpose of life is presumably that this appears to be a quick and direct way of justifying the normative claim that people should adopt X as a major aim. It seems to settle the matter once and for all. Moreover, by affirming that is *the* purpose, it also claims exclusivity for X. A God-given purpose seems final, important, and authoritative, whereas a self-given one may seem whimsical, egoistic and arbitrary. However, our brief examination of this issue has shown us that the appeal to God does not succeed.

The False Dichotomy

In these discussions of meaning as purpose, there is a danger of falling into a false dichotomy. We assume that someone has to give life meaning/purpose, and that if that someone is not God, then it must be us, ourselves. Either God gives life meaning, in which case it is objective, or we ourselves do, in which case it is subjective. When Nietzsche wrote his famous slogan 'God is dead,' in part, he meant that without God, life is meaningless, bereft of ultimate purpose and objective value. For a more recent example of the same idea, look at these two quotes from the eminent Cambridge theologian, Keith Ward:

Religion is not necessary to give meaning to life, though it is necessary to any claim that there is one state or being of supreme intrinsic value, that there is one overridingly important human purpose and that is an objective, morally ordered pattern (Ward in Runzo & Martin, p.27).

Later, he writes:

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A human life can have meaning without an objective purpose, value or pattern. We can construct our own values in a morally patternless world (Ward in Runzo & Martin, p.29).

In other words, if God does not exist then the meaning or value of life can only be subjective. The only way it can be objective is if God exists. For an explanation of the term 'objective,' see Chapter 7.

This kind of view has a surprisingly lot in common with that of the French existentialist and atheist Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980). Both Ward's and Sartre's views imply that life has to be given meaning either by God or by the person him or herself. Consequently, both writers accept that life has no meaning by itself or per se, and that it takes some agency to assign or designate meaning. Both thinkers agree that if God does not exist, then we humans have to invent the meaning of life for ourselves.

These claims are based on a false dichotomy, which presents us with only two alternatives when in fact there are others. Both alternatives assume that the meaning of life has to be assigned by someone and that it consists of a purpose to life. Both parts of this assumption might be false: life might have meaning without it being given or assigned, and also without it consisting of some purpose.

Finitude

Let us turn to a different issue: perhaps God is necessary for the meaningfulness of life because He is infinite and eternal. The famous British atheist philosopher, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) once wrote:

All the labors of all 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 (Russell, 1957).

We can take Russell's pessimistic position to be that, because our lives are transient and our achievements always temporary, our lives have no real meaning.

In opposition to Russell's view, some people would claim that life is meaningful only because of the promise of eternal life. Human life cannot attain to anything beyond the transitory on this earth, except those actions that prepare us for an eternal life after death. In other words, the argument supporting this position opposed to Russell's is:

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1. Life would have meaning if and only if, and only insofar as it is not transitory.
2. However, we have eternal life, after the death of the body.
3. Therefore, only life after the death of the body has meaning.

Note how this line of reasoning implies the claim that earthly life has no real meaning, except as a way to gain a better after-life. This is because of the phrase 'only insofar as it is not transitory' in the first premise.

One might think that the main problem with this line of thinking is that we do not know whether we have an eternal after-life or not. Even if there is an after-life, how can be sure that it is everlasting? However, there are two problems with the above argument that do not rely on questioning the idea of an eternal after-life, and which therefore get more to the heart of the matter.

First, notice how much the above position shares with Russell's, despite the differences. Both agree that this temporary life has no real meaning precisely because it is temporary or finite. There is an inherent contradiction in this type of position, which is similar to a Woody Allen joke. He reports of a particular restaurant that the food was awful and inedible and, moreover, that the portions were small. Note too the similarity between Woody Allen's joke and Hobbes' famous saying that the life of man is nasty, brutish and short. Regarding both Hobbes and Woody Allen, if the complaint is that the portions are small, this implies that the meal is good. Similarly, if death is a terrible end, then living must be good. If death is bad because it prevents us from living longer, then life must be worth living. In other words, we have good reason for rejecting the assumption of both positions and the assumption behind the first premise of the above argument, namely that this temporary life has no real meaning precisely because it is temporary.

There is a second weakness in the above argument. If a happy eternal after-life is meaningful, then a finite happy life should also be meaningful. Imagine that you are now living an everlasting bliss. Every minute is and will be filled with happiness. One thing that matters to you is that the present moment you are experiencing is a happy one. Of course, it also matters to you that the next minutes will also be happy and the next and the next indefinitely into the future. Presumably, however, these next minutes matter to you now because they will matter to you when you experience them in a few minutes time. In other words, an everlasting life of happiness would be good and meaningful precisely because each moment of time is and will be a happy one. In consequence, if an after-life of bliss is meaningful, then

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so is a finite amount of happiness, and premise 1 in the above argument would be false.

Infinite Boredom

Death is normally bad because it deprives us of more of the good things which living can offer. If this is correct then, it seems that, all other things being equal, it would be better not to die. In consequence, an everlasting life would be much better, and perhaps infinitely better, than a finite life. Please note, however, that this line of argument does not support the conclusion that a transient life has no meaning. It only concludes that an everlasting life would be better and more meaningful than a finite one.

However, many thinkers have denied precisely this point. More specifically, some have argued that our mortality is necessary for life to have meaning. For example, Victor Frankl claims:

Death itself is what makes life meaningful (see Nozick, 1981, p. 579)

This would imply that immortality would make life meaningless. The British philosopher Bernard Williams argues for such a conclusion. He cites the example of a character from a play by Karel Capek called 'EM', who at the age of 42, takes the elixir of life to become immortal. Some three hundred years later, EM is bored, indifferent and cold. Her life is joyless and, in the end, she refuses the elixir and dies (B. Williams, 1973).

The Absolute and The Infinite

We have already examined and rejected the claim that if God does not exist, then life would have no meaning because the meaning of life consists in the purposes for which we were created. However, the existence of God might be necessary for meaning in another way: our lives have meaning only in relation to the meaningfulness of an infinite God. The underlying point is the same as that concerning the after-life. It is that only the infinite has meaning or rather that:

The finite has meaning only by virtue of its relation to the infinite or unlimited.

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Let us re-examine this assumption in this new more general form, even though the basic structure of the argument against it is the same. Obviously, not just anything infinite is meaningful in the appropriate way. For example, an infinity of numbers would not be meaningful in the way that an infinitely long blissful after-life would be. It depends on the nature of the infinity. But the nature of the infinity in question depends on the nature of the single finite elements that make it up by being repeated an infinite number of times.

Nozick's Infinite Regress

Twentieth century Harvard philosopher, Robert Nozick dedicates a chapter of his award-winning book *Philosophical Explanations* to the meaning of life. He has also written a more recent work called the *Examined Life*; both are very interesting. Nozick advances and explores an argument for the infinity assumption that appears to avoid the problems we have raised so far. He argues that we should distinguish meaning and value. He claims that the intrinsic value of X consists in its being integrated within its own boundaries and that its meaning lies in its having a connection to something else beyond those boundaries. He writes:

For a life to have meaning it must connect with other things or values beyond itself (Nozick, 1981, p.594).

However, Nozick suggests the additional, apparently reasonable, point that for something to be meaningful, it must be connected to some other thing that is itself meaningful. In this way, meaning is like importance: to be important, X must be connected to something else itself of importance (Nozick, 1981, p.599). This additional point threatens to generate an infinite regress. The following two premises generate such a regress:

Argument A

1. If X has meaning, then it must connect to something else beyond it (i.e. to Y).
2. If Y itself does not have meaning then X will not.
3. Thus, if X has meaning then Y also must connect to something else beyond itself (i.e. to Z)

Nozick suggests that this infinite regress can be halted only by appeal to the notion of the unlimited or the Absolute. He suggests that

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the unlimited can be its own meaning, precisely because it has no limits. Nozick affirms that:

(1) To seek to give life meaning is to seek to transcend the limits of one's individual life (Nozick, 1989, p.166)

And, conversely that:

(2) To see something's limits is to question its meaning (Nozick, 1981, p. 597)

As a consequence of the idea inherent in this last quote (2), something without limits is something the meaning of which cannot be questioned. Consequently, the only way to prevent the infinite regress generated by argument A is by appeal to the Absolute, which is its own meaning.

The upshot of these arguments is that anything that has meaning must have it in relation to the unlimited or the Absolute. Note that the concept of the unlimited is distinct from the infinite. Something infinite can nevertheless be limited; for example, a sequence of numbers can be infinite, but it is limited because it consists only of numbers. The unlimited has absolutely no limits and, therefore, must include or be literally everything.

Nozick flirts with the infinity assumption. For example, he claims:

Perhaps the intrinsic meaningfulness of God's existence and his purpose lies in his being unlimited and infinite (Nozick, 1981, p. 593)

Whether he supports it or not, the argument can be taken as a vindication of the infinity assumption, which I have claimed is an error. So, let us critically examine this apparently attractive way of defending the infinity assumption. There are two points to look at; the first is how the regress is originally generated, and the second is the claim that only something unlimited can halt the regress.

Argument A, which generates the regress, has two premises. The first premise is that if X has meaning, then it must connect to something else beyond it (i.e. to Y). This premise is based on the distinction between value and meaning:

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The value of a person's life attaches to it within its limits, while the meaning of his life attaches to it as centered in the wider value context beyond its limits (Nozick, p.611).

Is this true? This automatically rules out the claim that the meaning of life is in the living of it. It also rules out the idea that meaning might be a special kind of intrinsic value. These could be two reasons for being suspicious of this way of drawing the distinction. Nevertheless, Nozick might reply that the term 'meaning' in fact does have the kind of use he signals. Indeed, he responds to the objection that other things apart from the Absolute can be their own meaning by arguing that living within limits is 'one means to value and not a mode of meaning' (Op. cit., p.596). However, I shall not pursue this line of enquiry now because I think that there is a more substantial point at issue that I shall raise in the next chapter.

The second premise of argument A is the assertion that for something to be meaningful, it must be connected to something that is itself meaningful. The idea is that something meaningful cannot obtain its meaning by being connected to something meaningless. However, given the special use of 'meaning' being employed in the first premise, this seems false. Surely, something can be meaningful by being connected to something valuable.

These two criticisms combined are sufficient to show that argument A is not sound, and that there is no threat of an infinite regress. If we accept the meaning/value distinction as drawn in premise 1 (on page 24) then premise 2 is false, and should be replaced by:

2b. For something to be meaningful, it must be connected to something that is itself of value.

Of course, proposition 2b is insufficient to generate the regress. Proposition 2b will be the theme of Chapter 10.

The Unlimited Assumption

Now that we have removed the threat of a regress, the motivation to posit a uniquely, inherently meaningful absolute has also been eliminated. Moreover, the previous point (i.e. 2b) also supplies an argument against the new version of the infinity assumption. The new version is that:

Anything with limits cannot have meaning except in relation to the Absolute.

eliminated. Moreover, the previous point (i.e. 2b) also supplies an argument against the new version of the infinity assumption. The new version is that:

Anything with limits cannot have meaning except in relation to the Absolute.

This is a false assumption, even given Nozick's particular way of distinguishing meaning and value, because something limited can have meaning because of its relation to something else with limits that has value. In other words, finite things can have value and, given 2b, therefore, they can have meaning.

Conclusion

Making the meaning of life depend on the Infinite threatens to deny the meaning of a purely finite life. In this chapter, I have been arguing against different versions of the infinity assumption. Please note that this does not constitute an argument against the notion of God or the Absolute. We have rejected the assumption that only the infinite or the unlimited or the Absolute has meaning, or that finite things can have meaning only in relation to the Absolute. This point is important because it refutes the kind of lament made by Russell towards the beginning of the chapter, namely that our lives are meaningless because they are finite.

Reading

There are good discussions of some of the themes of this chapter in Klemke, E.D. ed., *The Meaning of Life*, Oxford University Press, 1981. The fascinating discussion of the meaning of life by Nozick is contained in Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, Harvard, 1981.

Is There a Plan?

Is there a plan to the universe? Does this question even make sense? And what kind of empirical evidence might count in favor of or against such a claim? Some people interpret the generic question of whether life has a meaning in terms of the cosmological idea that there is a plan to the universe, presumably on the assumption that humanity has a role or should participate in that plan. We will return to the significance of that last assumption later towards the end of the chapter. For the moment, we can assume that if the universe is developing according to some plan, then this will almost certainly have some impact on the meaning of human life generically and specifically on the meaning of a person's life for that person.

At the beginning of Chapter one, we outlined two models of the universe, the medieval religious model and the modern scientific one. One of the important changes that occurred in the shift from the one view to the other is in the kind of explanation given of natural events. In the medieval view, natural phenomena are to be explained in terms of purposes. One aspect of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century was to replace such teleological explanations with mechanistic ones. According to this idea, any natural event can be explained in terms of its cause, which is some prior event, some background conditions, and a causal law, which can be expressed mathematically (e.g. $F=ma$). For this discussion, the recent advent of statistical laws in physics can be regarded as a form of mechanical explanation. Darwin's theory of evolution apparently shows how biological phenomena are explicable within this mechanistic view of explanation. Consequently,

it rules out the need for explanation by citing design and purposes and, thereby, apparently contradicts the claim that the universe develops according to some plan or end.

To be clear: the topic under discussion does not include the claim that people and some animals have purposes. That this is true, I shall take as a given, although some of the underlying issues concerning this point shall be dealt with briefly in Chapter 8.

Two Related Ideas

According to the standard medieval Christian view, God created the natural universe for some purpose. However, the idea that the universe has a plan does not necessarily require the concept of God. It could be that the universe is developing towards some end or goal, without the additional idea that that end is established by a divine being. Consequently, the claim that universe has a plan takes two forms. The first is that the plan represents the purpose of some divine being; God has a purpose in creating a physical universe, which is His instrument. The second is that the universe has some natural tendency to develop towards an end; the universe itself has an essentially teleological nature.

The difference is important because we might think that the second idea is more viable than the first. The less we anthropomorphize God, the less sense it makes to speak of His purposes. It is anthropomorphic to describe a car as a person, to ascribe human, or rather person-like, qualities to something which cannot have such properties, for example, to describe an ant as industrious, a violet as innocent and a galaxy as bored. We tend to personify God and to conceive the relation between humans and God as similar to the relations between people. This makes God intelligible to the human heart, and for this reason, in most of the major religions, there is a tendency to think of God as a father or mother, or as a king or queen. However, most religions also contain the opposite tradition, according to which God is something quite beyond limited human concepts. If this were true, then God would not have purposes, and the idea of a developing, end-directed universe must be explained independently of God's purposes.

Both the idea of God's plan and of the universe unfolding towards some end seem to be contradicted by the biological theory of natural selection. The purpose of this chapter is not to debate the viability of the theory of evolution, but rather to see whether the idea of a plan to the universe can survive (excuse the pun) the theory of natural selection.

Absolute Self-Realization

Perhaps the most intriguing and detailed characterization of a teleologically developing universe is that of the German idealist philosopher Hegel (1770-1831). According to him, the universe is in a process of coming to know and realize itself. The Absolute is the totality of everything that exists and it is developing towards the goal of self-realization. The Absolute expresses or manifests itself objectively in the physical world, which is unfolding, according to its nature, towards self-realization through the human mind. The story of this teleological process is the history of the universe, which Hegel divides into three phases: the Idea of the Absolute; its manifestation as Nature; and its coming to know itself as Spirit through the development of human consciousness.

The end or goal towards which the universe is developing is the Absolute as Thought that thinks itself or as a self-conscious Spirit. Since the Absolute is everything, this spirit can have no object other than itself. Therefore, the end towards which the universe is developing is universal self-consciousness.

The process by which the universe develops is dialectical. Hegel claims that concepts pass into their opposites, which generates a 'contradiction' and, as a result, there must a higher unity, which unites the thesis and antithesis without negating their difference, which he calls the synthesis. In turn this synthesis itself becomes a new thesis in a new phase of the continuing process. Hegel claims that all rational thought follows this dialectical process. Because of his idealism, this means that he also asserts that the historical development of the universe is a dialectical movement following the same pattern.

As an example of this dialectical process, let us consider the first movement outlined in Hegel's *Logic*, which is the first part of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* (1817). The concept of the Absolute is the pure formal concept or category of being, which is the wholly indeterminate idea of bare existence. This concept is the thesis. But something completely indeterminate is nothing, and so the concept of being passes into the concept of not-being or nothing, the antithesis. To reconcile this contradiction, there arises a new principle or synthesis, which is 'becoming.' This example not only illustrates the dialectical process, but also is an important result in Hegel's theory: namely, to conceive the Absolute as being, we must think of it as becoming. The Absolute must be conceived as a process.

In his influential work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) Hegel traces the development of consciousness in three phases: 1) perceptual awareness; 2) self-consciousness; and 3) reason or universal awareness. The first phase begins with consciousness in its most

simple form: raw unconceptualized sense-data, which he calls 'sense certainty.' This form of consciousness is inadequate, because, without the addition of classificatory concepts, sense certainty cannot be counted as a form of knowledge. So, in the next stage, the mind considers the thing perceived as a real object with properties, and is led beyond the data of the senses to postulate an external world. However, on deeper reflection, the mind realizes that this external world is itself a product of the understanding, and this leads consciousness to reflect back onto itself thereby producing self-consciousness. In this way, the contradictions inherent in perceptual awareness lead to self-consciousness (Hegel, 1972, p. 58-79).

In the second phase, self-consciousness develops in steps. In general, for consciousness to understand itself, it requires something to contrast itself with. In the first step, self-consciousness contrasts itself with an external object. However, the external object is something foreign and opposed to self-consciousness. In this way, there arises the need for a reconciling synthesis, which is desire: the wish to own or appropriate the external object as 'mine.' As a result, the process reaches the second step.

In this second step, desire is the thesis. However, desire is a state of dissatisfaction, and self-consciousness requires something else to contrast itself with, namely another person with self-consciousness. Full self-consciousness requires one to recognize others as selves or persons. At first, the self wishes to dominate the other self and demand the recognition of himself or herself as a person by the other. Hegel characterizes this as the master-slave relationship: the master and the slave both demand recognition of themselves by the other through this relationship. The contradictions inherent in this state lead to the next level. These contradictions are that, in treating the slave as less than a real person, the master puts him or herself in an impossible situation, because one cannot demand of an object that it recognize one as a person. Furthermore, the slave through his or her work objectifies himself (Op. cit. p.104-111).

The third phase, that of Reason, or universal self-consciousness, transcends the awareness of oneself in potential conflict with others, because it consists of awareness of oneself and others as existing in the universal infinite Spirit. Reason sees nature as the expression of the infinite Spirit. This synthesizes the first two phases, consciousness of external objects and self-consciousness, because in the third stage Reason sees its own reflection in nature.

This awareness takes three different forms: morality, religion and philosophy. First, Hegel traces the development of morality whereby moral awareness becomes more reflective and, finally, becomes a community of free persons. However, such a morality requires the idea

of a unity that transcends the individuals who participate in it; it requires the idea of identity in difference and, in this way, morality dialectically moves into religion. Second, Hegel traces the development of religion through various stages, until finally Spirit becomes aware of itself as such (op. cit. p.410-479). However, religious awareness expresses itself in pictorial form, and the idea that the Absolute recognizes itself as Spirit demands a conceptual representation, which leads to the third stage, philosophy. In this third stage, absolute spirit, or infinite self-thinking thought, comes to know itself in mature as Spirit. This occurs when our culture permits that the human mind can see beyond its own finitude and identify itself with pure Thought (op. cit. p. 479-495).

Evolution

In stark contrast to Hegel's portrait of the universe is the theory of evolution or natural selection, according to which, both the biological traits of natural beings and their variety can be explained entirely in terms of natural variations, inheritance and selection, without the need for purposes in nature. Darwin (1809-1882) pointed out that organisms vary in their inherited traits and their populations tend to increase geometrically and, hence, they compete for limited resources in a changing environment. Based on these observations, he concluded that:

- Some of these inherited traits will confer competitive advantage to the organisms that have them.
- Organisms with such advantages will have the best chance of surviving for longer.
- Such organisms will have a comparatively greater number of offspring with the same inherited traits (Lennox, p.271).

Darwin thought that we could explain the origin of species and the variation of their traits solely in terms of these natural processes of variation, inheritance and selection. A nice way to conceive of natural selection is to contrast it with artificial selection or breeding. By selective breeding certain morphological traits can be encouraged and others extinguished. Natural selection is a similar process of selection, but which takes place purely mechanically, based on the principle that organisms with certain traits will have competitive advantage over others and thus they are more likely to survive longer and reproduce. Over generations, the result will be that there will be more organisms with that trait.

Organisms vary in a heritable fashion. Some variants (are better adapted to their environment, survive longer and) leave more offspring than others; their characteristics, therefore, are represented at a greater frequency in the next generation (Wilson, 1984, quoted in Lennox, p. 288). (My additions are in brackets).

Darwin derived his theory from five types of observations. First, he made a careful study of artificial selective breeding, which showed him that species could be modified. Second, he studied bio-diversity, noting especially the affinity between species on the Galapagos Islands and those on the South American mainland 500 miles away. Third, Darwin looked at the fossil record, which showed him that extinct species are morphologically similar to present species, and which suggested that they were ancestors. Fourth, Darwin considered the evidence of embryology; embryos of different species pass through similar stages of development and this strongly suggested to him common ancestry. Fifth, he studied anatomical or morphological evidence. For example, the structure of the forelimb of frog, lizard, bird, horse and human are similar, and this should be explained in terms of common ancestry.

Contemporary theory of evolution is a synthesis of three distinct ideas. The first is Darwin's powerful idea of explaining both the generation of adaptations and bio-diversity in terms of natural selection, a blind process of adaptation. The second is Mendel's theory of genetic inheritance. Genes are the units of heredity. The third is the important contemporary discovery that the genes are in fact the DNA molecules of the cell, which unites genetics and biochemistry.

The term 'evolution' may be misleading because to many people it suggests the idea that things are progressing or changing for the better, or that life is evolving from the simplest organisms to the most complex ones. It suggests that natural selection inevitably produces more evolved or higher organisms, such as we humans. Such ideas are mistaken: it is not part of the scientific theory of evolution that historically later organisms will be more evolved, more complex or higher. It does not require the value-laden idea of progress. On the contrary, the theory of evolution rules out the explanatory need for a plan to the universe and the idea that change is movement towards some goal. In other words, the relevant biological traits of organisms can be explained without recourse to supernatural causation and without the need for cosmic purposes and ends. It is purely mechanical, and this is why the twentieth century American philosopher Dennett calls natural selection 'algorithmic': it consists of mindless, mechanical processes guaranteed to produce certain results (Dennett, 1995, p. 48 ff).

Evolutionary Progress?

This is not the place to examine the challenges hurled at the theory of evolution. Instead, we shall ask the question: 'Even if the theory is true, is it possible that there is a plan to the universe?' Are the two ideas incompatible? (Two claims are incompatible when they cannot both be true). In order to answer this question, we have to understand what it means to assert that the theory of evolution is true.

Initially, it seems that the two ideas are incompatible. After all, the essence of the idea of a plan is that there is some end towards which the universe is developing. In contrast, the essence of Darwin's theory is that mechanical, non-teleological processes are completely sufficient to explain all biological phenomena.

However, one still might argue that the two ideas are not contradictory, on the grounds that even if a cosmic plan is not necessary, there still might be one. Even though natural selection is a sufficient explanation of any relevant natural phenomena, this does not rule out the claim that nature actually is progressing towards some goal according to a plan. Because the theory of natural selection is true, the idea of such a plan or goal is not necessary for explanation; natural selection and genetic drift are a sufficient explanation. Nevertheless, given all this, it still remains possible that there is such a plan, for which there might even be empirical evidence.

This basic idea can be elaborated in two ways. First, it might be claimed that, while the theory of evolution spells out *how* the changes take place, any concept of a cosmic plan would specify *why*. Natural selection lays out the physical mechanism by which the universe develops towards some end. Second, apparently, the idea can be given intuitive appeal with an analogy. Think of human action. In principle, all the physical movements of a person can be explained in physiological terms because all behavior is caused by the nervous system. Yet, despite this, those same physiologically based movements can also be described as purposeful actions. In the case of human behavior, the adequacy of mechanical physiological explanations and the existence of purposeful action are not mutually exclusive. Consequently, as long as the universe as a whole shows sufficient complexity, the two might be compatible in the case of the biosphere. I will return to this analogy later.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), a paleontologist and a Jesuit priest, was one of the pioneers of this kind of theory. In *The Phenomenon of Man*, he presented a vision of the universe progressing towards a goal, the spiritual development of humanity. De Chardin

coined the term 'noosphere' to refer to the mind's capacity to know itself: 'For Teilhard, the noosphere is the world's way of knowing about the world' (Towers, p.36).

This is very reminiscent of Hegel. Nevertheless, some scientists found something of worth in the basic idea of De Chardin, while trying to distance themselves from his theology. Most prominent among these was the British biologist, Sir Julian Huxley (1887-1975), who argued that evolution is a process of progress that depends solely on natural selection, without the intervention of non-material causes. He defined progress as the 'increased control over and independence of the environment' (Barlow, p.13).

The contemporary scientist Francisco Ayala further developed this general approach by attempting to give a 'scientific' or biological definition of progress as increased ability to gather and process information about the environment (Ayala and T. Dobzhansky, *Studies in the Philosophy of Biology*, 1974). Even more recently, the sociobiologist Edmund Wilson affirmed:

Progress is a property of the evolution of life as a whole by almost any conceivable intuitive standard, including the acquisition of goals and intentions in the behavior of animals (from *The Diversity of Life*, 1992, quoted in Barlow, p.29).

The idea of progress implies an end towards which the progress is made. Therefore, Edmund Wilson's statement implies the compatibility of the theory of natural selection and the idea of an end. However, in order not to give the wrong impression, I should stress that the idea of evolutionary progress is a minority view among evolutionary biologists. Nevertheless, in a study of the meaning of life, we need to investigate such a possibility, even if it has no place in science.

These quotes and considerations indicate the importance of the question: 'Is the idea that the universe is progressing to some end really compatible with the theory of evolution?' To answer this question, we must look a little more deeply into what the theory of evolution actually is.

Back to Natural Selection

The theory of evolution can be regarded as a methodological principle as opposed to an historical claim concerning what really happened in the past. As a methodological principle, the theory would tell us that all the relevant biological traits should be explained as a product of natural selection. What should be included under this

category of biological is itself a debated issue (see page 37). As an empirical claim, the theory of evolution would be a statement to the effect that any specific relevant trait actually has developed only because of a causal history of mutation and selection. These two views could be combined, though this is not an option we shall explore in this book.

Here is an argument for the conclusion that, ultimately, the idea of a plan to the universe will be incompatible with both versions of the theory of evolution. If the idea that the universe has a plan or is progressing is to make sense, then there must be some empirical or observable feature of the universe which is taken to manifest this plan. This observable feature need not be any specific characteristic of a particular organism; it could be a very general feature of the patterns of development, or, to use E.O.Wilson's phrase, a 'property of the evolution of life as a whole.' However, if such a property is taken to show that there is a plan, then it must be asserted that the blind, mechanical processes of natural selection cannot explain that property. In this case, the idea that there is a plan to the universe will require the claim that blind, mechanical processes are not competent to explain all natural features. Consequently, the idea of a plan is not compatible with the theory of evolution. If the idea of a plan is explanatorily redundant, then it is empirically vacuous.

There is another point. Conceiving the universe as developing towards some end apparently means attributing a goal to the universe and, thereby, anthropomorphizing it. This requires treating it as a person or organism. Because the universe contains persons, this does not mean that it itself is a person or person-like. *Prima facie*, this is also a weakness with the analogy that we looked at earlier (page 33). We compared evolutionary changes in the biosphere to human behavior or action, in order to argue that the sufficiency of mechanical explanations and the existence of purpose are not mutually exclusive. The analogy is weak because it depends on the universe having person or organism-like qualities.

In the medieval view, the universe is God's artifact; in the seventeenth century scientific view, the universe is a machine. A few contemporary thinkers are inclined to the view that the universe is more like an organism. Perhaps none of these options are satisfactory conceptions of the universe. Do we have empirical evidence in favor of any of them? What could count as such evidence?

Let us briefly review the major points so far. Claiming that the theory of evolution is true is equivalent to saying that all relevant biological phenomena can be completely explained in terms of natural selection and other evolutionary mechanisms, such as genetic drift. This implies that there are no sky-hooks, a term that Dennett (1995) uses to describe the idea of citing supernatural causes to explain some

biological feature that appears designed. Accordingly, the idea that the universe has a plan has no explanatory role. Furthermore, to be meaningful, the idea of a plan must pick out some general feature of the natural world that would count as a manifestation of the plan. If this is so, then we must conclude that if 'The universe has a plan' is a meaningful claim, then there must natural characteristics that cannot be explained scientifically in terms of evolution.

Does Evolution Destroy Meaning?

Let us move the discussion forward. Up to now we have been considering conceptions of the meaning of life insofar as it requires the idea of a cosmic plan. However, not all conceptions of the meaning of life require such a notion. We shall now examine the claim that the scientific theory of evolution destroys the concept of the meaning of life or that of value in general. This is a complex issue, and part of it we shall be dealing with in Chapter 8 when we shall challenge the thesis that life cannot have a meaning in a purely physical universe. In this chapter, we shall examine the thesis that an evolutionary account of human values undermines those values. In the philosophical literature, this type of discussion is usually focused on the origin of morality, but it can be applied to the values related to the meaning of life (see, for example, Murphy, 1982, ch.2; Dennett, 1995, chs. 14 and 16; Mary Midgely, 1978 and 1985).

Darwin himself saw that the theory of evolution would explain the biological features of humans. Evolution has helped us to see that there is not a radical difference of kind between humans and other species. The differences are ones of degree. Like the other species, we are part of the natural world.

Limits of Evolutionary Explanation

In what sense could the theory of evolution explain our values? Let us look at morality. To be clear, we need to distinguish morality as a social institution, as a set of capacities, and as a set of statements or assertions.

Morality as a social institution consists of the moral beliefs and attitudes that people in a society have and, in particular, their mutual expectations regarding what behavior is acceptable. The theory of evolution could not explain directly such sociological phenomena, because any explanation of this aspect of a culture will have to appeal to social and historical facts about the society in question.

However, the theory of evolution should be able to explain our moral capacities insofar as they are innate. In other words, we have certain capacities that make it possible for us to make moral judgments and, in part, these are natural abilities, such as the capacity to make reasoned choices, to reflect self-consciously and, to have certain feelings and emotions, such as care. However, and this point is important, the theory of evolution will not explain how these capabilities are developed and trained socially; nor can it explain how these capacities will and should be used to in specific circumstances (Murphy, 1982, p. 79).

Morality also consists of moral claims concerning what we have reason to do or not do. Some of these claims would be substantive evaluative (moral) principles. Evolution cannot be used to explain or derive such substantive claims. To see why, we might compare moral principles to economic principles and mathematical statements. Evolution can explain why we have the mathematical capacities we do; but this does not mean that we can derive mathematical assertions from the theory of natural selection. Similarly, the capacities that allow us to make sense of economic activity in terms of micro and macro-economic theory should be explicable in terms of natural selection, but that does not mean that the theories themselves are derived from or based on evolution. Finally,

An analysis of the origin of morality will be correct only to the extent that it operates with a correct analysis of the concept of morality itself (Murphy, p.65).

For example, sociobiological accounts of its origin tend to identify morality with altruism, but morality involves more than just this.

Let us apply these conclusions. Even if our capacities to feel and perceive meaning can be explained as a result of a long, mechanical evolutionary process, this does not mean that our sense that life is valuable or meaningful is an illusion, nor that the claim 'Life is meaningful' is false. It does not imply that meaning is reduced to something mechanical.

The Importance of these Limitations

Jacques Monod, the French biologist, wrote in his famous book, *Chance and Necessity*:

Man knows at last that he is alone in the universe's unfeeling immensity, out of which he emerged only by chance. His destiny is nowhere spelt out, nor is his duty (p.198, Barlow).

Monod emphasizes the utter contingency of the evolutionary process. In part, he does so to undermine the position of his fellow countryman, Tielhard de Chardin, and this is the main point that I shall be returning to in a moment.

In scientific terms, Monod may be mistaken to stress that the processes of natural selection are as contingent as a huge lottery (Barlow, p.191). It seems clear that, all other things being equal, traits such as general intelligence have a strong adaptive value and, in most conditions, will be favored by natural selection. As Dennett says about Gould's idea of radical contingency:

Evolution can have produced us by an algorithmic process, without it being true that evolution is an algorithm for producing us (Dennett, p. 308).

Furthermore, since the 1980s, some physicists have tried to explain the behavior of complex, nonlinear dynamical systems, such as whirlpools, in terms of their capacity for self-organization. In computer simulations, sometimes known as artificial life, populations of mindless agents following simple rules can produce collective behavior that is amazing life-like and rich. In the life sciences, proponents of self-organization can argue that:

Natural selection is not the product of chance alone. It is the result of form building properties in nature integrating and stabilizing the favorable changes that are produced by chance (Louise Young, p.144).

We may conclude that the claim 'Either there is a plan or else the existence of life is pure chance' presents a false dichotomy. We are not trapped into having to agree either with Tielhard or Monod. We can disagree with both.

The general message of this last point can be amplified in two ways. First, it is a trap to think that either the universe has a plan, or else life must be nothing but a meaningless result of a mechanical slot machine. This is a false dichotomy, similar to the one we mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 1. Evolution is not necessarily a reductive theory: it does not explain away or reduce meaningfulness and value,

anymore than it explains away or reduces mathematics, economics or even sociobiology itself. It aims to provide a naturalistic explanation of biological characteristics, including the capacities that enable us to recognize value and meaning. Giving a causal explanation of the origin of capacities is not the same as giving an account of the relevant meaning or content. For example, sentences specifying the nature of morality have a meaning, which indicates the content of morality. We can investigate this content without thinking that it must be explained in evolutionary terms. Briefly, there are here two points of great importance that need to be examined in later chapters. First, can life have meaning even if the universe is entirely composed of matter? This will be the subject of Chapter 8. Additionally, does the meaningfulness of life depend on its having a purpose? As we shall see in the next chapter, even if there is no cosmic plan, there can still be meaning.'

The second amplification of the general point is that the false dichotomy represented by De Chardin versus Monod is a general reflection of our feelings concerning our situation in the universe. Many people feel that there are only two alternatives: either we humans are a very special part of God's creation, or else we live in a universe that is 'unfeeling,' to quote Monod, or mechanically indifferent. The claim that we humans are a special part of creation includes the ideas that God put us here, and that we have an important role or task to complete for Him in our lifetimes.

Both limbs of this dichotomy are problematic. On the one hand, the idea that we are special because we have an important God-given task to perform instrumentalizes the value of our lives and, as a consequence, is an erroneous way to understand the statement that our lives have non-instrumental or intrinsic value. As we shall see in the next chapter, contrary to expectations, it actually destroys the meaning of life.

On the other hand, Monod's idea that the universe is coldly indifferent to our fates actually personifies or anthropomorphizes the universe. A person can be indifferent to you only if you have reason to expect that he or she might care. Only a person can be coolly indifferent. For this reason, to affirm that the universe is indifferent to us is to personify it. Returning to the dichotomy, in effect, in the first option, we receive a job to be done from a caring cosmic parent, and in the second we receive silence and the cold shoulder because the landlord has left.

Our feelings of being at home in our own lives and with our surroundings do not have to depend on such considerations. What they may depend on, of course, varies with the circumstances of a person's life but, nevertheless, there are many interesting and important things

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to say about this, and we shall be looking at some of them later in the book.

Conclusion

Consider this quote from the famous zoologist Alister Hardy:

The very fact that one can conceive (a)...possible solution may save one from being in the pessimistic position of imagining that there can be no possible purpose in the process at all. Such a defeatist loss of all sense of meaning...is one of the tragic outcomes of the materialism of today (*Darwin and the Death of Spirit*, 1984, quoted in Barlow, p. 245).

In this chapter we have seen that the theory of evolution does exclude the possibility of there being a purpose to the process of evolution. Hardy assumes that the existence of a cosmic purpose is both necessary and sufficient for life to have meaning. Both assumptions are questionable. It is not necessary, if our lives can have meaning without there being a cosmic purpose. But, is it even sufficient? Suppose God created life and, specifically human life for a purpose, would this necessarily imply that the meaning of any one person's life would be that purpose? The cosmic plan would not be a sufficient condition for meaning if an otherwise meaningless life would not be made meaningful by such a plan. We now turn to these considerations in the next chapter.

Reading

A good, clear introduction to the philosophical issues surrounding the theory of evolution is to be found in Lennox, 'Philosophy of Biology,' in *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, Salmon et al., 1992. A more polemical and entertaining discussion is Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 1995. Barlow, ed., *Evolution Extended*, 1994 contains articles and selected writings on the implications of the theory for the idea of a plan to the universe. There is a useful discussion of the implications of the theory of evolution in Murphy, *Evolution, Morality and the Meaning of Life*, 1982. Also there is Peter Bowler, *Evolution: the History of an Idea*, 1984.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is translated by A. Miller (Oxford, 1977). The most comprehensive guide to Hegel's thought is

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Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, Cambridge, 1975. Peter Singer, *Hegel*, 1983, in the Past Masters series, is very readable and clear.

Appendix: Why is there Something rather than Nothing?

The Eskimos, when asked who made the heavens and Earth, always replied: "We do not know." A Zulu was asked: "When you see the sun rising and setting, and the trees growing, do you know who made them and governs them?" He answered simply: "No; we see them but cannot tell how they came. We suppose that they came by themselves" (Durant, 1954, p. 57).

These quotes have two striking features. First, the questions are loaded; they ask 'Who?' assuming agency. Second, the replies are straightforward, especially the supposition that things "can come by themselves." Can the universe come out of nothing? This is perhaps the most fundamental mystery of all. It is sometimes thought to be the key to the riddle of the universe and the ultimate mystery that cannot be explained scientifically. In this appendix, we shall briefly examine some possible answers to this intractable question, without trying to reach a definitive solution.

At first, the issue seems fundamentally simple. There can only be two alternative answers: either something came from nothing or, something has always existed.

One problem is that it is surprisingly easy to confuse these two options. Attempts to show something could come out of nothing usually fail to do this. For example, we might conceive nothing as empty space. If we did so, then we might think that we could answer the question 'How can something come from nothing?' by showing how the material universe could be generated from empty space. Such an idea has two problems. The first, which for the moment is irrelevant to my point, is that space may not exist independently of matter. According to this critique, the Newtonian idea that the whole of space could be utterly void or empty is mistaken. The second point, which is more directly relevant, is that empty space, under this Newtonian conception, is something. Consequently, by conceiving nothingness as empty space, we are not showing how something can be generated by nothing, but rather how something can be generated by something else (i.e. empty space). In other words, a solution that originally purported to be an answer of the first type turns out, on closer examination, to be a theory of the second type.

Here is another example of the same mistake. We might conceive nothingness as a combination or balance of particles and anti-particles,

or matter and anti-matter. There exists nothing when there is exactly the same quantity of matter and anti-matter. Given this, we might hope to show how nothing so conceived is inherently unstable and is bound for various physical reasons to collapse into matter. To complete such a theory, one would have to show that absolute nothingness is impossible, and that the only possible type of nothing is one that consists of a balance of matter and anti-matter. Does this kind of explanation solve the problem? No, for once again, such an explanation does not get to the fundamental issue, because we are conceiving nothingness as something. In such a case, it is clear that the solution that is being offered is one of the second kind rather than the first.

The point of insisting on clarity on this point is that the same confusion enters the traditional answer that there is something rather than nothing because God created the universe. If God exists, then He is something. Given that the universe is everything that exists, then the claim that God created the universe makes no sense because, given that He exists, God is part of the universe. If the reply to this is that the God is an immaterial being who created the material universe, then it is clear that the traditional religious answer turns out to be a solution of the second type rather than the first. This point is important for two reasons.

First, it shows us that this traditional answer does not perform one role it is often supposed to. We began with a sense of profound mystery that anything should exist at all. But, on reflection, we see that citing God as the non-material cause of the material universe does not address this issue at all. Second, we can see more clearly how the traditional Christian theory does not provide evidence that the universe is created by a God. Any argument for the existence of God based solely on these considerations is bound to assume that something cannot come from nothing. All the solutions that we have glanced at turn out to be of the second type rather than the first, and none of them have given us a reason for thinking that the first kind of solution is mistaken.

The generic mistake these theories make is to look for a causal explanation of how something came from nothing. There cannot be such a causal explanation because any such explanation must appeal to a cause and, in this case, there cannot be a cause, which would inevitably presuppose the prior existence of something.

However, this does not mean that there cannot be an explanation. Not all explanations have to be causal (Parfit, in Kolak and Martin, 1999). If we give up the assumption that everything must have a cause, then perhaps we can explain the existence of anything in a different way.

Non-Causal Explanations

Nozick notes that the question ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ presupposes an *inegalitarian* form of explanation. An *inegalitarian* explanation divides states into two kinds: those that need explanation and those that do not. For example, in Newtonian physics, that a body is in uniform, linear motion does not require any explanation, but any change in its motion does. In the case of existence, the question ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ assumes that the fact that something exists stands in need of an explanation, whereas, in contrast, the existence of nothing would not (Nozick, 1981, p. 121).

Nozick invites us to give up this assumption. We can do so in two ways. First, we can reverse the roles and assume that nothingness is a state that would require explanation rather than the existence of something. In which case, we would not have to explain why there is something; an explanation would only be required if nothing existed.

Second, we can just drop the *inegalitarian* presumption altogether and, instead, search for an *egalitarian* explanation. For instance, there are an enormous number of possible worlds, one of which is the possible world in which nothing exists. If we assume that it is a completely random which of these possible worlds exists, then we should assign an equal probability to each possible world obtaining. In this case, the occurrence of the possible world in which nothing exists becomes very improbable because there are many ways in which something can exist and only one way in which nothing can exist. In this manner, we can explain non-causally why there is something rather than nothing (Nozick, p. 127).

Another type of explanation, which comes under this second heading, would be that all possible worlds exist. In other words, this particular possible world, which we inhabit, is only one among an enormous number of them, all of which exist. Nozick calls this the *fecundity* assumption (Nozick, p. 129). If all possible worlds exist, then the question ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ is based on a false assumption, because the possible world in which there is nothing does exist.

In summary, there seems to be only two alternatives: either that something came from nothing or that something has always existed. We have seen that most answers end up, on analysis, to be of the second kind and that the answer that something came from nothing precludes any causal explanation of why something, rather than nothing, exists.

Do Possibilities Exist?

Finally, I would like to consider two answers that not fit neatly into the two categories mentioned above, and which complicate the whole issue. First, suppose that it is not the case that something has always existed, and instead that something actually did come from nothing. However, concerning the time when nothing existed, we do know that it was possible at that time that something should exist, because something now exists. Because of this simple fact, we cannot conceive of nothing without also including the possibility of something. In other words, even when there was nothing else, there was the possibility of something. In this sense, given that something now exists, absolute nothingness seems impossible. Does this mean that the first alternative above (i.e. that something came from nothing) is redundant? The reply depends on whether possibilities should be counted as something or as entities. If they should, then some thing, namely the mere possibility of something, has always existed. If they should not be so counted, then the first alternative (namely that something came from nothing) still remains as an option. However, if the mere possibility of something does not count as some thing, then the whole idea of possible worlds existing becomes a mistake, thereby ruling out Nozick’s fecundity assumption.

Non-Newtonian Time

The second answer that does not fit easily into the two categories, and which complicates the issue, is as follows. Up to now, the discussion has assumed a Newtonian or a realistic and linear view of time. The question becomes more interesting when we drop this assumption. According to Einstein’s general theory of relativity, matter that has a mass curves space-time. For reasons that we shall not go into, Einstein’s theory suggests that space-time is a feature of matter. In other words, if there is no matter, then there is no space-time.

Given this, we can assert that, even though the universe is finitely old, there was no time at which the universe did not exist. In which case, in one sense, it is no longer a mysterious fact that the universe should have come into existence 18 billion years ago, as opposed to, for example, 8,000 trillion years ago. This is no longer a mystery because there was no time at which the universe did not exist. It has always existed, even though it is finitely old. There was never nothing.

Since the universe is finitely old, let us suppose that there was a first event. (Note, though, as an aside, that is possible to claim both that the universe is finitely old and that there was no first event, just as

there is no first decimal or fraction). What did this first event consist in? One might be tempted to assert that it consisted in something coming from nothing and then be puzzled as to how something could come from nothing. However, this mysterious way of describing the first event seems to be an error because we can no longer truly assert 'In the beginning, there was nothing,' simply because there was never nothing. A true description of the first event seems to be 'Something happened' and not 'Something came from nothing.'

Someone might object to these ruminations on the grounds that, even if there was no time at which the universe did not exist because there was no time before the first event, nevertheless nothing existed eternally or timelessly. In reply, this objection does not seem to be valid. First, we might wonder whether the very concept of timeless existence makes any sense. Second, leaving that point aside, the thought 'Nothing, even time, existed timelessly before the first event' does not make sense simply because the timeless cannot be *before*, or come to that after, anything.

Reading

The best discussion of the question 'Why there is something rather than nothing?' is Robert Nozick's Chapter 2 of *Philosophical Explanations*, 1981. Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit has an excellent paper on this question in *The Experience of Philosophy*, edited by Dan Kolak and Robert Martin, 1999. A clear introduction to the main physical concepts is Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics*, 1983.

The Purpose of Goals

The debate about whether life has a meaning usually centers on the question whether it has some point or purpose. 'Does life have a meaning?' is usually understood as 'Does it have a point?' where 'point' means 'goal' or 'purpose.' For this reason, some Christian writers claim that the question 'Does life have a meaning?' should be understood as 'Does God have purpose planned for us?' According to this idea, a meaningless life would be one that did not serve some divine or higher purpose.

Other thinkers, rejecting the idea of divine purposes, argue that the question should be understood in terms of our own goals. They repudiate the idea of the meaning *of* life, but accept that of meaning *in* life, which consists for each one of us in fulfilling the goals we set for ourselves. A meaningless life is consequently one lived without any goals or objectives. A life is meaningful if and only if the person has some purpose or purposes around which he or she organizes his or her life. The meaning is to achieve those goals.

Why Divine Purposes?

To this, the divine theorist would argue that human purposes are inadequate for life to have meaning. In particular, of any person's goal, we might ask 'What is the point or purpose of that goal?' If the goal

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has no point or purpose, then it would be meaningless, in accordance with the definition of 'meaning' as purpose or point. A goal that does not itself serve a further purpose would be meaningless, and therefore cannot constitute the meaning of a life. This line of reasoning generates an infinite regress:

If X is to have meaning requires that X serve some meaningful purpose, then for a life to have meaning it must serve some purpose which itself must serve some purpose, which itself must serve some purpose etc....

The divine theorist could use this infinite regress to argue that no human purpose is adequate to constitute the meaning of a life. Accordingly, what is required to halt the infinite regress is a purpose that is guaranteed to be meaningful in and of itself. For a purpose to constitute meaningfulness, it is required that the purpose itself be meaningful and the only kind of purpose which is guaranteed to be meaningful in itself, without appeal to further purposes, would be one of an all-perfect being. Consequently, argues the theorist, if God is by definition perfect, then this would imply that any purpose set for us by God would be meaningful. The argument would be as follows:

1. X has meaning if and only if X serves a meaningful goal
2. Only a perfect being can have a meaningful goal (because of the infinite regress).
3. Therefore, the meaning of life must consist in the goals of a perfect being or God

What are we to make of this argument? Its strength is precisely the way it rejects the weakness of the opposing position, namely the claim that any purpose is sufficient for meaning. It seems that the assertion that any purpose is sufficient for meaning is too generous. A person might have an aim that, even on his or her own admission, is insufficient to make his or her life meaningful.

One weakness of the divine theorist's argument is that the first premise presents an exclusive definition of 'meaning.' It excludes the idea that something can be meaningful by being non-instrumentally valuable. For example, play can be meaningful without being useful. It is this exclusivity that, in conjunction with the self-referential nature of the definition, generates the regress (it is self-referential because 'meaning' is defined in terms of a goal that has meaning).

This exclusivity can be challenged as follows. The supporting idea behind this first premise was that something cannot be meaningful by

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serving a meaningless goal. That is fair enough. But we can retain that idea and avoid the exclusivity of 1) with:

1*) X has meaning if and only if X serves a goal that is either meaningful or otherwise valuable.

In Common

Notice that the two opposing views mentioned at the beginning of this chapter have a fundamental assumption in common, namely that the relevant sense of 'meaning' is 'purpose.' For example, contemporary philosopher Kai Nielson claims that the question 'What is the meaning of life?'

Most typically - though not always - functions as a request for the goals worth seeking in life, though sometimes it may serve to ask if there are any goals worth seeking in life.
(Klemke, p.180)

Nielson argues for this conclusion by comparing the question about the meaning of life with the meaning of a piece of non-linguistic behavior, such as a frown or some angry looks. When we ask 'What was the meaning of those frowns?' we are looking for the point or purpose of the action (Klemke, p.179). Similarly, the question about life concerns the point or purpose of life.

However, the analogy is weak. The purpose I have in frowning or sighing is not necessarily what the frown or sigh means. The purpose of my sighing might be to encourage someone to leave early. However, this is not what the sigh means. Usually a sigh means that one is tired, bored or frustrated.

Although the view that 'meaning' is 'purpose' appears plausible, I shall argue that this is a mistaken way to understand the question 'What is the meaning of life?' We should not identify the meaning of a person's life with purposes or goals, whether they are God's or those of the person herself. Neither the goals of a finite or an infinite being can constitute the meaning of a life.

I shall argue for this conclusion by first examining the role of our own objectives and goals within our own lives, and by applying the lessons of that investigation to the claim that the meaning of life consists in fulfilling God's purpose. I shall argue that fulfilling either cosmological or our own parochial goals cannot be the meaning of life, because identifying meaning with a goal turns the valuable into a mere

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instrument. For this reason, the meaning of life cannot be thought of as a goal.

However, none of these arguments mean that purposes and goals cannot causally contribute to the meaning of life (cf. ch.10). They imply that the meaning does not consist in such goals and purposes. These two points are distinct. ‘What typically causes or contributes to X?’ is distinct from ‘What does X consist in?’ For example, asking what kinds of things causally contribute to good health is different from seeking the definition of good health itself. Similarly, ‘What causes harm?’ is different from ‘What does harm consist in?’ We are concerned with the question ‘What does the meaning of life consist in?’ which is different from and prior to ‘What sort of things causally contribute to a meaningful life?’

Instrumentally Valuable

In this section, I shall draw some distinctions that we need to have clear in order to avoid confusions about the nature of value and its relationship to goals. Once we avoid these confusions then we shall see that the meaning of life cannot consist in goals and purposes. First, we shall examine this argument in relation to the goals that we form in our own lives. Later, we shall apply the same argument to cosmic and divine goals.

We need to distinguish between instrumental and non-instrumental value. Something has instrumental value only when it is valuable not for what it is but because what it leads to or facilitates. For example, money has purely instrumental value; it is only good because of what one can buy with it. On the other hand, happiness is said to have non-instrumental value. It is good in itself because of what it is. Of course, some things might have both kinds of value. For example, perhaps health has both types of value.

This distinction is often confused with another distinction: means and ends. An end is a goal. The vast majority of our actions are directed towards goals or ends and, as such, they are means. Something causally relevant or necessary to achieving a goal is a means.

To conflate these two distinctions is to think that means as such can only have instrumental value and that anything with non-instrumental value must be a goal. In other words, it assumes that something non-instrumentally good must be a goal.

This seems quite a logical assumption to make, i.e. to define the good or the intrinsically valuable as the end or goal of action. It seems logical because when we are asked why we are doing what we are doing, invariably we will reply by citing the goal or result that we are trying

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to achieve. “What are you doing?” “Writing a book,” “Constructing a new roof,” “Clearing up the garden.” Such answers seem to point to the idea that we justify and explain our actions in terms of goals, because anything non-instrumentally valuable must be a goal.

However, this last claim cannot be correct. It entails that the only aspect of an action that has non-instrumental value is the goal, the desired result, and this implies that the action itself is only instrumentally valuable as a means to that goal. This, in turn, denies the non-instrumental value of the activity itself, as a process. This is because if the good is always a goal, then it is ultimately only goals that provide non-instrumental reasons for action. If this were correct, then we should have to always regard our actions as merely instrumentally valuable. In other words, conflating the two distinctions prevents us from thinking that our goal directed actions can be non-instrumentally valuable. On the contrary, I shall argue that it is never correct to treat one’s own actions merely instrumentally.

Why is this Mistake Important?

We can bring out the same point in a different way. The term ‘instrumentally valuable’ is rather misleading, because something that is merely instrumentally valuable in a sense is not valuable at all. It itself has no value. To see this, consider the nature of efficiency. Efficiency implies that we should achieve our goals at minimal cost. To not do so would be irrational. The ideal of efficiency would be to achieve our goals without the need of any means at all, without any cost. In other words, something that is merely instrumentally valuable is a cost that we must pay for achieving a goal.

With this point in mind, we can see the implications of the statement that our goal-directed actions cannot be non-instrumentally valuable, which is a consequence of conflating the means/end and the instrumentally valuable/non-instrumentally valuable distinctions. Let us suppose that the life of a person consists in the activities and actions he or she performs. If all of those actions were merely of instrumental value to the achievement of various goals, then so would be the life of the person. In other words, the identification of value with goals entails that a person only matters as a means to what he or she could achieve. Clearly this is a mistake. A person is not just a means to achievement.

Because of the principle of universality, the same reasoning can be applied back to the micro-level of actions. In other words, our actions are never merely instrumentally valuable.

It is very easy to misstate this point. We might claim, for instance, that in all activities, the process matters more than result.

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However, this makes it appear like a question of balancing the two facets of action: process and results. To put the point in this way would be a mistake, because the issue is deeper. It is a matter of how we should conceive the good: the good should not be defined as an aim.

The Importance of Goals

None of this means that goals are not, or should not be, an important part of our lives. On the contrary, the idea is rather that traditional means-ends thinking may be turned on its head. Such reasoning is sometimes expressed with the saying 'The ends justifies the means.' Our discussion shows us that such reasoning is very misleading regarding the value of actions. As an antidote, we might express the non-instrumental value of a process with the following paradoxical saying: 'The ends are means to the means' or 'goals are means to non-instrumentally valuable activities, which are also means.' The point is that the importance of goals is that they can enrich the processes of life. This can be explained in two ways.

First, often we run to win to improve the running. Often, we write to a deadline, not because having the work finished by the deadline is intrinsically valuable, but rather for the sake of the process of writing itself. In other words, we need goals to give direction to, and to improve processes. In that way, goals are like means; they are instrumentally valuable.

Second, although our activities are means, really it is the activities that have non-instrumentally value, and the goals or ends are instrumentally valuable because they further the activities. If you win the race, you get to run again. If the work process is profitable, then this enables one to carry on working. In this process of activity generating more activity, the goals are instrumentally valuable because they enable more, and hopefully, better activity later on. In this way, goals are like means. (This is why I claimed: ends are means to means). The end-state is instrumentally valuable because it leads to further activity.

Instrumental rationality implies that the ends justify the means, but I have argued that the truth is closer to the opposite – the means justify the ends. Ends are instrumentally valuable, either because they improve processes, or because achieving the goal permits more and better activities and processes later on. (This claim will be subject to a qualification in Chapter 10). Having a destination improves the

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running, and winning the race enables you to run again (in knock out competitions). The value is in the running and not in the arriving.

Objectives, or end-states, such as a constructed or finished building, the achieving of a certain volume of production, the capturing of a market are not intrinsically valuable. They are more like steps in a larger process. We value those goals, because we think that they will have a certain role in facilitating, accentuating and permitting other processes or activities. To the constructor, the finished office building may appear like something of intrinsic value, but its importance is what it enables other people to do. It permits people to work in a designed environment. Suppose the finished office building will house a construction company. In this case, the importance of the finished building is that permits more construction, as an activity. The physical building is instrumentally valuable, even if during the construction, it was the goal. In this specific case, it is a valuable as a means to further construction. Once again, we find that our normal supposition is back to front. We uncritically assumed that the process of construction is a means to having a finished building and, with a little reflection, we discover that the finished edifice is valuable because it permits more construction.

In summary, goals or end-states are not intrinsically valuable, even though they direct and explain action. Although having aims or goals is an important and unavoidable aspect of life, it is a mistake to confuse those goals with non-instrumental value because this would imply that activities are mere instrumentally valuable. It is the goals of our activities that are instrumentally valuable; they are valuable to achieve because they lead to further worthwhile activities.

Divine Goals

We have seen that conflating the means/ends distinction with the instrumental/non-instrumental value distinction entails the claim that all of our goal-directed actions are merely instrumentally valuable to some goal. This is equivalent to asserting that the only thing of non-instrumental value must be a goal. But this latter assertion denies the non-instrumental value of the activities that constitute our lives. Such a denial is similar to treating ourselves as disposable means.

Our own goals should not make us treat ourselves as objects. This implies that we cannot think of the goals as the bearer of non-instrumental value in our lives. The same would apply to the goals of a Divinity. We cannot think of the goals of God as the source of non-instrumental value in our lives. We are not merely instruments, either

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for our own goals or for those of God. This is why it is a mistake to identify the meaning of life with a goal.

As we have seen, this does not imply that our own goals are not and should not be important in our lives. Consequently, it does not entail that Divine plans might not be important for us too. However, it means that they are not the meaning of life. In other words, even if there is a God who has a purpose or an objective for us, then this itself is not the meaning of life.

We can see this by imaging that the purpose that God allegedly created us for has already been fulfilled. For example, suppose that the Absolute has already realized itself, or that all souls already have realized their spiritual destiny. In which case, if the meaning of our lives were this purpose, then our lives would no longer have any meaning. We would be like used handkerchiefs, or last month's newspaper, or last year's calendar.

Suppose God does exist and that He has a plan for us. Would this guarantee that life has a meaning? No. First, one can argue that this would depend on what the plan is. For example, suppose that there is a group of trainee, renegade angels who need to eat semi-mature souls at least three times a day in much the same manner that we eat fast food. Our destiny is that after we die, our souls will become the food of these marginal angels. Would that make our lives meaningful? As the story stands the answer would have to be 'No' (Murphy, 1982, p.14).

Of course, we could embellish the story so that the answer might seem to be 'Yes.' For example, we could imagine that being eaten by one of these angels is an experience of absolute bliss that appears to last for eternity. Furthermore, we can imagine that, after their period of training, when they reach maturity, the angels will be glorious workers in the name of good and that their work will transform the universe much for the better. According to this new version of the story, we play a vital, but small part in God's unimaginably beautiful overall plan. That would *seem* to be meaningful.

However, once again we are in danger of confusing the purpose with the process. The meaning of life would not be the goal, but rather the process. The very phrase 'a goal worth struggling for' suggests that the struggle or fight (or in other words, the process) is the meaning. Consequently, the fact that, when we feel that life is meaningless, we complain that it is pointless should not count as evidence against my claim that the meaning of life cannot consist in a purpose. It does not so count because the complaint amounts to the claim that a person's life does not contain enough goal-directed processes of the right kind. This does not imply that the meaning is the purpose. The main point of goals is to enrich processes, but not all goals do that. A life that feels pointless may well be one that lacks such goals. Goals enter into

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the equation, but in a radically different way from how instrumental rationality and standard theology conceives.

The feeling of pointlessness does not necessarily have to be linked to goals. Imagine a person who feels as if life is hollow and pointless, who then later falls deeply in love. During the ecstasy of love, he or she might exclaim, 'This is what gives life meaning.' This indicates that when we refer to the meaning of life in this sense, we are referring to a part or aspect of life that is worthwhile, the kind of experience or activity that make life worth living. What makes life worth living is some part of a life, a non-instrumentally valuable life process, rather than some end or goal.

Summary

The main argument of this chapter can be summarized as follows:

1. Something that has only instrumental value is no more than a cost
2. If meaning were instrumental value then things with meaning would be no more than costs
3. Things which are no more than costs should be dispensed with, when possible, with for the sake of efficiency
4. Things that have meaning as such should not be dispensed with, when possible, for the sake of efficiency.
5. Therefore, meaning is not instrumental value.

Hepburn argues that the problem of understanding the meaning of life in terms of fulfilling God's purpose is that it morally degrades us into a mere tool or instrument, which is incompatible with our moral status as autonomous beings (Klemke, ed. p.211). This point is derived from the moral philosophy of Kant, who claimed that the essence of morality consists in making one's will accord with the supreme moral principle, which he called the Categorical Imperative. In one of its forms, the Categorical Imperative enjoins us never to treat a person merely as a means, but always as an end. In other words, morally we should not use people for the sake of some end, even for the promotion of greater overall happiness. Hepburn uses this Kantian point to argue against the idea that the meaning of life is to serve God's purpose:

1. If the meaning of life were to serve God's goals, then we would be merely instruments or tools.
2. We are not merely instruments.
3. Therefore, the meaning of life is not to serve God's goals.

The claim I have been urging in this chapter is slightly different from Kant's and Hepburn's. My point is that we should not conceive of non-instrumental value as an aim or goal. It is a mistake to confuse the means/ends distinction with the instrumentally/non-instrumentally valuable distinction. This point does not depend on how we understand morality. Instrumentalizing activities, regarding them as mere means to goals, is a form of depreciating one's life and ultimately oneself, because mere means are only costs that should be minimized. Treating an action as a cost is effectively the same as wishing it away. It is a way of denying the non-instrumental value of the activities that comprise living.

Consequently, even if life in general did have a cosmic goal, then that would not be its meaning. To be more exact, the fulfillment of that goal would not be the meaning of life, even though the process of fulfilling of the goal might be. The goal itself cannot be the meaning. It might be a potential cause or source of meaning, but affirming that X causes meaning is not all the same as asserting that it constitutes meaning. The cause of happiness is not what happiness consists in.

Sisyphus

Albert Camus, the French Existentialist, describes the myth of Sisyphus as follows. The gods have condemned Sisyphus to roll a rock ceaselessly to the top of a mountain. Once the rock almost reaches the top, it rolls down again, and Sisyphus must repeat his labors. Sisyphus was condemned to a life of futile labor (Klemke, p.77). Sisyphus' existence is absurd and we may be tempted to conclude that the futility of Sisyphus' life is a good analogy for the apparent pointlessness of ours.

Contemporary philosopher Richard Taylor discusses this analogy and suggests that the apparent meaninglessness of Sisyphus' existence might be alleviated if we imagined that the gods had planted in Sisyphus a desire to do exactly what he is doing (Klemke, p.143). From his own point of view, Sisyphus now does exactly what he wants to do and, says Taylor, his life feels meaningful. However, as Taylor himself points out, Sisyphus' life is really as pointless as it was before. We might conclude that the gods have tricked Sisyphus mercifully into thinking that his life is meaningful, when really it is not.

As an alternative diagnosis, we might argue that the meaning of life should not be thought of as its point or purpose at all. In the original example, part of what makes Sisyphus's fate appear cruel and

pathetic is that we assume that the point of his existence is to reach the top. Furthermore, we assume that this pointlessness robs his life of meaning. What casts the portrait of Sisyphus in a depressing light is that we project a goal-directed desire onto his life, a goal that he never attains, and assume that this goal defines the meaning of his existence. When we give up these assumptions, we are no longer forced to see his life as meaningless.

However, please don't confuse this point with two others. First, we can imagine that Sisyphus takes delight in stone rolling, and given this, we can paint an entirely different picture in which he thanks the gods that the stone never reaches the top and repeats his actions for evermore with loving care. This destroys the suggestion of the original example that his life is one of grinding boredom. But this should not be confused with my point, which was that Camus' example trades on the false claim that the meaning of life consists in achieving goals, and that a pointless life is therefore meaningless. This is quite different from the suggestion that Sisyphus' existence is boring and limited.

Second, we might alter Camus' example, as Taylor does, by supposing that Sisyphus wants to roll the stone up the hill. In the Camus' original story, we assumed that Sisyphus does not want to roll the stone. However, dropping this presumption is not at all the same as discarding the assumption that the meaning of life consists in achieving goals, and that a pointless life is therefore meaningless.

In summary, Sisyphus' life appears meaningless because we assume that the meaning of his life is a goal; once we give up that assumption, we are no longer forced to see Sisyphus' life as meaningless. This is quite different from pointing out that his life is boring or that he does not want to do what he is condemned to doing.

Camus himself seems to think that Sisyphus' mode of existence is meaninglessness just because it is pointless. He takes it to be a good analogy for our everyday life situation. Yet he thinks that Sisyphus will attain 'the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks' (Klemke p.80).

Part of the reason why we sense that Sisyphus' life must be meaningless is that the gods condemned him to his fate as a form of punishment. In other words, his life is not natural to him. This point would also explain why Taylor's answer to Sisyphus' predicament is not entirely satisfactory. Taylor imagines that the gods induce in Sisyphus the desire to roll stones. Given that Sisyphus' desire is implanted in him by his tormentors, it is difficult to believe that he can be entirely satisfied with his fate, despite Taylor's description to the contrary. Taylor claims that once we imagine Sisyphus with this new desire, his situation is improved and we can regard him as happy.

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However, an implanted desire might strike Sisyphus more like an addiction or a compulsion that he would prefer not to have.

The British philosopher Hanfling compares the myth of Sisyphus to the migration of birds:

Suppose one of the migratory birds... were to ask itself 'What is it all for?' The preparations for the start; the desperate journey over vast distances with no food; the feverish activity for those who survive... So that another generation is produced which will do these things over again? Then why not stay in Africa and take things easy? (Hanfling, p.24)

This last question shows how instrumental rationality can and should be used. When we have a specific aim to achieve then instrumental rationality recommends that we do so efficiently. Something pointless in this sense is simply a waste of resources. But the second to last question ('So that another generation is produced which will do these things over again?') shows how treating things within a means/ends framework, how confusing ends and non-instrumental value, leads us to lose grip on the value of life. 'What is it all for?' is simply the wrong question.

Conclusion

A meaningful activity is not one that has merely instrumental value. A meaningful life is also not one that has merely instrumental value to some goal, even if the goal is divine. This suggests two important conclusions. First, meaningful activities are those that have a certain kind of non-instrumental value, and a meaningful life is one that consists of such activities. Second, derived from this, the meaning of a life must be in the living of it, or rather in the way it is lived. These are important conclusions, because they apply even if God has a purpose in mind for us and even if there is an everlasting afterlife. Even if there is a goal worth struggling for, the meaning is in the struggle. As Jung wrote:

The serious problems in life... are never fully solved. If ever they should appear to be so, it is a sure sign that something has been lost. The meaning and purpose of a problem seems not to lie in its solution but in our working at it incessantly (*The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, Pantheon, 1960, p. 393).

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Reading

Albert Camus' book *The Myth of Sisyphus* contains several essays of interest. Richard Taylor's article can be found in Klemke, 1981 and in Sanders and Cheney, 1980. There is a good discussion of some of these issues in Hanfling, *The Quest for Meaning*, 1987.

5

Spiritual Development

The first four chapters of this book have argued strongly against many common and traditional religious views regarding the significance of life. Many people assume that if the religious view of life has failed, this is because it has become replaced by the scientific view. However this blanket opposition of religion and science is far too simplistic. For example, if we take the scientific view to include the claim that life is meaningless because the world consists of no more than random atoms, then the scientific view may well be false too because it contradicts important facets of our everyday experience, as we shall see in Chapter 8. Thus, a rejection of aspects of traditional religious views by no means implies a wholehearted acceptance of so-called scientific views regarding the meaning of life. Furthermore, to negate some, albeit important, strands of religious tradition does not imply a wholesale repudiation of the spiritual dimension of life.

Buddhism

Many systems of thought suggest that the meaning of life consists in spiritual self-transformation. For example, in Buddhism, the purpose or aim of life is the release from the suffering that is an inherent part of the cycle of life and death, called Samsara. Gautama, sometimes called the Buddha, lived in India from 536 - 483 BC. After his death, Buddha's followers produced an authorized version of his teaching, which was transmitted orally for 400 years until a written

version, called the *Pali Canon*, was produced in Sri Lanka in the 1st century. The *Pali Canon* consists of three parts:

- 1) the Vinaya Pitaka, which outlines the rules of conduct for monks and nuns;
- 2) the Sutra Pitaka, which is a collection of sermons or discourses given by the Buddha; and
- 3) the Abhidharma, which is an attempt to present the Buddha's teaching as a systematic philosophy.

A central element of the Buddha's teaching is called the Three Signs of Being. First, there is the doctrine of impermanence or anicca; all compounded things are impermanent and must change. Second, there is suffering or dukkha; all living things suffer. Suffering is caused by its opposite, pleasure, and both are the result of desire in an ever-changing world. Third, there is the doctrine of anatta or no-self, which implies that the idea of a permanent, distinct self is an illusion. Consequently, there is no immortal soul. This teaching has important implications. In Buddha's day, spiritual development was seen as a liberation of the true self, the atman, which in Brahmanism was identified with Brahman, the Ultimate Reality and, in Jainism, with the universal life principle, the jiva. Buddhism repudiates these traditions because to attribute ever-changing thoughts, desires and feelings to an I is to own them and, thereby, perpetuates the attachment of desire. In contrast, what we call the self is 'simply a convenient way of referring to a particular collection of mental and physical states' (Harvey, 1990, p. 51).

All life goes through a process of birth, growth, decay, death, and finally, rebirth according to the law of karma, which is like a metaphysical version of the claim that, for every action, there is an equal reaction. For every pleasure, there will be suffering. What a person reaps, he or she has sown: sow a thought and reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit and reap a destiny (Humphreys, 1962, p.102). The *Dhammapada* says:

If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, pain pursues him, even as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart (Chapter 1, verse 1).

In other words, according to the law of karma, one's situation in life is the consequence of one's own previous actions. This doctrine of self-responsibility extends from one lifetime to another, through what we might call reincarnation. However, the term 'reincarnation' suggests

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the existence of a soul that is reincarnated, and so a more appropriate word might be 'rebirth.' Through many lifetimes of right living, a person may hope to attain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth and from suffering.

This release consists in attaining Nirvana (in Sanskrit) or Nibbâna (in Pali). Pleasure inevitably brings its opposite, suffering, and both are caused by desire; consequently, release consists in freedom from all desire and attachment. According to Buddhist thought, the goal of life is to reach Nirvana, a state of realizing the unity of everything, in which there are no distinctions. This state of enlightenment will consist in the realization that one's own separate existence as a self is an illusion. Consequently, within this state, desire attachments are impossible and, thereby, one is liberated from suffering.

However, Buddha discouraged idle speculation about the unconditioned state of Nirvana, and in his sermons concentrated on the more practice-oriented theory of the Four Noble Truths, which are:

1. We are all subject to suffering (or dukkha);
2. Suffering is caused by pleasure (sukkha) and desire;
3. The cessation of suffering is achieved by the ending of desire;
4. The ending of desire is achieved through the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path is the road to enlightenment, which consists in a middle-way between self-indulgence and asceticism. It consists in eight qualities or developmental stages on the way to enlightenment, and these are divided in three kinds, called the Three Pillars. The first is the Pillar of Wisdom (panna) and it consists of:

1. Right understanding (Samma Ditti) which includes understanding the Three Signs of Being, the law of Karma, and the Four Noble Truths.
2. Right mindedness (Samma Sankappa) which consists in loving all living things and having compassion towards one's fellow humans.

The second pillar is that of morality (sila) and it consists of:

3. Right speech (Samma Vacha), which enjoins us to avoid gossip and harmful words and to speak truthfully for the betterment of the world.

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4. Right bodily conduct or action (Samma Karmanta), which requires not harming other beings, not indulging in sensual pleasures, and not stealing.

5. Right livelihood (Samma Ajiva), which requires us to earn a living in a way that does not hurt or exploit others, such as trade in weapons and poisons, and that does not involve deceit.

The third pillar is that of meditation or samadhi, and it consists of:

6. Right effort (Samma Vayama) which consists in avoiding states of mind that involve hatred, attachment and delusion and in cultivating their opposites.

7. Right attentiveness (Samma Sati) which involves having a sharp awareness of what happens to one's consciousness in meditation.

8. Right concentration (Samma Samadhi) which requires developing the ability to focus one's attention on one thing without wavering and with calm.

Sometimes the Three Pillars are given in the following order: morality (sila), meditation (samadhi) and wisdom (panna).

This very brief explanation of Buddhism may create the impression that Buddhist thought is all of a piece. However, in reality, there are many different kinds of Buddhism, and its practice in southern Asia (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, and Kampuchea) and northern Asia (Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan) takes many different forms. Sometime after the death of Gautama, Buddhism split into two general groups: the Hinayana school (the Small Vehicle), which includes orthodox Theravada Buddhism, and the Mahayana school (the Great Vehicle). Exactly when and how this division happened is a matter of scholastic dispute. In very general terms, Mahayana Buddhism places more emphasis on the ideal of the bodhisattva, the enlightened person who seeks salvation for the sake of others rather than for him or herself. Some versions of Mahayana Buddhism claim that the universe as a whole is infused with the Dharmakaya, the cosmic and compassionate Buddha-nature and that, as a consequence, one should aim to cultivate a compassion for all beings and work for their release from suffering.

Mahayana Buddhism itself consists of a very wide range of teachings and practices. I will very briefly mention some of the important variations. In some forms of Mahayana Buddhism, Nirvana and Samsara (the cycle of rebirth) are identified. This is because, in the

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contemplative experience that reveals the unity of everything, there can be no subject-object distinction. There is no subject or self that experiences other things. Enlightenment requires transcending such divisions. In other words, the identity of Nirvana and Samsara is implied by the unity of everything, and this requires that there be no dualistic distinctions, which are merely mental abstractions. This eliminates the distinction between Nirvana and Samsara.

Although this last claim seems to be a logical consequence of the essential unity of everything, it is deeply paradoxical. If there is no distinction between Nirvana and Samsara, then Buddhism seems to have no aim. Furthermore, it seems to be a consequence of the claim that there is no self, that there is no self to attain Nirvana. Partly to overcome these paradoxes, some Mahayana schools distinguish between, on the one hand, the relative perspective and its relative truths (*samvriti satya*) and, on the other hand, the transcendental perspective and its absolute truth (*paramartha satya*). It is only from the transcendental perspective that there are no dualistic distinctions, including that of Nirvana and Samsara, thereby apparently resolving the paradox. However, of course, the contrast between the relative and absolute perspectives is itself a dualistic distinction and, thus, the paradox remains.

Partly in reply to these theoretical conundrums, the influential Indian sage Nagarjuna of the second century AD argued for the relinquishing of all opinions and a philosophy that advances no conclusions. All teachings are merely an instrument to help people achieve enlightenment or insight into the inexpressible ultimate truth. In his work, *Mulamadhyamaka-karika*, Nagarjuna seeks to show that every logically possible view on certain philosophical topics, such as causation, motion and time, is self-contradictory. Yet, his whole approach itself may be paradoxical, as the conclusion of his work, indicates:

I reverently bow to the Buddha who, out of compassion, has taught the true doctrine in order to relinquish all views
(Snelling, p.60).

As the above quote shows, Nagarjuna's claim that a Buddhist should relinquish all views is itself a view. He calls it 'the true doctrine.'

Let me finish this short survey of Buddhism by very briefly mentioning Zen Buddhism, or Ch'an as it was originally called when it arose in 6th century China, as another reaction to the theoretical nature of much of the Buddhism of the time. Zen spread to Japan in the twelve

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century. It is based on a practice of sitting meditation, called zazen, which consists in 'thinking not-thinking' or rather just not thinking, or sitting quietly doing nothing and letting those thoughts which occur just happen. Through the process of meditation, finally, one transcends all thought. Rinzai Zen requires the practice of answering, without prior conceptualization, certain formalized riddles, called koans, with the aim of breaking down the mental barriers to enlightenment. A well-known koan is 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?'

Back to Meaning

In Buddhism, there is no God. The universe has always existed and so there was no creation. Furthermore, if there were a God, then He would be responsible for the suffering of the world. Nevertheless, Nirvana is a transcendental, perhaps indescribable, state and, in this way, in most forms of Buddhism, the meaning of life lies beyond the universe as we know it. Furthermore, it consists of a purpose, a goal to be attained. The one notable exception may be the meditation of Japanese Soto Zen, which is supposed to be an end in itself.

We find views about the meaning of human life that are similar to Buddhism in other religions and mystical practices, such as the Christian ideal of union with God and the Hindu idea of moksha or liberation. Although we should not automatically assume that such terms refer to the same process, there are some important similarities between these different ideas.

One generic problem with such views is that if we affirm that the meaning of life is some goal, then we imply that the value of life is as a means that goal. Therefore, if a religious view or a system of thought identifies the meaning of life with a goal, it ends up denying the intrinsic value of living. In this sense, perfection is the enemy of the good. Perfection as an end turns the worth or goodness of life's processes into mere instrumental value. It is for this reason that we find what we might broadly call 'life denying' strands within many branches of the major religions, including Buddhism. For instance:

Human life is of supreme value to the Buddhist as the only condition from which the highest good can be reached
(Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, p176 quoted in F.Ross, 1952, p.85).

This passage sends a mixed message, because if life is only valuable as a condition or means to enlightenment or the highest good,

then it is not of 'supreme value.' Compare this passage with the slightly more straightforward quote from St. Augustine:

You seek happiness in the land of death, and it is not there. For how shall there be happiness of life, where there is no life? (*Confessions*, IX)

By the phrase 'the land of death,' St. Augustine means ordinary mortal life.

In the previous chapter, we saw that the significance of life is immanent and is not some purpose beyond life itself. Therefore, we should not feel that *something else* gives life meaning, even some transcendental purpose (Solomon, p.112). This has some important consequences. The lack of meaning must be explained immanently too. The French existentialist Camus thought that the absurdity of life was a metaphysical truth about the universe but, in opposition to Camus, an absurd life is not one lived in a pointless, godless universe, but perhaps rather one lived in a pointless, 'godless' way. In other words, meaninglessness is a mode of life rather than a transcendental truth about the universe. Most of the following chapters of this book will be concerned with how to conceive the meaning of life as something immanent and more personal.

Starting Again

The religious aspect of life needs to be reconceptualized to avoid the error of turning life into only a means to Heaven, Nirvana, or union with God. I will briefly discuss two elements of such a reconceptualization without either endorsing or rejecting them.

First, the claim that most people have a good reason to practice self-transformation, if they so wish, does not imply that the external point or purpose of our lives is to reach perfection. In other words, the idea of religious or spiritual practice does not have to go hand in hand with the claim that the meaning of life is a goal, such as perfection, heaven, or nirvana. Betterment does not require the best as a goal. It only requires the idea of improvement. If the meaning of life, in one sense of the term, consists of living in accord with values that are inherent in our natural interests (cf. Chapter 6), then the idea of self-improvement has a relatively clear immanent sense. Furthermore, the conception of meaning that we shall develop requires the idea of training our consciousness to pay attention to value and this constitutes another possible form of self-improvement (cf. Chapter 9).

Second, although we have criticized the idea that God gives life meaning by assigning a purpose to us collectively or to each one of us individually, this does not mean that God is irrelevant to the meaning of life. It does not exclude the idea that part of the meaning of life consists in the contemplation or worship of the divine. For example, Ninian Smart writes:

The God we see is awe-inspiring; and the proper response to him or her is worship (Runzo & Martin, p.32).

Many people hanker after the transcendental and feel that there is more to life than ordinary everyday experience. In most religious traditions, God is conceived as something divine and transcendental. However, this conception of the divine as transcendental is problematic. For example, can we even make sense of the idea of something beyond or transcending the world as we normally experience it? Could something transcendental be experienced? Fortunately, it is not our job to answer these questions here.

Traditionally, the relation between the divine and the human is that the divine confers meaning on our finite and otherwise petty lives. The idea behind the quote from Ninian Smart is different: namely that the divine has qualities that are meaningful because of our possible response to them. In other words, rather than starting from the divine and understanding the meaning of our lives in terms of that, we should start from meaningful activities, such as contemplation and worship, that constitute an appropriate response to the divine, and from this, try to make sense of the divine.

Reading

Runzo, J. and Martin, Nancy, *The Meaning of Life in the World's Religions* is an interesting collection of articles. More specifically on Buddhism, there is Christmas Humphreys' book, *Buddhism*, and Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 1990. A useful compilation of original Buddhist texts is *The Gospel of Buddha*, edited by Paul Carus. A classic introduction to specifically Zen Buddhism is D.T. Suzuki's *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Rider, 1969.

6

Happiness

Many people suppose that if the meaning of life cannot be identified with some divine plan, then if life has meaning at all, the only alternative is happiness. However, is the meaning of life to be happy?

Certainly the idea that it accords with some of the conclusions of the previous chapters. It apparently agrees with the claim that the meaning of an activity is some, as yet unspecified, type of non-instrumental value that the activity has. It also accords well with the idea that the meaning of life consists in the way it is lived, or in the living of it, rather than in the fulfilment of some goal that in theory could be achieved without specific and dispensable means.

Despite all this, the third mistake that I would like to identify is that of thinking that the meaning of life consists in happiness, or at least in pleasure or satisfying one's desires, which are the two ways that we normally understand happiness. My argument for this conclusion is that the concept of happiness so understood does not capture the idea of living in a meaningful way. I shall this by first showing that the concepts of pleasure and desire are inadequate to explain the idea of the good life or a better quality of life. Afterwards, I shall link this idea to that of the meaningfulness of life.

Pleasure and Desire

The pleasure theory affirms that a better quality of life consists in having more rather than less pleasurable mental states. According to the pleasure theory, a better life is a happier life, where happiness is

constituted by more pleasure and less suffering. The early utilitarians, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) were the first to explicitly articulate this theory.

Pleasure Theories

To make the issues involved in the pleasure theory vivid, Nozick asks us to imagine an experience machine designed to give you the most pleasurable and enjoyable experiences you can imagine (Nozick, 1974). While you are plugged into the machine, you will not be aware of being so. For example, if you are given the experience of scuba diving, then you will believe that you are really underwater and will have no inkling of the fact that you are actually hallucinating. The machine is programmed to give you the illusion of a supremely pleasurable life in all its variety and spice. For instance, if a little suffering is necessary to heighten the enjoyment, then it will give you that too. The snag is that once you are connected to the machine, you cannot get off.

You might ask: 'Should I plug into the machine?' However, the more relevant question is: 'Do I lose anything of intrinsic value by plugging into the machine?' If you do lose something of intrinsic worth, then well-being does not consist only in feeling pleasure. It demonstrates that pleasurable mental-states are not the only things of non-instrumental value. The pleasure theory amounts to the claim that a person's life consists of mental states alone, and if it is right, then you lose nothing by going into the machine.

Well, would one lose anything of non-instrumental value if one plugged into the machine? Yes, one would. For example, one would never meet one's friends again, nor see one's family; one would never walk in the park again, swim in the sea, or write a letter. These activities are non-instrumentally valuable. Of course, one would experience the illusion of doing these things, but in fact spend the rest of one's life sitting in the machine having hallucinations. This constitutes a loss.

Suppose we agree that one would lose things of intrinsic value by hooking into the machine. This does not automatically mean that you should not plug in, only that doing so would involve a loss. If your life is very miserable, you might think the loss is worth it. This, however, is not the issue; the point is that, if there is any loss, the mental state or pleasure account is mistaken. We may conclude that there is more to life than merely mental states, more than how pleasurable life feels from the inside. In other words, the pleasure theory is false.

It is mistaken because it treats the activities and actions that constitute life as mere dispensable means to pleasurable states of consciousness. For example, the theory implies friends and family are merely a source of personal pleasure. It implies that watching a sunset is not valuable for itself, but only as an instrument for obtaining enjoyment. The experience machine shows us that the mental-state theory requires that all of life's outer activities and happenings are merely means to pleasure.

The problem with the mental-state theory is that it turns the person into the pleasure machine. It makes living purely instrumentally valuable as a means to more pleasure and, therefore, its failure is, in part, the same as the error we discussed in the previous chapter. The machine promises to provide the pleasure without the trouble of actually living. And that is the problem: it turns living into an inconvenience, a cost, a dispensable means. That life's activities are not valuable merely as a means to pleasure is shown by the fact that we do lose something of non-instrumental value by plugging into the machine.

Feelings of happiness and joy are an integral part of living well. Obviously, such feelings contribute to life's going well, but they do not constitute it. A football player feels saddened when his or her leg is damaged, because the loss itself is bad. His or her sadness is a result of the adverse nature of the loss; it does not constitute it. Likewise, it is a commonly held false belief that being happy is the same as feeling happy. Feelings of happiness and joy are like a barometer or symptom of how one's life is faring. As well as contributing to it and being a part of it, they also measure it. If I feel utterly depressed, this may be a sign that something is wrong with the way I live. Similarly, if I feel relaxed and happy, then this may be a sign that my life is going well. Consequently, whether life is going well or badly does not simply consist in having those feelings or symptoms. In a similar way, being sick does not consist in feeling pain. You do not cure an illness just by alleviating the pain. Aspirins do not cure.

The pleasure-theory is mistaken because an improved quality of life does not merely consist in having more pleasure. It matters what the processes of our lives are, what actually happens to us and what we do. We cannot separate mental states from the external aspects of a life, as the pleasure theory requires. Being aware and conscious is already an integral part of doing things. Enjoyment is not a simple mental state over and above the activities we enjoy. Separating mental states from the activities they are a part of decontextualizes and trivializes the activities in two ways.

First, it implies that the activity is no more than a means to the mental by-product. However, what is important in these activities is not a mental by-product, but rather the way in which we perform those activities. Pleasure is not a separate mental state, but consists of liking and enjoying what one does.

Second, pleasure is the lowest common denominator among positive mental states. It is an abstraction from the different ways we feel when we engage in activities. How we feel is important, but to regard joy, delight, contentment, and rapture as just pleasure is to disregard the differences between them.

Desire Theory

Many people think that an improved quality of life consists in obtaining what one wants or desires. I shall argue that this is a mistake, because desire satisfaction as such does not constitute the relevant values. The good life cannot be defined in terms of obtaining what one wants.

As an alternative to the pleasure theory of Bentham and Mill, recent utilitarian philosophers have tried to develop a preference or desire theory of well-being (J.Griffin, 1986, R. Frey, 1980; J. Rawls, 1973, pp.416-24). The preference theorist claims that well-being consists in the satisfaction of certain kinds of preferences, and much of the work of these theories consists in supplying the conditions that the relevant kinds of preferences must accord with in order to count towards well-being. Sometimes, these preferences are thought of as hypothetical, that is as preferences one would have under certain ideal conditions, rather than as the preferences one actually does have. Note that the criticisms I shall make of the desire theory also apply to these preference theories.

In Plato's dialogue the *Euthyphro*, one of the slaves of Euthyphro's father accidentally dies. The young Euthyphro feels obligated to prosecute his father for murder because he regards this action as pious. Socrates challenges the young man by asking whether an action is pious because the gods command it, or whether the god's command it because it is pious. This suggests a similar question: 'Are things good because we want them or, do we want them because they are good?' The nature of human well-being hangs on this Socratic question. To understand the good, and the idea of meaningful activities, we have to comprehend what makes activities non-instrumentally valuable. Thus, we must ask: 'Which way does the explanation run - from desire to value or from value to desire?'

Socrates was clear: things that are good are not so just because we want them. Something that has no worth apart from one's desire for it has a comparatively trivial value. The proposition 'It is good only because I want it' implies that it does not matter what I desire, because it implies that what matters is the obtaining of what I want, whatever that happens to be. If there is no value in what one desires aside from one's wanting it, one may as well have wanted something else. Consequently, the notion of getting what one wants does not help us understand what constitutes the non-instrumental value of activities.

Of course, one can want something that is valuable independently of one's desiring it. In such a case, what one desires is valuable; however, it is not the desire that makes it so. In other words, desired things can be important, but not simply because they are desired. Furthermore, some things that we want are valuable and others are not. There are valuable things that we do not want. So desire is neither necessary nor sufficient for non-instrumental value.

I would suggest that the relationship between desire and value is as follows: desire functions as a guide to what is valuable. This means that it does not define it. The evidence that it is a guide is that it is sometimes misleading, as for example, when we want things that are bad for us. For instance, I can be attracted to a job that on the whole would not suit me at all.

Thinkers opposed to what I am arguing, those who try to define value in terms of wanting, will argue in the following way: 'The desire itself was not misleading; the problem was that the desire was based on false beliefs. You had false beliefs about the job and that is why you wanted it. Thus, one needs to correct one's beliefs concerning the things that one wants. Given this kind of correction, value can be defined in terms of getting what one desires.'

This type of theory is called the informed-preference theory of well-being and, according to it, well-being should be defined in terms of the satisfaction of informed desires or preferences. The theory holds that Y's being a greater value than X for a person is constituted by his or her having an informed preference for Y rather than X. However, this revised account also fails. (For detailed criticisms of the revised theory, see Scanlon, 1975 and 1998, and Thomson, 1983).

First, the revised theory mistakenly assumes that desires can mislead only because they are based on false beliefs. It supposes that, knowing all the relevant information, I will automatically and necessarily prefer only what is non-instrumentally best for me. Obviously, it is better to have an informed guide than a misinformed one. However, even when informed, desire remains as a guide to, and does not define, value. Furthermore, the guide can mislead, even when it is well informed. Correcting false beliefs is not always sufficient. For

example, when I feel ugly and vile, my desires will be ugly and vile. When I am in a bad mood, my preferences, even when informed, may not be for the best for me.

In recognition of the dependence of desire on factors other than belief, the theorist may try to amend the definition to include those other factors. For instance, Frey suggests defining well-being in terms of rational desire-satisfaction. He defines rational desires as:

Those desires we would have if we were not at present angry or under stress or under the influence of drink or suffering from depression, and if we were rational, if we possessed knowledge of ourselves . . . and if we possessed sufficient detachment to assess such knowledge and information calmly and carefully. (R.Frey, 1980, pp. 134-5).

We may wonder whether even this list is complete; surely an indefinite number of things could prevent us from properly appreciating what we desire, and thus prevent us from desiring what is best. It seems hopeless to define non-instrumental value by trying to enumerate all the ways in which a person can desire something less than the best.

Second, let us return to the Socratic question: 'Which way does the explanation run: from informed-preference to intrinsic value, or from value to informed-preference?' When a person A changes his or her preferences, subsequent to acquiring new information, this change may be explained and justified in terms of the factual content of the information. It is the factual content of the information, rather than the change in preference, that constitutes the value. What makes the one course of action more preferable than the other for A are the facts about those options, and not A's preference once A is informed of those facts. The facts explain and justify A's informed preference. The change in preference merely indicates A's sensitivity to the different preferability of the options. Therefore, they are not constitutive of that preferability, but merely reflect it.

The desire theory of well-being suffers from a third general problem. Sometimes, what we need for an improved quality of life may be a transformation of desire, rather than getting what we want. For example, a person who is inhibited by many anxieties will have desires that reflect his fears. For such a person, a better life might involve being more free of such fearful desires. In other words, a higher quality of life sometimes requires a transformation of desire. Additionally, getting what one wants is too limited a notion to capture the value possibilities before us. Our desires are limited by what we are. It is the nature of value judgments that they should reach out beyond what

already exists and point to something better. Basing the concept of a improved quality of life on desire constricts this reaching out. It limits the possibilities to what is already conceived and wanted. In this way, desire gives too restricted a view of well-being. It reaches only as far as the horizon prescribed by our wants, taking those desires as a given (or in the case of the informed-preference account, taking the preferences as a given, once the person has been fully informed about their objects). For this reason, the quality of life cannot be defined in terms of what we want.

Desiring X is neither necessary nor sufficient for X to have the kind of value that constitutes meaningfulness. There can be activities that I don't want to engage in, or that I have never even considered that would be valuable for a person like me. There can be activities that I want to perform that I imagine would be valuable to engage in, but which in fact are not.

None of the above entails that desire may not be important in determining what counts as valuable. It implies that desiring to do X does not itself constitute that kind of value. The relation between our wants and what counts as valuable may be more oblique or less specific. In any case, most, if not all, of the desires that make up our daily lives are the result of beliefs about what would be good, and such beliefs are formed on the basis of past appreciation of value. Such desires presuppose the value they are supposed to explain. Furthermore, please note the rejection of the desire-theory of happiness as a way to understand well-being and meaning does not rule out the claim that desire satisfaction is a good.

Towards an Alternative Theory

In this chapter, I have argued that the two common conceptions of a good or increased quality of life are mistaken. As well as being mistaken, I believe that they are also damaging. First, claiming that activities are only a means to pleasure turns our actions into mere means. By reifying pleasure, turning it into a desired product separate from activities, we negate the non-instrumental value of the activities themselves, and thereby render impossible the appreciation of those activities. Second, the desire account tries to define the desirability of activities in terms of their being the objects of desire or of informed preferences. In so doing, it urges us to accept our desires at face value, as a given. Since the satisfaction of such desires is claimed to constitute well-being, to understand well-being we do not have to look beyond them and ask why we desire what we do. In this way, it urges an uncritical attitude to our wants and preferences. In opposition to this, I

suggested that desires act as a guide to the relevant kind of non-instrumental value and that, as a guide, they can mislead us. This suggestion indicates the need for a critical attitude towards one's desires. Such an attitude does not imply mistrust, but it does necessitate trying to identify the interests that motivate our desires, as we shall see.

We have rejected two theories, but we have also learned something about what ought to replace them. How should we conceive of the good life? Now I shall briefly sketch the beginnings of an alternative theory (for more details, see Thomson, 1983). Activities and experiences are worthwhile because they have desirability-characteristics. When we explain what makes an activity worthwhile, we usually cite general desirability features of the activity. For example, the activity is exciting, soothing, engaging, and so on. Such characterizations show what makes the activity valuable.

What is the relation between these characteristics and our desires? There are two extreme positions. On the one hand, there is the desire theory that claims that desirability features are derivative on our wants. We have already rejected such desire-satisfaction theories. On the other hand, thinkers advocate that desirability characterizations do not depend at all on our wants, but rather explain them. We want things that we perceive to have such characterizations (see Platts, 1979 and 1980).

I would like to advocate a view that combines these two positions. It rejects the idea that desirability is entirely independent of desire on the grounds that what is desirable for one person might not be for another. (This is not the claim that what a person thinks is desirable for him might be different from what another thinks is desirable for her; it is the assertion that what actually is desirable for one person might not be for another). In other words, some of the psychological differences between people will amount to the fact that, for one person, X is desirable and for others not. On the other hand, the position I am advocating rejects the identification of the desirability of X for A with A desiring X. Part of the problem is that object-individuated desire is too specific. Although these characterizations depend on general features of our desires, they do not depend on specific conscious wants.

Well-being has an experiential and a motivational element, which must fit together. It would be a travesty to think of the experiential component as the obtaining of pleasure, and it is better conceptualized as appreciation of activities of non-instrumental value. The motivational component defines what types of activities have such value. In conceptualizing this element, we must go beyond the preference functions of economics, for otherwise we fall back into a desire theory. Instead of characterizing this element in terms of what a person wants or prefers, we need a framework that can explain why people want what they do.

Our motivational make-up cannot be entirely irrelevant to our well-being. The fact that we are broadly socially motivated creatures is surely relevant to what a good life and harm is for us, even if that cannot be spelled out directly and specifically in terms of what a person wants (or would want under certain conditions). Freud realized that even our deepest desires have a motivational source behind them, of which we are not usually aware (Freud, Vol. 14, p.111). Unfortunately, he tended to think of this as yet another desire, albeit unconscious. Freud's insight does not have to be couched in Freudian terms, in terms of repressed sexual desires. Freed from the particularities of the Freudian message, the important insight is that desires for very different things can have a similar motivational source. Wants are structured by this source.

This insight is important for us, and should be developed, because it allows us to recognize that our motivational nature as individuals, as members of a culture and of a species, is relevant in determining what counts as well-being and harm. It permits us to recognize this, without trapping ourselves in the idea that obtaining what one wants is all there is to value. It allows us to distinguish between the feeling 'I have to get what I want' and the idea that one's life has to fit one's nature as a person. It requires us to separate the specific thing that a desire is directed towards (the object of desire) and the general source or direction of the desire. This permits a mature attitude towards wanting than that which exclusively focuses on getting exactly what one desires.

Many people do things because they aspire for status. This aspiration generates many more specific wants, which demand tremendous effort. However, suppose that the desire for status or recognition is largely an expression of a need to belong or fit in. If this is true, then it is worrying. Trying to gain status is a muddled way to belong. Indeed, the search for status, which will make a person ambitious, may actually thwart the possibilities for belonging, for example, by making us work too hard and ignore our friends and family. In which case, what you actually want (status) is incongruent with the need or interest that motivates the want (belonging). The want is a warped expression of the interest or need. In this case, it is distorted to the extent that the satisfaction of the desire, and the effort that entails, frustrates the interest or need which actually motivates the want. Here the word 'interest' is being used in a special way, which needs a little explaining. Desires can be instrumental and non-instrumental; instrumental desires are for things wanted as means to something else. Things wanted non-instrumentally are desired for their own sake. The term 'interest' refers to the motivational source of non-instrumental desires.

The need to belong may express itself in many disparate ways. It may be manifest as a desire for status, or for fame, or for respectability. It may express itself as a desire to conform or to outshine others in competition. It might display itself as a desire to dress well, to own prestigious things, and to join exclusive clubs. This wide range of very different desires has a common unifying element. Without the notion of the motivating interest, which lies behind these multifarious desires, one could not understand how wants for such different things have something in common, nor how a desire for success might later be replaced by a desire to conform. Without some notion like this, one cannot see any patterns or structure in the varieties of human wanting.

For the sake of clarity, let us disentangle and put in order these different points.

1) The first is that even non-instrumental desires are motivated; they have a motivational source, which we may call an interest. What is wanted or the object of a desire is distinct from the motivating source of the desire (i.e. the interest). Behind our desires and preferences are tangles of such interests. Because such interests are not based on choices and beliefs, they form a feature of desire distinct from what is wanted.

2) The second point is that these interests define patterns or a structure to our desires. Interests form the framework of our desires. They permit us to see that desires for very disparate things may have common motivational sources. Although interests are different from desires, they are not some *entity* completely distinct or separate. They are facets of our wants.

One of the interesting points apparently in favor of the ultimately misguided attempt to explain value in terms of getting what one wants, is that it permits variations in what counts towards the well-being and harm of different people. It can explain the diversity within the unity. What is good for an adventurer may not be good for an artist, or for a priest. Interests do this too, but without involving the problematic aspects of the desire theory.

3) The third point is that what is important in desire satisfaction is not getting exactly what one wants, but it is rather that the interests behind the desire are satisfied. If I need more beauty in my life, then it is not so important that I obtain exactly the beautiful things I want, but rather that there is more beauty in my life.

4) The fourth point is that the objects of desire, the things we want, do not necessarily express well the interest behind the desire. As an analogy, I may need salt and this may express itself as a desire for sugar. I may have an interest in belonging, and this may express itself as a range of desire pertaining to status.

The truth in the desire model is that our motivational patterns can define what has non-instrumental value for us. In this sense, our desires are relevant in defining what constitutes an improvement in the quality of life. However, this improvement does not consist in the satisfaction of desire. Desires bid us to do, but what they bid us to do is not automatically good for us. The prompting of desires can be fickle voices, and when they are clear, they are often a stubborn and persistent nagging that leads us away from what is good. Yet, at the same time, desires have motivational sources that reveal our deeper interests, which do define, in part, what has non-instrumental value for us.

Conclusion

What makes certain activities good or valuable? What does their value consist in? Any explanation of their value must have at least three ingredients. First, it must cite some aspect of the individual's psychology in virtue of which the activities in question have value. What kinds of activities and experiences comprise the good life will vary from individual to individual. Any understanding of the good life must incorporate such variation. The mistake of the desire theory is to focus exclusively on object-individuated desires. Second, the explanation of the value must also cite the desirable features of the activities or experiences in question. Third, it must take into account the fact that the person must be able to appreciate the value of the activities that she or he is engaged in (cf. Chapter 9 below). These three elements need to be in the right kind of relationship for a life to be good.

How does this whole discussion relate to the meaning of life? As we saw in Chapter 1, asking 'What is the meaning of life?' can be, among other things, a request for an explanation or a specification of what aspects of life have non-instrumental value and, in this chapter, we have begun to do just that. In this process, we have learned that these worthwhile activities and experiences that in part constitute a meaningful life cannot be adequately explained in terms of pleasure and the satisfaction of desire, which constitute the traditional conception of happiness. Consequently, happiness as traditionally conceived is not the meaning of life.

Reading

There is an excellent discussion of these issues in J. Griffin, *Well-Being*, 1986 and in Scanlon's book, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 1998. Martha Nussbaum, and A. Sen have edited a useful collection, *The Quality of Life*, 1993. Also of interest is Nussbaum's own approach, which has much in common with Sen's, found in *Women and Human Development*, 2000. My own theory of well-being is outlined in Garrett Thomson, *Needs*, 1983.

The Invention of Meaning

A life has meaning if it has a certain kind of non-instrumental value and, consequently, it is important to understand the kind of value in question. This is the direction our study is taking us. One plausible claim is that for life to have meaning, it is necessary that the values in question must be in some sense real or objective. Consider the common view to the contrary that the meaning of life is invented. Many thinkers accept this claim; for example, Hepburn affirms:

Meaning is not now something to be found, as awaiting discovery, but is imparted to it (i.e. life) by the subject himself (Klemke p. 210)

Each person has to invent the meaning of his or her life, because, to put it loosely, values are purely subjective. It is important to see that this view implies that, in some sense, life has no meaning. If I must choose to make my life meaningful, then it is not so independently of, nor prior to, my choice. Likewise, the idea that one chooses what is valuable in life implies that life is not valuable before or independent of the choice. Understood in this way, the question ‘How can I *give* my life meaning?’ assumes that it is not meaningful. In this sense, it is fundamentally different from the question ‘How can I make my life more meaningful?’ which assumes that it is.

Along these lines, we should distinguish two uses of the sentence ‘We must *make* our lives meaningful.’ The first assumes that a life is

meaningful if and only if it has certain qualities and asserts that living in accordance with these qualities requires the appropriate actions from the person. For example, a meaningful life might include deep friendships or engaging creative activities and, therefore, a person must make the appropriate efforts and actions to lead a meaningful life. The second usage would be more akin to ‘We must *give* our lives meaning’ and it implies that an individual’s life can be made meaningful by his/her choosing it to be so. In other words, the person must decide for herself that her life has meaning. Meaning is invented.

For some existentialist thinkers, such as Camus (1913-1960) and Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), the last point is important. Our lives are absurd or meaningless and so we must choose our values. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre describes human existence as a ‘hole in Being,’ for reasons that will become clear in a moment. Because God does not exist, there are no objective values set for us and there is no purpose to our existence. Furthermore, humans lack an essence; human existence precedes its essence (Sartre, p.438). By this, Sartre does not mean that there are no universal truths about humans, such as the claim that we need to eat. Rather, he means that there are universally true statements about how humans should live. We are condemned to a radical freedom, which has no limit except that we cannot choose to be not free (Sartre, 1943, p.439). This means that we must choose our own values.

His analysis starts with the distinction between conscious beings, the ‘for-itself,’ and inert objects, which are the ‘in-itself’ (Sartre, 1943, p. xxxix). This distinction is based on the fact that consciousness is always of something other than itself. Consciousness also requires the ability to distinguish between itself and its object, which in turn requires the capacity to make negative judgments, or to conceive of what is not the case (Sartre, 1943, p. 5). In this sense, the essence of consciousness is nothingness. This power of negation is the basis of our freedom to imagine other possibilities and of our freedom to act (Sartre, p.24-5). Consequently, to be conscious entails being completely free.

Sartre calls the consciousness of one’s own freedom ‘anguish.’ It is a painful recognition that nothing determines one’s choices. For example, walking on a dangerous cliff-path, one feels anguish because one knows that there is nothing to prevent one from throwing oneself over the side (Sartre, p.29-32). Acting in ‘bad faith,’ we often try to pretend to ourselves that we are not free (Sartre, p.44). For example, a café waiter tries to identify himself with his role in order to pretend that he has no choice with regard to his own actions. In this way, bad faith consists in the desire to become a passive object, and any attempt to attribute an essential nature to oneself constitutes an evasion of one’s

freedom. However, Sartre claims that it is possible to avoid bad faith and be authentic, that is to make our own individual choices fully aware that nothing determines them for us (Sartre, 1943, p. 70). An individual must choose to defy the meaninglessness of life by deciding freely what to do and what to value. In what sense we could make such a decision is a point we shall return to later (see page 87 below).

Two Issues

We are examining the claim that for a life to have meaning, it is necessary that the relevant values must be in some sense real or objective, rather than just invented. The problem is that the terms 'real' and 'objective' are vague. We need a more exact statement of what is at stake. I think that there are two fundamental issues at hand. The first is whether the relevant kind of value judgments can be true or false. If the relevant value judgments are true or false, then this means that they are true or false independently of what people accept, think or want with regard to their truth and falsity. The second issue, which shall be the topic of the next chapter, is whether the values that constitute the meaningfulness of life are in some sense real. Can evaluations literally describe reality? Obviously, the two issues are closely related, but it is better to keep them separate in order not to presuppose a realist theory of truth.

This first issue must be distinguished from five others with which it may be confused easily. First, the point under discussion is not whether these value judgments are absolute. This term 'absolute' is also vague, but it functions in contrast with the term 'relative.' Value judgments indeed may be relative to many factors and still be true or false. For example, something beneficial or harmful to one person might not be to another. Sugar harms the diabetic. In this sense, 'harm' is not absolute. Nevertheless, the evaluative claim that sugar harms a particular person may be true or false.

Second, we are not investigating the claim that value judgments are absolutely true or false in the sense of being true or false independently of all human dispositions or social meanings. As with any other judgment, the meaning of what we say when we make an evaluative claim depends on social and cultural factors. Although this may exclude such judgments from being absolute in some sense, this does not prevent them from being true or false.

Third, the issue is not whether value judgments are subjective in the sense of reflecting our intentionality. The concept of intentionality should be explained as follows: a state is intentional when it is about something. For example, mental states, such as wanting, believing,

perceiving, thinking and feeling are intentional because they are about something. We want, think, feel etc *that P*. These mental states have propositional content, which is specified by the proposition 'P' after the 'that.' This is a very important feature of our mental lives that we shall return to later in the book (see pages 101 and p.112). Because of it, mental states are always directed towards something as something, or under some description. For example, we can perceive a person as a person, or as a friend, or as a physical thing occupying space. We perceive a person under one set of descriptions as opposed to others; similarly for other mental states. This means that our mental states are always directed to some aspect of something to the exclusion of others and, in this sense, they are partial. This is a hallmark of subjectivity. We might think that value judgments have similar features. When we value something, we always do so under a range of descriptions as opposed to others, and this intentionality is reflected in the value judgments we make. This is a very important point that we will return to later. For the moment, let it suffice to say that this feature of evaluations clearly does not preclude them from being true or false. Believing is intentional, but statements of belief can be true or false.

Fourth, the issue is not whether some values apply universally and, even less whether some values are universally accepted. Evaluations might be true or false judgments that apply to specific circumstances. The idea 'universally applicable' should not be confused with that of truth-value. Furthermore, if value judgments can be true or false, then their being so does not depend on their being accepted or believed. Universal acceptance is not a condition for truth.

Finally, even if they are true or false, they can be perspectival. Thus, the question of whether value judgments are perspectival is not the issue. Perspectival judgments, such as 'From this spot, the car is to the left of the tree,' can be true or false.

The Relevance

Why do these two central issues concerning the status or nature of value judgments matter to the meaningfulness of life? There are three points. First and foremost, if the meaning of life is purely a personal invention, then there can be no such thing as a mistaken view about the meaning of life, and no such thing as coming closer to understanding truths about it. Note that I did not say 'the truth' because there may be many true claims about meanings. Second, as we indicated earlier, the idea that the meaning of life is invented or created by each person implies that life really has no meaning. The term 'invent' carries this

suggestion: an invented story is a made-up fable, which is an untruth. In this way:

Non-cognitivism invites us to stand outside our own evaluative commitments and recognize that from this external viewpoint, nothing is intrinsically valuable because values are not a part of the real world, but are created and invented by us (McNaughton, 1988, p12 –13).

The idea that some things might be really and objectively valuable, as opposed to valuable by invention, seems to be part of the very idea of the meaning of life. We could imagine someone denying that life has a meaning on the grounds that all values are invented. Finally, the idea that some values are not invented seems to imply that they are important. This is a contentious point. If values are simply invented, then we might have equally as well invented an entirely different set of values and our commitment to one set of values seems arbitrary and without justification. On the other hand, if values are not invented, then they must be in some sense real and, consequently, there is some kind of justification for our commitment to one set of values as opposed to another. I mention these points not to endorse them, but rather to explain what seems to hinge on this discussion.

Non-Cognitivism

A person who claims that the meaning of life is in some sense invented would argue that evaluations are neither true nor false, or that evaluations are not strictly judgments at all (since the term ‘judgment’ applies only to sentences that are true or false). Instead, evaluations are literally only expressions of feeling, such as ‘Oh!’ Or they are imperatives, such as ‘Don’t harm yourself.’ In summary, according to this view, evaluations are not true or false judgments, but rather either expressions of feeling and attitude, or else prescriptions.

This theory is sometimes called non-cognitivism because it implies that there are no evaluative cognitive states. Verbs such as ‘believe,’ ‘discover,’ ‘perceive’ indicate what are called cognitive states, which can be true or false. One can believe truly or falsely. On the other hand, verbs such as ‘desire’ or ‘want’ indicate non-cognitive states. If a sentence, such as ‘friendship is valuable,’ can be true or false, then it is possible to *believe* that friendship is valuable. A cognitivist is so called because he or she would argue that such

evaluative beliefs or cognitive states are possible. The non-cognitivist would deny the possibility of such cognitive states.

The cognitivist claims that evaluations are expressed with sentences that are true or false assertions, such as ‘Friendship is valuable.’ According to this view, there are evaluative cognitive states: we can have beliefs about what is valuable; furthermore, those beliefs might be false and there might be things to discover. For this reason, cognitivism is usually held to imply moral or evaluative realism, the view that there are evaluative facts, which is the topic of the next chapter.

Here follows a briefly stated version of such a view, although not all cognitivists would agree with it. Sentences such as ‘P ought to do A’ state that there is a reason for person P to perform action A (J. Raz, 1978). This reason will be some fact about action A, or possibly about some relation between A and person P. This fact will usually be expressible with a desirability characterization, which is a predicate that describes what is desirable about A. This desirability characterization may be true of A by virtue of facts which can be described only with desirability predicates. As we saw in the previous chapter, perhaps what makes action A desirable in the relevant way will be some fit between the character or nature of action A and of P’s desires, without it being necessarily the case that P desires to do A.

To summarize the main differences between the two views:

- 1) First, there is a linguistic or semantic difference. Non-cognitivism denies, and cognitivism asserts, that evaluative sentences, such as ‘Her words were soothing,’ can be true or false. (Note that the cognitivist does not have to claim that all such sentences are true or false, because there might be some value sentences that are indeterminate or vague). In effect, this difference amounts to the claim that the non-cognitivist will assert that there is a radical distinction in kind between describing and evaluating. A description states how things are; an evaluation expresses an attitude concerning how things ought to be. In contrast, the cognitivist will argue that descriptions and evaluations are not radically different in kind because descriptions can be evaluative. Many words in our language seem to be a mixture of both descriptive and evaluative components. For example, the predicates ‘is courageous,’ and ‘is enjoyable’ appear to be both descriptive and evaluative. As we shall see later, the difference between the two positions comes to a head in relation to these kinds of words.

- 2) There is an epistemological difference. The non-cognitivist will deny and the cognitivist will assert that we can have beliefs, perceptions and other cognitive states concerning what is valuable. The non-

cognitivist will say that these apparent cognitive states are really non-cognitive attitudes.

3) There is a metaphysical difference. In some sense, the non-cognitivist will affirm and the cognitivist will deny that there is a fundamental ontological difference between facts and values. In brief, the non-cognitivist will assert and the cognitivist will deny that the furniture of the world consists of facts alone and not values. This is the subject of the next chapter.

In addition to these three fundamental points, there are two other also important differences, which may be considered as implications of the three central and position-defining points.

4) There is another epistemological difference. The cognitivist will affirm and the non-cognitivist will deny that there can be direct empirical evidence for an evaluation. The non-cognitivist will claim that what we take to be empirical evidence for a value judgment itself requires another value judgment. Deciding what will count as empirical evidence to support any value judgment will itself be a value judgment, because no set of purely descriptive statements by themselves can ever entail or serve as evidence for an evaluative judgment. This means that according to the non-cognitivist, there will be some basic value judgments that do not have empirical evidential support, and that whenever we try to give empirical evidence for a value judgment we will be presupposing another value judgment. At root, non-cognitivism implies that value judgments cannot be mistaken in the sense of being contrary to the empirical evidence; they cannot run against the grain of the world. In contrast, the cognitivist will claim that certain facts can directly count as evidence for an evaluation. Despite this, cognitivists debate what kinds of fact count as evidence for a determinate type of evaluative judgement. For example, remember the debate we examined in the previous chapter.

5) There is a difference regarding the psychology of motivation of actions and their relation to evaluation. The non-cognitivist will insist that non-cognitive states, such as attitudes and desires, are required to motivate a person to action and, consequently, since evaluations motivate action, that they must consist in the expression of attitudes. The cognitivist will deny this claim. He or she will claim that beliefs by themselves can motivate a person to action, or he or she will argue that evaluations need not motivate action. There will be more about this point later.

To summarize, we have seen that the difference between the cognitivist and non-cognitivist positions is important for the meaning of life. Which of the two views is the more correct one? To answer this, we shall look first at some arguments in favor of non-cognitivism that are not very strong. Having dispensed with these peripheral issues, we shall examine three more powerful arguments in favor of non-cognitivism.

Some Initial Confusions

There are several arguments for the claim that value judgments lack truth-value. I thought that it would be best to start by briefly considering some quite popular arguments for the position that are insufficient to prove their conclusion. This will clear the deck for a more in-depth discussion of the stronger arguments for non-cognitivism.

1) Each one of us must decide for ourselves

The idea is that if a person does not decide for him or herself, then this is a denial of that person's autonomy or freedom. Sartre's philosophy appeals fundamentally to this kind of consideration. However, this type of argument has two fatal flaws. First, it seems to assume the position that it is trying to defeat, namely that value judgments can be true or false. It seems to assume that value judgments such as 'Autonomy is good' or 'Autonomy should be preserved' are indeed true. Second, because it fails to specify what the individual decides, it does not justify its conclusion. Of course, people ought to decide for themselves what value judgments they believe; otherwise they would be subjugating their decision-making powers to someone else. However, deciding to believe something does not make the belief true. The position seems to confuse deciding to believe something with making a claim or belief true.

2) We should not impose our opinions on others

Similarly, it may seem that non-cognitivism is a view that accords with tolerance. The idea that no evaluations are judgments but are rather expressions of attitude means that no evaluations can be true and that none can be false. In this sense, no evaluation can be more correct than any other. No one can declare truth for his or her evaluations, and no one can pronounce that those of other people are false. This seems to be the epitome of tolerance.

Closer inspection shows that this line of thought is misleading. First, the non-cognitivist cannot affirm as true that tolerance is better

than intolerance and violence. Such an affirmation would contradict non-cognitivism. One cannot argue that, because tolerance is objectively good, non-cognitivism and subjectivism are correct! Second, notions such as tolerance are not ruled out by cognitivism. For example, according to cognitivism, people can recognize that their own evaluative views might be mistaken. Moreover, the cognitivist can uphold tolerance as something truly of value within limits. Furthermore, in relation to moral evaluations, the cognitivist can distinguish between the truth and falsity of a judgment and the action taken to enforce it. For example, he or she could separate the two questions: 'Under such and such circumstances, is abortion morally wrong?' and 'Under such and such circumstances, should abortion be made illegal?' The point is that the question of tolerance concerns the enforcement of morality or of evaluations more generally, rather than the cognitivism/non-cognitivism debate.

Stronger Arguments

There are four principal arguments for the non-cognitivist view. The first is the claim that there are no evaluative properties or facts. The argument is that, since there are no such facts, sentences that express evaluations cannot be either true or false because there are no facts to make them true or false. In other words, there is nothing in the world by virtue of which they could be true or false. This powerful argument connects the two issues that I want to separate and so we shall examine it in the next chapter.

Guiding choice

The non-cognitivist also might argue that cognitivism cannot explain the prescriptive function of evaluative language. The purpose of evaluation is to guide choice by prescribing a course of action; an evaluation says that this is what I/you/we should do. But, to continue the argument, no description can guide action. A description can only tell us what is true or what the facts are. Therefore, evaluative language cannot consist in descriptions.

1. To guide choice, evaluative language must prescribe actions
2. No description can prescribe an action.
3. Therefore, evaluative language cannot consist in descriptions.

The first problem with this argument is that a cognitivist can argue that premise 2 is false. If a fact can be a reason for action (e.g. the fact that X will hurt you is a reason for avoiding it), then a descriptive statement affirming that fact can prescribe an action. Second, suppose that the second premise already assumes that no description as such can prescribe actions (perhaps on the grounds that all prescriptions are imperatives). If this assumption is made, then the first premise can be challenged, by arguing that evaluative language can guide choice by pointing out relevant facts. To conclude, this second argument is weak. The best we can say of it is that it needs to be supplemented by other considerations, such as the ones that follow.

The Motivation of Actions

The third argument against cognitivism is the psychological parallel to the linguistic argument we have just considered. It is a contemporary version of an argument first given by David Hume (1711-1776) in relation to morality. In effect, the argument is that cognitivism is committed to clearly false claims about the motivation of action. First, says the non-cognitivist, moral or evaluative views must be capable of motivating us to action. This position is called internalism, because it postulates a conceptual or internal connection between evaluative views or opinions and action. Second, psychological explanations should always involve both a desire and a belief. In other words, beliefs on their own cannot motivate people to act. For example, the mere belief that it is raining is not sufficient to motivate you to take an umbrella; you also need the desire to keep dry (See McNaughton, 1988, p.23). The argument is:

1. Evaluative views must be capable of motivating action.
2. Beliefs and other cognitive states on their own cannot motivate an action.
3. Therefore, evaluative views cannot consist solely in beliefs.

In other words, the cognitivist position is inadequate for explaining how evaluative judgments can motivate action. (This argument is usually discussed in relation to moral views specifically).

Cognitivism has two replies to this argument. First, it can deny premise 1 by claiming that the mere recognition that an action is good is not sufficient to motivate a person to perform it. In other words, the cognitivist can deny internalism and embrace externalism. An externalist would claim that evaluative facts and beliefs only motivate those people who care about them. Consequently, a person might have

knowledge about what is good and not at all be motivated to act on that knowledge. This reply insists on a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, the criteria concerning what counts as good or valuable and, on the other hand, the considerations that motivate a person to action, even though we may use the phrase 'reason for action' for both.

The second reply is to accept internalism and deny premise 2. The cognitivist might argue that belief and other cognitive states on their own are sufficient to motivate action. It is not necessary that the person have the relevant desire.

In effect, this second reply challenges the very distinction between cognitive (such as beliefs) and non-cognitive states (such as desires). Normally, the two are distinguished in terms of their direction of fit: we try to make our beliefs fit how the world is, because in this way they are true; but with desire, we try to make the world fit our desires. The second reply of the cognitivist challenges this exclusive way of dividing cognitive and non-cognitive states by arguing that some cognitive states can have both directions of fit. For instance, suppose that you perceive that something is very beneficial to you. The perception is a cognitive state, which is either true or false, and this defines the required direction of fit: the state must fit the facts, otherwise the belief is false. Nevertheless, at the same time, the cognitive state, by virtue of its evaluative content, is such that it also has the opposite direction of fit: there is a reason for us to make world fit it. Similar considerations would apply to moral beliefs (see McNaughton, p.109).

The idea that a cognitive state can motivate would seem to accord with the phenomenology of our experience. In the case of morality, it seems that a person can be moved by his or her recognition of a moral obligation (see McNaughton, p.49). In the case of prudence, the perception that something is harmful to us seems sufficient to motivate us, at least on occasions.

In summary, on the basis of this brief and preliminary analysis, it seems that there are good reasons for doubting that this argument in favor of non-cognitivism succeeds.

The Is/Ought Gap

The fourth argument for non-cognitivism is that a set of descriptive judgments about what is can never entail a sentence that expresses an evaluation. This is called the 'is/'ought' gap.

As has been pointed out by philosophers from Hume to G.E. Moore, one cannot logically derive a statement about what

ought to be the case from any statement of what simply is in fact the case (Murphy, 1982, p.61).

The alleged gap between 'is' and 'ought' has some importance for how we think about values and factual evidence. Ultimately, the 'is/ought' gap implies that what we take as empirical evidence for a value judgment itself requires another value judgment. Deciding what will count as empirical evidence to support any value judgment will itself be a value judgment. For example, suppose that a film made us laugh and kept us engrossed for two hours. If we want to claim that this is evidence for the evaluation that the film was good, we have to make an additional evaluation that a film that makes people laugh and keeps them engrossed is a good film. Furthermore, if we want to give empirical evidence for this second evaluation, then we shall have to presuppose another evaluation, such as 'Laughter is good.' In other words, an evaluative conclusion will only follow from a descriptive or factual premise given another evaluative premise. If the 'is/ought' gap thesis is true, then no set of purely descriptive statements by themselves can ever entail or serve as evidence for an evaluative judgment.

This means that there will be some basic value judgments, which do not have empirical evidential support, and that whenever we try to give empirical evidence for a value judgment we will be presupposing another value judgment (Hare, 1965). In simple terms, this view implies that, if you make the evaluative judgment 'Pain is bad' and I claim that pain is good, then there can be no reason to believe I am mistaken, so long as I am consistent in all the value judgments I make. At root, it means that value judgments cannot be mistaken in the sense of being contrary to the empirical evidence; they cannot run against the grain of the world.

Perhaps, the main reason why the 'is/ought' gap seems plausible is that no statement of fact seems sufficient to determine that some action ought or should be performed. Given any statement of fact regarding action A, it appears to be undetermined whether one ought to do A.

However, this point is not enough to establish the required conclusion in favor of non-cognitivism, because the argument depends on a failure to distinguish conclusive and non-conclusive 'ought' sentences. In brief, the facts may be insufficient to determine whether we ought *conclusively* to do A, but this does not rule out the possibility that the facts are sufficient to establish that we ought non-conclusively to do A. The underdetermination does not exclude the possibility that facts can be non-conclusive reasons for action.

I went over this last point very quickly. Let me repeat it step by step. First, there are two kinds of 'ought' statements:

- a) 'I ought to do A' can imply that there is a reason for me to do A, where such a reason can be defeated or overridden by some other consideration.
- b) 'I ought to do A' can imply that there is a conclusive reason for me to do A. By definition, a conclusive reason is not defeated or overridden by some other reason in the context in question.

This difference between these two types of 'ought' statement ought to be intuitively obvious. With the first, weaker kind of 'ought' statement, even if I ought to do A at time t, it can still be true that I ought to do another action B at the same time. Reasons that can be overridden can conflict. At any one time, there may be reasons for me to do many different actions: I have a reason to go home; I also have a reason to go to the library, to the restaurant, to the shops and to stay at home. I can have reasons to do all these different things and recognize that I have such reasons, without any contradiction, because the claim that there is a reason is comparatively weak. It does not imply that I have a conclusive reason to do any one of these things (See Raz, 1978 and Kagan, 1989, p.17). On the other hand, to claim that there is a conclusive reason for me to do A is to affirm that the reason is not overridden all things considered.

The second step: the claim that the facts do not determine what ought to be done is not plausible for non-conclusive 'ought' statements. For instance, it does not appear reasonable to deny that pain presents one with a non-conclusive reason for action. It only appears plausible to deny that pain necessarily presents one with a conclusive reason for action.

Thirdly, and finally, if the above is correct, then there is no 'is/ought' gap that supports non-cognitivism regarding evaluations that entail non-conclusive 'ought' statements. There is no 'is/non-conclusive ought' gap. There might be a logical gap between descriptions and conclusive 'ought' statements, but not one between descriptions and evaluations in general. Consequently, there is no argument against the claim that facts can be reasons for action, but only one for the underdetermination of conclusive 'ought' statements. As Wiggins says:

Having tamed non-cognitivism into a doctrine of cognitive underdetermination (Wiggins, p.137),

we may now pass onto another point.

For the Alternative Position

None of the arguments for non-cognitivism have succeeded. However, this does not exclude the possibility that there might be a better argument that we have not considered, nor that there is some sound rebuttal to the objections we have presented. Nevertheless, it is better now to see whether there are any good arguments in favor of cognitivism.

Superficially, the grammatical form of sentences of the form 'X is desirable,' 'X is meaningful' etc is that they are assertions or statements that can be true or false. Unless there is some reason for thinking that this is not their true form, then we should treat them as such. However, none of the arguments we have considered are sufficient to show us that the cognitivist view is mistaken. Therefore, there would be a presumption in favor of its being true. This conclusion, however, must be tentative, because it assumes that there are no other stronger arguments against cognitivism.

Here is a powerful point in favor of cognitivism: we can describe by evaluating and we can evaluate by describing. These two functions of language are not mutually exclusive in the way that the non-cognitivist insists. However, this point does not seem to be an argument in favor of cognitivism, but more of a restatement of the position. As an independent argument, we might appeal to the fact that, in ordinary discourse, people use evaluations to describe and vice versa. This is evident by our use of terms that have both functions; words such as 'dirty,' 'harmful,' 'delicious,' 'entertaining,' 'noble,' can be used to describe and evaluate at the same time. Let us call them 'mixed terms.'

The non-cognitivist will reply that it only appears that such words can be used to describe and evaluate at the same time, and that, the correct analysis of the use of these words will show that their meaning consists of two logically distinct elements: a descriptive and evaluative component.

This is the key point: the non-cognitivist must insist that the two components of a mixed term, or a desirability characterization, such as 'enchanting,' or 'harmful,' are always logically separable. The argument to the effect that they are not, and that cognitivism is therefore true, is called the non-disentanglement thesis. According to this claim, the

meaning of a mixed term, such as 'gorgeous,' cannot be split into two elements, the neutral descriptive and the recommendatory evaluative. The meaning of the term cannot be thought of in this way because the so-called descriptive element cannot be understood without knowing the point of the classification that it is supposed to make, and this point cannot be grasped without understanding the so-called evaluative element. For example, the predicate 'is dirty' cannot be divided into two logically separate parts, the neutral descriptive (ND) and the negative evaluative part (NE). It is impossible because the classification supposedly effected by ND cannot be understood without grasping the point of such a classification, and this requires knowing NE. In other words, understanding ND requires knowing NE. Consequently, the predicate 'is dirty' does not have two logically distinct components and, thus, non-cognitivism is false. We can evaluate by describing.

Back to the Meaning of Life

We can tentatively conclude that it is a mistake to claim that the meaning of life is invented. The conclusion is tentative in two ways. First, the important issues concerning reality have been postponed until the next chapter. Second, we have focused exclusively on the idea that the meaning of person's life must be invented because a) a life is meaningful is a kind of value judgement and b) all value judgments are subjective in the sense of not being true or false assertions. We have argued against this idea. However, this does not preclude there might be other ways in which the meaning of life is invented.

I will conclude by trying to iron out two possible confusions. First, the following is a commonly voiced view: each person designates the meaning of his or her life by choosing the goals that he or she pursues. For the sake of clarity, we should note that this view actually is opposed to the claim that the meaning of life is invented. The view implies that meaningfulness is not invented but rather is (objectively) constituted by our goals. Of course, it claims that people choose their goals, but nevertheless, it entails that the meaning of a person's life is defined or determined by the individual's goals rather than being invented. As a result, the refutation of this view belongs not to the issues raised in this chapter, but rather to the discussion of Chapter 4.

Second, it may true that we have to construct a meaningful life for ourselves, but this does not imply that we construct the meaningfulness of it. This will be one of the themes of Chapter 9.

Reading

The best introduction to the issues raised in this chapter is McNaughton, David, *Moral Vision*, Blackwell, 1988. David Wiggins' article, 'Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life,' is found in Wiggins, 1978.

Soft Reality

8

Contemporary physics apparently tells us that the universe consists of only elementary particles. Suppose we made a list of all the elementary particles that exist and their position at different times. Such a list would be immensely long, but the point is that if the physical theory is right, then there is literally nothing else. We would have a complete description of the universe. This purely physical description seems to present a very bleak and depressing view of the universe. The aim in this chapter is not to challenge or endorse this materialistic ontology, but rather to answer the questions: 'Can life be meaningful if everything that exists is composed of material particles?' 'If it can, then how is that possible?'

Prima facie, the problem is that physical theory appears to challenge our ordinary, everyday descriptions and understanding of the world. For example, our view of the universe apparently must include room for meaning and value. How can such phenomena be compatible with the statement that the physical dot description is complete?

One answer is to argue that such phenomena are not compatible with the scientific view. This amounts to a non-realist view of value, according to which the universe does not really contain value, or rather, things of value. Instead, we humans project value on to things and the universe itself is value-neutral. This non-realist view of values seems to support the non-cognitivist position concerning value judgements, which we rejected in the previous chapter. In this chapter, we shall argue that materialism does not imply a non-realist view of value. In other words, a materialist ontology does not preclude things really

having value. Consequently, materialism does not provide support for the non-cognitivist idea that evaluations are merely expressions of attitude.

In summary, the aim of this chapter is to defend the thesis that we can and do give evaluative descriptions of situations. When we claim that an action will lead to an individual's ruin, or that a person is generous, it appears that such statements are true or false descriptions, which, at the same time, are evaluative because they involve appeal to values. In the previous chapter, we argued against non-cognitivism and in favor of the affirmation that evaluative descriptions are possible on the grounds that the factual and evaluative aspects of meaning cannot be separated or disentangled. Now, however, the idea of evaluative descriptions faces a different objection: 'How can such descriptions be possible in a completely physical universe?'

This challenge is central to the conception of the meaningfulness of life, and its defense has enormous importance for our understanding of ourselves, as we shall see in the next chapter. Many people would like to think that we live in a beautiful, interesting and meaningful world, or at least that some of our actions are truly worthwhile or meaningful. These hopes may seem to be dashed to the ground by materialism, which tells us that only material things exist. Materialism presents us with a challenge: 'How can life be meaningful in a universe that is completely characterized by the dot description?'

This challenge affects more than the issues of value and meaningfulness. It concerns the apparent conflict between a hard scientific view of reality and our normal everyday view of life. The hard scientific view seems to exclude mental states, as well as social and linguistic facts. As a consequence, we live in a world that appears to be much richer than the purely physical dot-characterization would allow. The universe apparently contains facts such as people getting angry, and companies selling services across national borders. We live in a world in which a poem can express an insight, and a person can act unjustly or altruistically. We inhabit a world in which love hurts and work can be boring. This seems to be a quite different universe from the dot one. But is it? Can we reconcile the two?

Please note that the purpose of this chapter is not to argue that materialism is a true ontological theory, but rather to show how our richer descriptions of the world might be compatible with it. To show that materialism is a true or false theory is quite a different discussion; for example, it would require arguing that there are no sets and other abstract objects, such as numbers. Later in the chapter, we shall also re-examine the claim that evaluations are descriptions of reality and address the unresolved points that are left over from the previous chapter.

Answer One: Weaker Forms of Materialism

Up to now we have characterized materialism as the view that only material things exist. This leaves open the possibility that those material things can have non-material properties or characteristics, such as being loveable, containing meaning, and feeling joy. It also allows the possibility that there are non-material facts, such as: the baby is loveable, the poem is meaningful and Helen feels joy. In more technical terms, substance-materialism is compatible with property-dualism and with fact-dualism. Substance-materialism (the thesis that only material substances exist) is compatible with property-dualism, the assertion that things can have both material and non-material properties. It is also compatible with the claim that things can be valuable and meaningful.

A brief clarification: what are material and non-material properties? For the sake of simplifying the discussion, we can give a provisional definition in terms of what John Locke (1632-1704) called primary qualities. Locke argued that material things have certain primary qualities, such as motion, position, shape, and mass, which are essential features of matter. Basically, primary qualities are those that an object has by virtue of its spatio-temporal character and its mass. We can provisionally define the material properties of an object as its primary qualities. This is a simplification because it does not take into account any of the advances in physics of the twentieth century.

Although it is not our primary aim to debate the relative virtues of the different forms of materialism and dualism, it might be argued that the discussion of this chapter is so far radically incomplete. The idea was to answer a challenge, namely the claim that materialism rules out things having value and life having meaning. This challenge has been answered only in a limited sense, by restricting materialism to substance-materialism. The objector would press the point as follows: the real challenge is strict materialism, namely the claim that only material substances and their material properties exist. The revised and more difficult challenge is to show how things being valuable and meaningful is compatible with this strict materialist ontology.

Answer 2: Supervenient Properties

We have redefined materialism to be the claim that the only substances are material and that their properties are material. Does such a view exclude the claim that life is meaningful? Does such a view contradict the assertion that evaluations can be descriptions and thereby force us to a form of non-cognitivism?

The answer is perhaps not. It depends whether this stricter form of materialism precludes supervenient properties. Supervenience is usually defined as follows:

Properties of type A are supervenient on properties of type B if and only if two objects cannot differ with respect to their A-properties without also differing with respect to their B-properties (Audi, 1996, p. 778).

The idea is that the B-properties underlie the A-properties. For example, physical properties, such as being in a certain brain state, underlie mental properties, such as having a certain thought. The mental ones are dependent properties.

In the case of evaluative properties, the supervenience relation may be a little more complex than the above suggests. This is because not all evaluative properties are intrinsic properties. In other words, the evaluative properties of X may depend on the other factors besides the physical properties of X itself, such as the nature of human interests (see Chapter 6 below). However, these other factors themselves will be supervenient on some physical properties and, consequently, we should expect that the supervenience relation can be reformulated to include such non-intrinsic properties. The term 'supervenience base' is sometimes employed to refer to the physical properties and the other factors that underlie the supervenient property (Audi, 1996, p. 779).

Answer 3: Different Descriptions

Suppose someone insisted that a strict definition of materialism must rule out the possibility of supervenient properties. Would this force us to rule out the idea of evaluative descriptions?

Not necessarily. There is another option, which would be something like the following. Materialism tells us what the world is made up of: everything is composed of matter and its primary qualities. However, complex combinations of that matter might be described in radically different ways. Even a strict materialist ontology does not imply that the world is describable in only purely scientific terms. Even if the world consists only of matter and its primary qualities, the world may be still truly describable in non-scientific terms.

How is this possible? It is because there can be different kinds of descriptions of the same parts of matter. For instance, we can truly describe matter in intensional and evaluative terms, as well as scientifically. This reply is made possible by a simple distinction: meaning and reference. Two phrases or words can have the same

reference, but different meanings, for example, ‘water’ and ‘H₂O,’ ‘the evening star’ and ‘the planet Venus.’ In these cases, the two phrases have a different semantic meanings (unlike ‘brother’ and ‘male sibling,’ which have the same meaning) but, nevertheless, they refer to the same thing.

Similarly, we might argue that two sentences can have different meanings, and yet be true in virtue of the same states of affairs or facts or events (this is akin to reference). The idea is that the same facts or events can be described in radically different ways. For example, we can describe the last minute of soccer game in terms of the position of different atoms, second by second. We can also describe the same events in terms of the winning of the game. Similarly, we can describe the events in a person’s brain in neurological terms, or else psychologically, in terms of what that individual was thinking. Here we have one state of affairs or series of events and two fundamentally different kinds of description. Even if science has a monopoly concerning the composition of the world, it does not have a monopoly over what we can truly say about that world.

(Note the following technical requirement: such a view entails a non-semantic characterization of ‘fact.’ If two descriptions with different meanings can pick out the same token fact, then sentence meaning cannot be employed to individuate facts. For example, consider the two sentences ‘John laughed during the funeral’ and ‘Mr. Fuleki’s eldest son laughed during the funeral.’ Supposing that ‘Mr. Fuleki’s eldest son’ and ‘John’ refer to the same person, then do the two mentioned sentences pick out different facts? Many philosophers would reply: ‘Yes because facts are individuated according to sentence meaning. In your example, there are two sentences with different meanings and, thus, each sentence picks out a different fact.’ Answer 3, the view I have explored in this section, implies that such a reply is mistaken. The two sentences, despite having different meanings, are true in virtue of the same fact. That fact has been described in two different ways).

Intensional and Extensional Descriptions

We can make the general idea more precise by distinguishing intensional and extensional descriptions. Although at first the distinction may look dry and obscure, it will become apparent soon that it gives us a good handle on the central theme. An extensional description is one that is referentially transparent. This means that co-extensive terms or words with the same reference can be substituted in the sentence without changing whether the sentence as a whole is true or false. For example, in the sentence ‘2+2=4’ we can substitute for ‘4’

any word that has the same reference, such as ‘9-5’ or ‘144-140.’ Typically, the sentences of natural science and mathematics are all extensional.

The language that we use to describe our mental states is not extensional. It consists of intensional sentences. The sentence ‘Person A believes that P’ is intensional, because one cannot substitute co-referential expression in the clause after ‘that.’ To see this, consider the following example in three steps. First, let ‘P’ stand for the sentence ‘The cake in the window is delicious’ and let ‘Q’ stand for ‘The oldest cake in the city is delicious.’ Second, suppose that the phrase ‘that cake in the window’ actually refers to the oldest cake in the city. In other words, it is the same cake and ‘P’ is equivalent to ‘Q.’ Third, and this is the point, despite this, we cannot substitute ‘Q’ for ‘P’ in the sentence ‘A believes that P.’ Given that A believes that the cake in the window is delicious, it does not follow that he believes that the oldest cake is delicious. In other words, the following argument form is not valid:

1. A believes that P.
2. P is equivalent to Q.
3. Therefore, A believes that Q.

Sentences of the form ‘A believes that P’ are not extensional; they are intensional, precisely because we cannot substitute co-referential expressions in the P-clause without possibly changing the truth-value of the whole sentence.

Most of the interesting things we say about the world are intensional, especially concerning people and their mental states. Yet, scientific descriptions are extensional. Why is there this difference? Typically intensional sentences specify content. For example, ‘John believes that water is a liquid’ specifies the content of his belief. ‘The sentence ‘Il pleut’ means that it is raining’ specifies the content of the original French sentence. Because they specify content, intensional sentences reflect points of view or perspectives on the universe. Consider John’s belief: if we said ‘John believes that H₂O is a liquid at room temperature’ then we would be putting words into his mouth. That was not the content of his belief, which was about water and not H₂O. We have to describe his belief in a way that correctly expresses his point of view; otherwise the attribution of belief would be false. To put the point in a different way, intensional sentences express intentionality (for an elaboration of this point, see Chapter 9).

On the other hand, extensional sentences do not express a point of view or perspective. If true, then they are true, not from a specific point of view, but from any point of view. This is because, in an extensional sentence, co-extensive terms may be substituted *salva veritate*

(preserving truth). This is why scientific theories should normally be explained in extensional terms; at least according to the conventional view, the aim of such theories is to tell us how things are independently of any particular point of view. To put it differently, extensional sentences do not express intentionality.

Scientific descriptions are extensional, but the descriptions of the world that engage and describe our everyday concerns and interests are intensional. Does the claim that the world consists only of physical things and their material properties entail that all true descriptions of reality are extensional? If it does, then science rules out the idea that evaluations can be descriptions of reality and that life really has meaning. I will argue that the answer to this question is ‘No’ because materialism can be non-reductive and non-eliminativist (terms that I shall explain in a minute). In other words, the view that I shall reject is as follows: a scientific world view and a strict materialist ontology implies that only extensional sentences can be true and, as a consequence, no evaluation and no statement of meaning can be true. I shall argue against the claim that science excludes a realist view of value and meaning because strict materialism requires that only extensional sentences can be true.

Non-Reductive Materialism

The above strict scientific view ignores the possibility that materialism can be true but, at the same time, that not every true sentence is extensional. In other words, it ignores the possibility of a non-reductive and non-eliminative materialism. If this is a possibility, then there can be true evaluative statements in a purely material world.

Let us explain these technical terms. First, ‘reduction’: a reduction is a relation between one set of sentences and another, such that the first reduces to the second when the second necessarily entails the first. For example, the statement ‘The average height of the people in this room is six foot’ reduces to a set of assertions about the height of each person in the room, the claim that there is no one else in the room, and a definition of ‘average.’ It so reduces because that set of assertions necessarily entails the first.

Can evaluations be reduced to extensional scientific statements? Can a set of extensional statements about physical particles entail an evaluation, such as ‘The walk was invigorating’? This question can be divided into three parts: first, from particles to neurology; second, from neurology to psychology and third, from psychology to evaluations. The first question: Can neurological descriptions of the brain be reduced to statements about physical particles? Second, can a psychological and

intensional statement about a person’s mental states be reduced to a set of such neurological descriptions? Thirdly, can an evaluation be reduced to set of such psychological descriptions?

The especially difficult step seems to be the second. Such a reduction requires relevant bridge principles, which link neurological concepts to psychological ones. The equivalent in our earlier example is the definition of ‘average’ in terms of the height and number of people in the room; this is a simple bridge principle. Finding bridge principles from the neurological to the psychological is difficult, if not impossible, because there is no one-to-one matching of types of brain states to types of mental states. For example, there is no one type of brain-state corresponding to wanting chocolate. Materialism implies that, for every particular or token mental state, there is a corresponding particular or token brain state, with which it is identical. It does not imply that the much stronger claim that we can make generalizations from types of mental states to types of brain states, and vice versa. It requires token/token and not type/type identity. Since a mental state can be instantiated in many different physical ways, the search for mental-neurological type/type generalizations seems hopeless. This is not yet a knock down argument, but it indicates the difficulty of finding the relevant kinds of bridge principle needed for a reduction.

Seeing that such reductions appear impossible, thinkers have proposed an alternative approach, eliminativism. According to this new approach, the world can only be described truly in the extensional terms of physical theory. Any other apparent description of reality will either not be a true or false description at all (i.e. the non-cognitivism discussed in the previous chapter), or it will be strictly speaking in realist terms, false. This second option leads to the error theory, which is discussed below.

Eliminativists of the second type usually adopt a pragmatic or an instrumentalist approach to non-extensional sentences. They will claim that all non-extensional sentences are, strictly speaking, false. They do not truly describe reality. Nevertheless, they argue, it is useful to treat some of these sentences as if they were true. For example, it can help us predict successfully the behavior of people if we attribute to them beliefs and desires. However, according to the instrumentalist, intensional statements of the form ‘A believes that P’ are always strictly speaking false, even though they are sometimes useful.

Returning to the main issue, the crucial strategic point is that materialism does not require either eliminativism or reductionism. We do not need to eliminate or reduce intensional sentences in order to be consistent with the materialism of science. We can reject the assumption of reductionism and eliminativism (namely that only

extensional sentences directly describe reality) but still hold that everything consists of matter and its primary qualities.

The general idea behind this move is very simple - namely that the intensional and extensional modes both describe the same one reality, doing so in very different ways. For example, we can describe the chalk marks on the blackboard extensionally, in terms of the dots or, intensionally, as a meaningful sentence. We can characterize the events of last night in terms of dots, or, intensionally, as a murder. There is plenty of room for different kinds of descriptions of reality, so long as they are not contradictory. In this way, materialism does not require reduction and elimination. That ordinary everyday-life descriptions of the world are true does not require abandoning a materialist ontology.

This crucial point is obfuscated by the notion of ontological reduction. The idea of ontological reduction is that the entities postulated by one theory are reduced to those postulated by another theory when the first is explained in terms of the second. For example, heat can be explained in terms of the kinetic energy of molecules and this means that heat has been reduced to molecular movement. This is a confusing way of giving an account of scientific explanation, because reduction is not a question of reducing one set of entities to another. As we have seen, reduction is a relation between sets of statements, not things. It is a semantic relation. In other words, rather than saying 'Heat is reduced to molecular motion,' we should claim that statements about heat can be reduced to statements about molecular motion. Without this clarification, we would be tempted to think that materialism is necessarily either reductive or eliminative.

Conclusion

Let us return to the universe of extensionally characterized dots. According to materialist theory, this is a complete characterization of the universe. Rejecting eliminativism does not contradict that assertion, because the physical description does not leave out any substances or entities. It does not omit any non-physical entities, such as meanings or values, because there are none. In this way, the dot-characterization is complete. Nevertheless, it is not the only kind of description of reality, and, in this sense, it is not complete. The dot-characterization is not an exhaustive description of the universe. There are plenty of other, more interesting, ways of truly characterizing segments of the universe. In particular, in everyday evaluations, we can describe actions as harmful or oppressive, beneficial or liberating in the intensional mode, without assuming that such statements have to be reduced, or that they require

the postulation of strange entities, namely values. Matter can be truly characterized in intensional and evaluative terms, when it is appropriately and sufficiently organized. Thus, the extensional dot description is incomplete because it does not include all true sentences.

How can there be value and meaning in a physical universe of dots? If this question means 'How can there be such *things* as values in a physical universe?' then, the answer is that there cannot. In a completely physical universe, there are no such entities as values. However, this does not preclude evaluative descriptions being true of segments of the universe. An event can be truly described as a murder or as a disaster. We can give true intensional descriptions of a universe of dots, without having to accept that such descriptions must be reduced or eliminated.

Absolute Reality

We have just seen that the non-cognitivist cannot appeal to materialism to argue for his or her position. Materialism is compatible with the idea that things really do have value or at least with the claim that there are some true evaluative descriptions. In opposition to this, the non-cognitivist might appeal to an absolute conception of reality to support his/her position.

We need to distinguish between appearances and reality, for example, in a theory of perception. The non-cognitivist will argue that so-called value properties are not part of reality, but rather just how things appear to us. He or she will argue this by appealing to an absolute conception of reality. According to this absolute conception, reality consists of what is accessible from any point of view (B. Williams, 1978, p.245-9). In other words, according to the absolute conception, anything real must be independent of us humans.

This view implies that colors, smells and sounds are not real properties, but rather are appearances because such properties cannot be perceived by beings without the appropriate sense organs. For example, we can define 'green' as follows: something is green if and only if it looks green to a normal human observer in normal lighting (McNaughton, p. 67).

This idea is reminiscent of John Locke's primary and secondary quality distinction. Locke (1632–1704) asserted that secondary qualities are nothing in the objects but 'the power to produce the various sensations in us by their primary qualities' (Locke, II, vii, 10). Primary qualities are the intrinsic properties of all material things. In contrast, secondary qualities are merely the power of objects to produce certain ideas in us. These secondary quality powers must have a real basis in

the object itself, and this basis is the primary qualities of the particles that compose the object. Color in an object is simply the arrangement of certain particles and their primary qualities, and this is the basis of the power of that object to cause in us the idea or sensation of color (see Thomson, 2001 a). According to this position, secondary qualities depend on our particular way of perceiving rather than being part of reality as it is independently of us. In contrast, it is argued, scientific concepts, and especially those of the primary qualities, do not require an essential reference to the way such properties are perceived by humans (McNaughton, p. 85).

According to non-realists, evaluative properties, picked out by terms such as 'beautiful' and 'beneficial,' are similar to these secondary qualities. It is impossible to understand or perceive such properties without having a distinctively human range of concerns and interests. Hence, according to the absolute conception, such properties belong to the human point of view, and hence cannot be counted as real.

This appeal to the absolute conception of reality to defend non-realism regarding evaluations can be challenged in three ways. First, the non-realist argument is similar to the points we were considering earlier in this chapter. We saw that an eliminativist will argue that strictly speaking only scientific extensional statements can be true; intensional ones should be discarded as false, albeit often useful. The idea that only extensional descriptions are true is very close to the claim that only scientific statements describe absolute reality. It is important to note this similarity, because the points we raised earlier concerning eliminativism also apply to the absolute conception of reality. We might oppose the absolute conception by claiming:

We should not think of the everyday and the scientific conception as being in competition, with the lesser being relegated to the realm of appearance. Rather, the two accounts should be seen as complementary descriptions of the world which... serve different purposes and have different roles
(McNaughton p.90).

Second, the concept of reality indicates something that is independent of the mind. Believers in the absolute conception of reality explain this concept of mind-independence in a very strong and implausible way by insisting that the notion of reality should exclude all elements attributable to human cognition.

A weaker or softer form of realism would deny that this is a requirement of the concept of reality. What is required is merely that the object or properties in question exist independently of our cognition of

them. For example, consider the sentence 'There is a computer in the room.' If the sentence is true, then there really is a computer in the room, independently of whether anyone sees the computer and independently of what anyone believes or thinks about the contents of the room. Given this, the computer in the room is part of reality despite the fact that the concepts of computer and room are part of our conceptual apparatus. Such statements can be true, even though they are relative to our concepts.

Similarly, value judgments are not absolutely true or false in the sense of being true or false independently of all human dispositions and social meanings. As with any other judgment, the meaning of what we say when we make an evaluative claim depends on social and cultural factors. Although this may exclude such judgments from being absolute in some sense, it does not prevent them from being true or false.

Third, Kant's famous work, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), has inspired some philosophers to argue that the notion of absolute reality, independent of our concepts, is vacuous or does not make sense. If this type of view is correct, then even scientific descriptions are not absolute. The meaning of any description depends on factors, such as our concepts. Nevertheless, descriptions can be true or false independently of what we think or want with regard to their truth or falsity (see Thomson, 2000 and Putnam, 1981). A non-absolute description can still be objectively true or false.

Error Theory and Non-Cognitivism

We have seen that eliminativism implies the conclusion that the world can only be described in terms of the primary qualities of matter. Given this, the eliminativist has two options with regard to the idea of evaluative descriptions. First, he or she can argue that such so-called descriptions are not true or false descriptions at all, but should be analyzed non-cognitively. Second, he or she can argue that all such descriptions are strictly speaking false.

Non-Cognitivism Again

The first alternative is to deny that such evaluative descriptions are possible and argue that all apparent evaluative descriptions, such as 'The food is delicious,' 'The executive's job is very demanding,' are not really descriptions at all; instead they require prescriptions or expressions of attitude. This position is non-cognitivism, which we examined in the previous chapter. In the course of that discussion, we

delayed examining an argument in favor of non-cognitivism, which was:

Argument A:

1. There are no evaluative properties or facts.
2. If there are no such facts, sentences that express evaluations cannot be either true or false descriptions.
3. Thus, sentences that express evaluations are not descriptions.

Now we can examine how the cognitivist might reply to this argument. In this chapter, we have seen that a materialist could deny the first premise, by claiming that there are non-material and/or supervenient properties (answers 1 and 2 above). Furthermore, in this chapter, we outlined how a materialist can argue also against the second premise: in a universe of no more than physical things with physical properties, those same things can be described in many ways (answer 3 above).

Error Theory

The second option for the eliminativist with regard to the idea of evaluative descriptions is to claim that all such descriptions are strictly speaking false. If there are no evaluative facts to be described, then all evaluative descriptions must be false. In this sense, much of our everyday language is based on an error, as is the claim that life is meaningful. The argument for such a position might be:

Argument B:

1. There are no evaluative properties or facts.
2. If there are no such facts, sentences that express evaluations must be false descriptions.
3. Therefore, evaluations are false descriptions.

My comments on this argument are very similar to those on argument A. First, a materialist can deny premise 1 on the grounds that there are non-material and/or supervenient properties (answers 1 and 2 above). Furthermore, given that facts are not individuated linguistically, the second premise ignores the possibility that physical things with physical properties can be described in many ways (answer 3 above).

Additionally, the error-theorist will have to try to support his or her second premise in argument B above against the non-cognitivists second premise in the argument A above. Whereas the non-cognitivist argues that evaluations are non-descriptive, the error-theorist maintains

that they are false descriptions. However, this debate between non-cognitivism and the error-theory is not a discussion for this book.

Conclusion

To counter-act the apparently cold portrait of the universe given by physical sciences, we do not need to postulate the existence of values and meaning as things. We only need to be able to truly describe material things in a meaningful and evaluative way. Neither do we have to suppose that such descriptions have to be reducible to ones in terms of quantum dots. Furthermore, such descriptions are not absolute; their meaning depends on factors such as our concepts. Nevertheless, they can be true or false independently of what we think or want with regard to their truth or falsehood.

This type of reply looks promising. Indeed, it has important consequences for our lives, which we shall explore in the next chapter. In terms of metaphysics, it allows us to keep the ontology of physical theory and avoid dualism. It avoids affirming that there are non-material *entities*, such as minds, values or meanings. Yet, at the same time, by avoiding reductionism and eliminativism, it seems to preserve the integrity of descriptions other than the extensional dot ones. It allows us to claim that richer, non-extensional descriptions of the world are possible. It allows us to claim that life really is meaningful.

Reading

Many of the issues raised in this chapter are discussed in McNaughton, David, *Moral Vision*, 1988. The first chapter of Mackie's book *Ethics* argues for an error theory. In recent years, the error theory has evolved into quasi-realism, see Chapter 12 of McNaughton.

9

Appreciation

Life seems to be much more rich and full of meaning for children than it is for most adults. Consider, for example, the magical experience for children of seeing animals play. All of us can remember this time of wonder, mystery and enchantment. The question ‘Why are children more like this than us adults?’ is in part an empirical question that requires observational study. Perhaps it is because of a lack of self-consciousness or a lack of cynicism and tiredness.

We can draw a useful philosophical lesson from these kinds of phenomena, namely the importance of appreciation for any theory of value and meaning. It is quite a common view that the sole or primary purpose of evaluations is to guide our choice of actions. However, when we think of value judgments as reducible to reasons for action, we ignore the function of value in perception, a role that is central to any conception of the meaning of life: namely that values should color the content of consciousness. To live in accordance with a value is not merely to act on it. It is also to perceive and feel through it. To perceive and feel in accordance with a value can be more important for the meaningfulness of life than merely acting in agreement with it, because perception and feeling directly concern our awareness and, thereby, define our personal phenomenological world.

Value Ignorance

In the previous two chapters, we defended the assertion that value judgments can be true or false and that, as a consequence, life really can

be valuable and meaningful. Such an argument also permits the cognitivist idea that meaning can be perceived, a claim that a non-cognitivist would have to deny.

The idea that we can perceive meaning and values may sound strange at first. In fact, such phenomena are part of our everyday life. When you listen to someone speak, you hear him or her saying something meaningful. One perceives people and their actions under a wide range of evaluative predicates, such as ‘joyful,’ ‘lonely,’ ‘patient,’ and ‘cruel.’ These adjectives describe the subjective content of the experience itself; they characterize your perception, or how you saw the action or person. Similarly, one’s self-perception is essentially evaluative.

Realism makes possible the further claim that when the perception is accurate or truthful, then what you perceived is true. For example, you see a person’s action as cruel, and when your perception is accurate, then the person’s action really was cruel. This may sound like commonsense, and it is but, nevertheless, it is also a piece of commonsense that requires a philosophical defense (given briefly in Chapters 7 and 8). In this way, the cognitivist position more accurately reflects the phenomenology of everyday experience in which we can see things as beautiful or just plain, feel them to be meaningful or hollow, and perceive our actions as worthwhile or trivial. These examples illustrate that the perception of values is nothing exotic or mysterious. (In his book, *Ethics*, the Oxford philosopher John Mackie argues against the possibility of ethical properties partly on the grounds that they would be too strange. See Mackie, 1977, Chapter 1).

The cognitivist and realist way of understanding our interaction with things of value is especially important when it comes to the appreciation of other people. In everyday experience, we perceive other people as courageous or timid, creative or highly-strung. For example, there is a person whom I admire for her incredible combination of persistence and flexibility. The realist position allows me to affirm that she really does have these (value-laden) qualities, and the cognitivist view permits the assertion that I admire her because I perceive that she has these qualities. It also allows the idea that my perception might be mistaken or erroneous. Someone who knows my friend better might disagree with me and have a more accurate perception of her qualities.

Realism also, even more importantly, permits the possibility of ignorance. There are evaluative facts (or facts described in evaluative terms) concerning which I am ignorant. For example, there is beautiful music that I have never learned to appreciate. There are people around me whom I could love and become friends with, whom in fact I have hardly met. This is a vitally important point, because it means that we

live in a world of untapped value-possibilities. It implies that the world that we live in is richer in meaning than our experience of it.

The importance of this point is that one can be aware and appreciative of the fact that there are untapped value-possibilities, and this can affect one's feelings and one's sense of the meaningfulness of one's life. In other words, one can appreciate the second-order fact that there are things of value (or first-order evaluative facts) that one does not appreciate either for lack of opportunity or lack of aptitude. Appreciating this second-order fact can make a substantial difference to how one feels about one's life and surroundings. We can feel that the world is richer than we can ever know and that we could never exhaust its meaning.

The Intentionality of Appreciation

To understand the importance of this last point, we must revisit the theme of intentionality briefly referred to in Chapter 8. The evaluative aspects of our everyday lives depend on the intentionality and phenomenology of perception or appreciation.

One of the first thinkers to understand the intentionality of mental states was the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl's teacher, Franz Brentano (1838-1917), who claimed that intentionality is an intrinsic feature of all mental phenomena, was the first to use the term 'intentionality.' According to both Brentano and Husserl, intentionality is 'the mark of the mental' that distinguishes the study of the psychological from the physical sciences.

As defined by Husserl, intentionality is the property of mental states insofar as they are about or directed to something in the world. For example, whenever we think, we must think about something (either some fact or an object). The same point applies to many mental states, such as wishing, wanting, believing and perceiving; they are about something. In fact, some mental states do not have this feature; for example, general nervousness and raw sensations do not seem to be intentional mental states. Nevertheless, intentionality is the most fundamental characteristic of the mental in general.

Intentionality has some puzzling characteristics. Contrast the following two features of perception. First, as Husserl's definition of intentionality indicates, intentional mental states are about objects in the world. We directly perceive things in the world. For instance, we directly perceive trees, clouds and other people, things that exist independently of our perception of them. Husserl rejects the claim that we can only perceive directly our own ideas or private mental objects. He opposes the assertion that external objects exist behind a veil of

perception, a thesis that implies skepticism. Second, in sharp contrast, we can be subject to perceptual hallucinations. When one has such a visual experience, one is seeing something. Additionally, we can think about unicorns and other things that do not exist. Consequently, it seems that we need the concept of non-existent intentional objects to understand perception and thought. In other words, these points seem to imply that we do indeed perceive private mental objects after all, and this puts Husserl's first claim in jeopardy.

How can we reconcile these two features of intentionality? Husserl tries to do so in three steps. First, he distinguishes the content of a perception from its object. In other words, intentional mental states have a meaning or a sense or content, which in his later writings, Husserl calls the 'noema.' This should be distinguished from the object of a mental state, the actual entity in the world that the state is about or directed to. Second, Husserl argues that it is the meaning or content of a mental state that permits the mental state to be directed to something in the world. Mental states can refer to or pick out objects in the world because they have meaning. Moreover, what particular thing they are directed towards depends on the specific content or meaning of the mental state. Third, Husserl claims that the content or meaning of a mental state is nothing but the way in which the real object is picked out; it is the way the object is presented. In other words, it should not be thought of as another object (more specifically, as a private mental object). The contemporary philosopher of mind and language, John Searle puts the point like this:

One should say that a proposition is not the object of a statement or belief, but rather its content...But that proposition is not what the statement or belief is about or directed at (Searle, 1983, p.18).

Husserl's thesis that the directedness of an intentional mental state depends on its content permits the idea that we can study mental states without any ontological presuppositions concerning what exists. This is an important result because it is the basis of Husserl's phenomenological method, which consists in directing the attention exclusively to the noematic content of experience, rather than to the external object or matters of fact concerning experience. It is the study of experience as such.

Husserl's concept of noematic meaning constitutes an important addition to our understanding of meaning. First, it allows us to assert that meaning is an essential quality of the life of beings that have intentional mental states. Furthermore, it provides a different port of

entry to the idea of the meaning of life. Provisionally, we can view the meaning of a person's life as the combination of the meanings of his or her mental states and actions. I say 'provisionally' because there is a difference between the meaning of a collection of actions and mental states and the meaning of a life as a whole, and this will be one of the themes of Chapter 12. Third, it is a basic type of meaning. The idea of meaning as intentional content seems to be a necessary condition of the other types of meaning, because it is a fundamental characteristic of our mental life. We can appreciate and perceive the meaning and value of things in the world because of this feature of our experience. Perhaps the feature of experience that most deeply reflects our perception of value in the world is the shifting of attention. When one shifts one's attention from feature or aspect P to feature F of some object, this is because F has become or is more noteworthy than P, and in this way has become more significant or meaningful.

Intentionality and Intensionality

As a parenthetical aside, we need to complete our definition of intentionality (with a 't') by distinguishing it from intensionality (with an 's'), a concept we introduced in the previous chapter (see page 101). Intentionality is a feature of mental states and intensionality is a feature of some sentences. The intentionality of mental states is expressed by intensional 'that' sentences. Let us explain this in two steps. The first step concerns desires and other intentional mental states. What we desire or believe should be properly expressed with a whole sentence. For example, strictly speaking, the claim that one wants a coffee is too general a characterization of one's want: more specifically, the want is *that I drink a coffee soon*. You don't want the coffee splashed over your hair and you don't want the coffee next week. The point is this: the content of a belief, or a desire (or of any other intentional psychological state) is properly expressed by a whole sentence following the 'that' clause in sentences of the form 'I desire that....' (Searle, 1983, p. 1-13). In other words, the sentence expressing the content of the desire should have the form 'I desire that P,' where 'P' stands for a whole sentence.

The second step: as we explained earlier, sentences of the form 'A desires that P' are intensional, as opposed to extensional, because substituting co-referential or co-extensive expressions within the 'that P' clause may change the truth-value of the whole sentence (see page 101). More precisely, the phrase 'believes that...' forms an intensional context, because co-extensive sentences cannot be substituted in the gap indicated by the three dots after the word 'that.'

The reason for this difference is interesting. In an extensional context, such as '...is 10 inches long,' the truth-value of the whole sentence depends on the *reference* or the extension of the word or phrase placed in the gap. In contrast, in an intensional context, such as 'John believes that...' the truth-value of the whole depends on the *meaning* of the words placed in the gap. The truth of the whole sentence 'John believes that P' depends on the meaning (rather than the extension) of the embedded sentence 'P' because 'P' should accurately express the content of John's belief. This concludes the parenthetical clarification.

Construction

To understand how meaning and value enter into our lives, we require not only a realist and cognitivist view, but also the notion of construction. Often, the concept of construction is opposed to a realist view. For example, thinkers who claim that the self is constructed usually deny that the self is real. A thinker who claims that the meaning of life is constructed appears to be very close in spirit to the existentialist, who affirms that it is invented. Nevertheless, I shall argue that realism and construction are compatible, and furthermore, both are necessary to understand the concept of life's meaning. They are compatible because we construct our phenomenological experience of the world, but not the world itself. We construct a meaningful experience of life, but that does not mean that we invent meaning.

Construction of a 'World'

The intentionality of attention means that we necessarily attend to the world under a range of descriptions and not under others. Not only do we select what we give our attention to, but also we also chose how, or under what descriptions, we attend to it. Attention is always selective in both senses; it is directed to this and not that, and in this way and not that. It is always intentional because it includes some aspects of what is noticed and excludes others. In this way, usually without being aware of it, we construct, piece by piece, our phenomenological 'world.'

The idea of a phenomenological or experiential 'world' is simply *how* a person experiences the real actual world. When I speak of a person's phenomenological 'world,' please do not think that I am necessarily referring to a real entity, or to a set of private mental objects, or literally to a private 'world.' As we saw earlier when discussing Husserl, we do not have to treat the content of experience as

an object. The content of experience is the way in which we experience.

We have argued that some of the activities we engage in really have value. However, for that value to mean anything to the person, he or she must appreciate the value of the activity. Each individual must experience or perceive the activity he or she is engaging in, under those same descriptions that make the activity desirable. For example, suppose that white-water rafting is a desirable activity because it has the following desirable features: it is exciting, challenging, vitalizing, and enlivening. However, for these desirable features of the activity to mean anything to the person, he or she must experience the activity under those very same desirability characterizations. To count for anything in living, value must be cherished by appreciative attention. For example, a person who is thoroughly depressed or completely terrified will almost certainly not be able to appreciate the value of rafting.

This very last point is important because it shows that a person can suffer harm in two general ways. First, we are harmed when we are deprived of engaging in non-instrumentally valuable activities and experiences. Injury, illness and poverty harm us in this way; they prevent us from doing desirable things, such as seeing our friends or having children. Second, we can be harmed by not appreciating the value of desirable activities and experiences, even if we can actually engage in those activities. For example, depression can prevent a person from appreciating the value of what he or she is doing. The activity will have no meaning to him or her. Poverty and illness can harm us in this second way too.

This point shows that to live a meaningful life requires both being able to participate in activities of worth or value, and being able to appreciate that worth. This second condition is often ignored. We can see its importance by exploring the assertion that each person constructs the phenomenological or experiential world he or she lives in.

The phenomenological content of a person's experience is defined by how his or her attention is directed to selected details of the real world. The way in which we focus our attention constructs our phenomenological 'world' as a personal heaven or hell. Wittgenstein said: 'The happy man lives in a happy world.' (Wittgenstein, 1998, 6.43) To this we might add: 'The courageous person lives in a 'world' of greater possibilities, and, the generous person inhabits a 'world' in which others are truly alive.' In other words, the qualities of the phenomenological 'world' one inhabits depend in part on how one directs one's attention. In this sense, one constructs one's own experiential 'world.'

The word 'construction' is perhaps misleading. This 'construction' of a phenomenological 'world' is not something that one usually does deliberately. Furthermore, one cannot avoid such construction; it is part and parcel of the intentionality of perception that we mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, the word 'construction' emphasizes the fact that one does have some control over the phenomenological content of one's experiences. One constructs one's phenomenological 'world' indirectly, as a consequence of one's actions, thoughts, feelings, and wants. For example, the person who complains a lot will reinforce that type of tendency, and thereby perceive more and more things as worthy of complaint. In this way, he or she builds a phenomenological 'world' with more bitterness in it. An individual who pays attention to other people and perceives them as people, thereby constructs a more humane phenomenological 'world' than that of the person who perceives other people as mere resources.

The word 'construction' is appropriate in other ways too. It emphasizes the fact that the quality of one's content of one's experience depends on oneself. It focuses on the fact that we can rebuild our phenomenal 'world' differently, as it were a brick at a time, by training our attention. Building is a skill and, so too is the construction of a meaningful phenomenological 'world.'

The quality of one's day is invariably a function of how one feels. Feelings dominate consciousness. They are the materials out of which we construct the phenomenology of our lives. If I have been working too much and in the wrong way, then I will feel exactly how the world will appear: dull and monotone. My attention will be drawn and colored by these feelings and so they will reinforce each other. Turning the tables, on a bright day, when work is yielding results and I am gliding along, the world will seem wonderful and beautiful. On both kinds of day, the world itself is the same: the same beauty and wonder existed on the gray day, though I was not open to it.

Aesthetics and Feeling

I chose the word 'appreciation' to indicate this way of connecting to values because it is clearly a cognitive or perceptual term and, at the same time, it has emotional and aesthetic implications. Let us briefly look at this word. First, appreciation is clearly a form of perception, and as such it is a cognitive state that can truly or falsely represent the world. To appreciate X is to perceive appropriately the valuable aspects of X. I added the word 'appropriately' because appreciation requires the estimation of the true value of something. Sometimes, failing to have an appropriate feeling can be a form of undervaluing something. For

example, if I feel bored, then I cannot be appreciating a day out with my friends. On the other hand, the appropriate appreciative feeling towards something of disvalue could include boredom. If failing to have the appropriate feeling can be a form of undervaluing, then having appropriate feelings can be form of, and a part of appreciation.

Please note that I am not merely claiming that having inappropriate feelings can be the cause and the result of lack of appreciation. The statement that I am advancing is that, in addition to this causal role, feelings can be part of and a form of appreciation. Consequently, appreciating something can require being in an appropriate emotional state. This is because we can perceive and understand value with our feelings (Solomon, p.111). For example, one cannot perceive another person as a friend without feeling love of some kind for him or her. This is a relatively contentious view of feeling, which we shall explore and defend.

Feelings

The great French novelist Stendhal (1783-1842) describes romantic love as a process of crystallization. He uses the analogy of a stick thrown into the salt mines of Salzburg, which, when pulled out after two months, is covered with brilliant crystals:

Even the tiniest twigs... are spangled with a vast number of shimmering, glittering diamonds so that the original bough is no longer recognizable (C.Williams, p.47).

This analogy portrays well the idea of projection, discussed in Chapter 8. Here, in plain English, is what Stendhal's analogy asserts about a lover and a loved one: the loved one is just a bland stick, but the adoration of a lover coats this stick with diamond-like crystals. Underneath the crystals, the loved one remains a plain stick, the same as before. The lover is tricked into believing that these diamonds are part of the loved one. As Jose Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher (1883-1955) says:

Note that, in sum, this theory defines love as an essential fiction. It is not that love sometimes makes mistakes, but that it is, essentially a mistake (C.Williams, p.59).

If we conceive other feelings according to Stendhal's analogy, then we are in fact regarding the world as consisting of bland sticks, and

our feelings are projections of imaginary qualities upon these sticks. All feelings become a trick or a deceit: a way of believing that there are diamonds and other magical qualities in a world that only consists in atoms.

Ortega y Gasset advances an alternative way to understand feelings such as love. When we fall in love, we notice the attractive features of a person, and our attention becomes fixed on those qualities. Because of this, we become attracted and later attached to the person who has those qualities:

‘Falling in love,’ initially, is no more than this: attention abnormally fastened upon another person (C.Williams, p. 64).

Now, doubtlessly, there are a million more things to say about love, but that is not really the point here. The relevant feature of Ortega y Gasset's account is that it is cognitivist and realist. We *perceive* the loveable qualities of another person (cognitivist) and that person may well actually have those qualities (realist). Because the theory is cognitivist and realist, we can make mistakes. For instance, you can think that you see kindness and generosity in a person you are attracted to, when really you are misperceiving his or her anxious form of selfishness. Additionally, one can mistake sadness for depth. The example has helped us to see how feelings can essentially involve perceiving, shifts of attention and the making of judgments.

The Whole Person

Another line of thought that leads us to conclude that appreciation is a form of perception that may require and essentially involve feelings is that we cannot isolate the different functions of the human mind and body. There are two issues here.

First, as a preliminary point, feeling and thinking are logically linked. Aristotle stressed the essential interdependence of the cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of the psychology of any being. Believing and desiring, and thinking and wanting require each other. An organism can only think something if those thoughts have the capacity to be manifested in action or behavior. However, belief and other cognitive states alone cannot cause actions; actions require a relevant desire state (as we saw in Chapter 7). For example, the belief that it is cold outside causes appropriate cold-avoiding behavior only given the desire to avoid the cold. Similarly, we can attribute desires to a person only on the basis of his or her actions or behavior, and this requires the postulation of relevant belief states. Consequently, belief and desire require each

other. This means that the idea of a being or organism with thoughts but without desires and wants is impossible.

However, this last point concerned thinking and feeling in generic terms. To see how they are logically linked on particular occasions, consider that thinking and feeling, and desiring and sensing are continually in causal interaction. For instance, the selectivity of perception is based on feeling and desire. For example, part of feeling angry is thinking angry thoughts, remembering anger provoking situations and moving one's body angrily. According to causal theories of mind or of mental content, this causal interdependence has logical implications. Such analyses claim that part of the content of a mental state is the typical effect it has on other mental states and on behavior. In other words, part of what it is to be angry is to have angry thoughts. Therefore, we should not be surprised that part of what it is to appreciate a friend, as a friend, is to feel the relevant kind of love.

Feelings of Meaninglessness

Part of the aim of this book is to identify and correct mistaken ways of thinking about the meaning of life. However, this does not imply that, whenever we suffer from a sense of meaninglessness, this is due to some intellectual mistake. Nor does it mean that one can overcome feelings of meaninglessness just by realizing that one is making an intellectual error. For a start, it is quite possible to feel that life is meaningless while knowing that it is not. Second, the feeling that life is meaningful does not require appreciating the value or meaning of life. For example, joy does not have to arise from a connection to value, though it usually does and it is more likely to be long lasting when it does.

Third, we should be wary of making blanket statements about the causes of feelings of meaningfulness. There are so many possible causes. For example, in moments of despair and great suffering, people sometimes question the meaning of their lives. Or, one can be attacked by existential anxiety in moments of great difficulty and stress. Alternatively, contemplating the great age and size of the universe can lead one to feel overwhelmed and that nothing matters. A more neutral objective view of the universe can make the concerns of a more subjective view seem petty and absurd (see Nagel, 1986). Or, perhaps, feelings of meaninglessness arise because of the particular features of our skeptical, commercial and technological culture (see Landau, 1997 and below, page 7). Alienation might be a necessary consequence of our capitalist specialist forms of production, which deprive work of its real

meaning. Alternatively, inauthenticity and bad faith are caused sometimes by our mode of being (cf. Chapters 7 and 11).

I could further lengthen this already long list of possible causes of feelings of meaninglessness. However, the point is that it is an empirical question what causes a particular person to feel meaninglessness on a particular occasion. Philosophical analysis can help one be clear about the conceptual differences between different types of possible cause, but it cannot tell one which type of cause is operative on a particular occasion. Consequently, we should substitute the empirical question 'What are the causes of the feeling of meaninglessness?' with the conceptual question 'What does feeling of meaninglessness consist in?' The important point is that the answer to this second query must include the lack of appreciation of activities and experiences of non-instrumental worth. What might cause such lack of appreciation is a different matter.

Conclusion

This chapter has four important conclusions. The first is the idea that we connect to values by appreciating things of value, which is a form of feeling perception. Prudence requires a balance between adapting our environment to suit our nature, and changing ourselves to fit into our environment. In order to improve life, sometimes we must change ourselves rather than the world and, one way in which we can do that is by appreciating more fully the value and meaning of our activities and experiences.

Second, we examined the idea that we construct our own phenomenological 'world' because of the intentionality of attention. This point is important because it implies that we can train ourselves to construct a more meaningful phenomenological 'world.'

Third, we can be ignorant of value-possibilities. There are things of value that have not had the chance to appreciate. There are unexplored value-possibilities or values that do not directly impinge on the phenomenal world of our experience. This implies that the real world is richer than we know. Just as I can know that I am ignorant of many facts, I can also realize that there are things of value and meaning that I do not really appreciate. In this way, one can feel that the real world is full of meaning-possibilities, and this realization can change the attitude one has to life. Combining this idea with the second, we obtain the conclusion that one can construct one's phenomenological world as one that is full of unexplored meaning-possibilities.

Fourth, we looked at Husserl's analysis of intentionality and saw that the claim that mental states are directed to things in the world

(rather than to private ideas) requires the idea that mental states have content or meaning.

Reading

One of Husserl's classic works is *The Idea of Phenomenology*, 1964. A more introductory work on phenomenology is Merleau-Ponty, 1969, Chapter 2, 'What is phenomenology?' Also recommended is his *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 1996, especially Chapters 3 and 4. Two good commentaries on Husserl are B. Smith and D.W. Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, 1995 and David Bell, *Husserl*, 1990.

Appendix 1: Death

Some people think that the meaning of life is death. By 'death' we mean the end of a person's life, as opposed to passing into another form of life. Such a view would imply that an everlasting life would be meaningless, and we have already seen that there are good reasons for rejecting such a view (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, there is something intriguingly deep about the claim that death has a special personal meaning for each one of us. Perhaps the idea is that we must confront death in order for life to be meaningful. Perhaps, a person who has not faced up to death cannot have a meaningful life. Is this right?

Our appreciation of life can vary in at least two ways. First, it can vary with regard to how and to what we direct our attention. Second, the appreciation of value depends on the strength or the vividness of our awareness or consciousness. When our awareness is dull, for example when we are exhausted, we cannot properly appreciate the value of what we do.

When death is close to us, our appreciation of life typically will be full in both ways. First, in the face of death, a person cannot so easily pretend or lie to him or herself about what is really important. When death is close, we naturally attend to what really matters. Second, close to death, we are more likely to appreciate fully every moment of life and less likely to be numbed or clouded by boredom. We are more likely to be fully attentive.

However, as they stand, the above are clearly empirical claims. As a matter of fact, the closeness of death might make some people more bad-tempered, and more prone to complaint and less appreciative of life. Some people might be more open to self-deception in the face of death. Consequently, perhaps the above claims about death should be understood as normative claims rather than empirical ones. In some sense of the term 'should,' closeness to death should make us more appreciative of life. Given this, the original idea can be stated as follows: if we lived each day as it were the last, then we should be more appreciative of life's meaningfulness. For more on this theme, see Chapter 11.

Appendix 2: Mistaken Theories

We have concluded that to live meaningfully requires the appreciation of value. How meaningfully one lives depends on the quality of one's awareness, as well as on what one is doing. This quality depends on one's sensitivity to what is valuable. This point helps us to reveal more misconceptions in the standard philosophical theories of happiness or well-being examined in Chapter 6.

Against the Desire Theory

Let us return briefly to the desire theory. Our new points concerning appreciation reinforce the conclusion that, on its own, having what one desires cannot constitute well-being or a valuable life. Getting what one wants usually means nothing without appreciation. If you purchase a new toy and do not use the opportunity to play with it because of the distraction of some new desire, then the toy may as well not be there. This is partly why thinkers, from Marxists to Buddhists, have argued that constantly focusing on new wants can be a costly and fruitless venture: it diverts one's focus from the desires one has just satisfied, thereby leaving one distracted and not able to appreciate properly what one has.

The Pleasure Theory

Now let us examine the pleasure theory. In Chapter 6, we concluded that well-being does not consist of the feeling of pleasure, but to some readers it may seem that, in this chapter, we have reintroduced the idea of pleasure through that of appreciation. To counteract this suggestion, I will briefly show how understanding 'well-being' in terms of 'the appreciation of values' is significantly better than trying to comprehend it in terms of pleasure.

Here is the important difference between conceiving well-being in terms of the appreciation of values and in terms of pleasure. Treating activities as a mere means to pleasure actually destroys the possibility of appreciation their non-instrumental value, because it implies that the activities have only instrumental value. On the other hand, appreciation requires attention that is sensitive to the non-instrumental value of the activity. In this way, the two accounts are radically different from each other.

Typically, the most important aspect of a person's life is his or her relationship with other people.

Virtually all our emotions and most of our moods and desires involve other people... Even when it is hell, the meaning of life is - other people (Solomon, 1976, p.104).

This generates an apparent tension. If we are referring to the meaning of my life and to the value to me of the activities I engage in and the experiences I undergo, then the values in question are self-regarding. This does necessarily mean that they are selfish, but the values pertain to the quality of my life for me, the person living the life. On the other hand, what is important in one's relationship with other people is them, the other people. The other person is a being who has value. A relationship with another person requires connecting to the valuable nature of that person, and this seems to imply that the valuable aspect of the relationship is other-regarding. Resolving the tension between these two types of value will help us gain a better understanding of what friendship and love are. Let us look at the two sides of the conflict in order to see how they can be combined. This will also help us understand our relationship to social and political causes and deepen the conclusions of Chapter 4 regarding the role of goals in our lives.

The Other

The valuable aspect of love is the other person, the loved one. By this, I do not mean just that the beloved feels important to the person who loves, although that is, of course, true. Rather the point is that, in loving someone, one becomes connected to the valuable nature of the other person. One aspect of that connection is that the other person feels important to one. In other words, I recognize that there is a being of value distinct from me, and I become deeply connected and involved with that other life.

In Chapter 4, we saw the perils of confusing of ends or goals and non-instrumental value. In effect, the point was that I should not use myself merely as a means to the achievement of my own goals, not because this is morally wrong, but rather because to do so would be to not care for oneself. The basis of this claim is that the goals of a person matter because the person matters rather than the other way around, although this last statement is subject to an important qualification or clarification shortly. If these points apply to oneself, then they also apply to other people. In other words, each person has a reason to care for him or herself, and the basis of this non-instrumental value is not some goal that one might achieve. To think otherwise is to misunderstand the nature of goals. Just as I have value and this value has implications for the way I act and live, so the non-instrumental value of each person has similar implications for how the individual should treat him or herself.

Part of the beauty and wonder of our relationships with other people is that we can realize and feel this self-regarding value of others and, thereby, participate in it. One can do so simply by connecting to another person as a person, which, according to Kant, implies a feeling of respect for the other person. Moreover, one aspect of loving another person is learning how to see things from that individual's point of view and caring about and entering into his or her phenomenological world. It involves appreciating his or her subjectivity. More specifically, and more intimately, we can connect to the valuable qualities or character-traitsthat the other person has, such as his or her creativity, generosity, and humor or general way of being.

Love is Underdetermined

This point shows that love and other forms of commitment are, in a sense, underdetermined. There are good reasons for loving the people one cares for. For instance, they have special and loveable qualities. However, they are almost certainly not unique in having such qualities.

Yet, the fact remains that one loves this particular person and not someone else. Consequently, although I can explain causally why I love this particular person and not another, this causal explanation does not amount to a determining or a conclusive reason. At this level, love is underdetermined. Although I shall qualify this last point (see page 130), this feature of love and other forms of care has important implications for the way we should think about our relations to acquaintances and strangers.

This underdetermination is a consequence of having cognitivism and realism as a framework for comprehending the emotions. Part of love is appreciating the loveable qualities of the person one adores, but one can also recognize that many other people have similar qualities. This makes love underdetermined.

However, this same realization can enrich one's view of the world. By recognizing that other people have equally loveable qualities, one can perceive strangers as potential friends. Furthermore, one can realize that almost any person is someone that, in different circumstances, one could have admired, cared for, and come to know well. One can recognize that a person that one does not like is someone with valuable qualities, which one could have appreciated, had circumstances been different. This idea can be taken a step further. Suppose that there is a person whom one dislikes intensely and one is psychologically incompatible with. One can even appreciate that such a person is someone of value with loveable or admirable qualities whom others would love. Even one's enemies have friends. Realizing these points can transform the landscape of one's phenomenological 'world,' changing a sea of nameless faces and momentary acquaintances into persons one could have appreciated.

Another point: when we do care for someone, part of that love is an intense appreciation of, and fascination with, his or her qualities and way of being. That person would still have those attributes even if one had never known him or her. It is just that I have had the good fortune to have my attention fixed by that person's characteristics and have come to love him/her. In other words, I have connected to someone of value outside of me. Love and other forms of commitment are underdetermined, and this shows that, in loving, the value resides in the other.

One's Own Life

In contrast, when we assert that someone has meaning for me, we claim that our relationship has a self-regarding value. Life is dreary

without friends, and empty without people to share with. We need friends, companions and acquaintances.

In Chapter 2, we discussed Nozick's claim that life has meaning when one relates to things of value beyond oneself. It was this claim that generated an infinite regress, which led Nozick to require the meaningfulness of the absolute to underwrite that of the finite. Although we rejected Nozick's definition of meaning and, thereby, avoided the infinite regress, there is a positive insight of great importance in his claim that we do not want to lose. Life is more meaningful when one is connected to things of value outside oneself. For example, by loving and caring for other people, or enjoying beauty, or struggling for some cause, or by engaging in the pursuit of knowledge, we connect to things of value beyond the limits of our own life, and the activities and experiences that constitute this connection are meaningful. As we saw in Chapter six, this connection requires appreciation. By appreciating the value of things beyond our own limited lives, we can add to the meaning of our own life.

Making the Connection

We have briefly examined the other and self-regarding values concerning love and friendship. How do these two types of value become combined in a relationship? We connect to other people in three fundamental ways: first, by appreciating them, that is through our own perception, feelings and emotions; and, second, through our own goals and desires, by making their interests or concerns our own. The third involves what one might call a 'we'-consciousness. Caring for and loving others is usually a combination of these three elements.

1) Appreciation and Feeling

As we saw in the previous chapter, appreciation is a form of perception or cognition of valuable characteristics, which may involve having appropriate feelings and emotions. As well as appreciating the value of the worthwhile activities and experiences that constitute our own lives, we can appreciate the valuable character-trait and ways of being of other people. Such emotive perception is part and parcel of what it means to admire, respect, like, adore, love and care for others. These are ways of connecting to something of value that otherwise would be beyond the limits of our own lives.

2) Purpose

An important way of connecting to other persons is through the goals and desires we have. For example, when we love another person,

we make some of his or her concerns our own goals. We can care for strangers in this way too. Also, most people feel a need to be connected to things of value that are beyond the confines of their own lives and we forge such connections by adopting new purpose and ends. For example, we work for goals of importance, such as social causes, the furtherance of knowledge and the creation of art. There are jobs to be done, and we help out our friends. In these ways, we care.

In Chapter 4, we saw that purposes are a way of improving the processes of life. We need to be careful here. This does not imply that the things of value beyond ourselves that we connect to are merely instrumentally valuable as a way to improve the processes of living. There is a world of difference between the two hand:

a) 'I care for him because I want my life to be meaningful and caring for him is a way to make it more meaningful.'

and, on the other hand,

b) 'I care for him because he has the following qualities...and he is part of my life and its meaning.'

To summarize, the important differences between the two are the following: the first example of caring is motivated by a desire that is an I-desire, whereas the second is motivated by a perception of the other person's qualities. Additionally, the first example involves a means/end relation and the second a part/whole relation.

First, an I-desire is a desire that is directed to oneself or that has oneself as part of its content. For example, the desire to recover from an illness can be expressed as follows: I want that I recover from this illness soon. This is an I-desire because the content of the desire requires mention of me. In contrast, wanting the world to be a healthy place for future generations is not an I-desire, because its content does not mention me. Psychological egoism is the view that all one's basic desires are I-desires (B. Williams, 1973). Obviously, as a matter of fact, in our relationships with others, there are both kinds of caring.

Second, the kind of caring mentioned in b) constitutes a connection to value in a way that a) does not. The first instrumentalizes the other person and, therefore, it is not an instance of connecting to the non-instrumentally valuable aspects of another person. (In saying this, I do not mean that it is morally bad or inferior). In contrast, b) expresses that the other person has a non-instrumental value, because he or she is part of one's life. This implies that his or her concerns have become one's own.

Awareness of Us

The third way in which one connects to other people is by thinking, feeling and perceiving them and oneself not as 'me and you,' but as 'us.' Conceiving the relationship between two persons in terms of each being no more than means to the ends of the other destroys the non-instrumental value of the other person. To understand a relationship of love and friendship, we must substitute the means/ends relation with the part/whole relation. In other words, you become part of my life and its meaning, rather than just a means to my having a meaningful life. Someone's life being part of one's own requires 'we'-awareness.

What are the differences between 'me and you' and 'us'? The first difference is that the idea of two individual persons with separate, but perhaps overlapping, interests and concerns is distinct from the idea of a couple or group, for each one of whom the other is part of his or her life. Additionally, 'we'-consciousness is self-reflective. In other words, I am aware of us as a couple, and you are conscious that I am so aware. We recognize of each other that we regard ourselves as 'we' or 'us.'

This self-reflective 'we'-awareness dramatically alters the nature of a relationship in several ways. It strengthens the bonds between people. First, it permits the idea of doing things together as a unit and of communal activity, as opposed to the concept of co-operation between separate individuals. This is a very important aspect of our lives. There is a huge difference between playing tennis with a good friend and playing with a stranger. The first is something we did; the second is something I did with someone else. Second, it also transforms the way other peoples' interests and concerns enter into our lives. So far we have considered the ways in which your goals can become mine, but now there is the possibility of purposes that are essentially conceived of by both of us as ours. Thirdly, it permits the introduction of a new historical awareness into the conception and appreciation of a relationship. For example, couples often say: 'We have been through many things together.' Blood and family ties involve this historical 'we'-awareness. In this way, at this level, love is not underdetermined.

Causes and Other Relations

A person first starts to live when he can live outside of himself (Armand Hammer, from Friend, p. 29).

Many of the points that we have made about love and friendship also apply to caring for social and political causes and other projects.

We care about such causes because we recognize their value, and this value is ultimately both non-instrumental and non self-regarding. Yet, at the same time, our own lives are made more meaningful by our having important goals. The process of pursuing an other-regarding important goal is, all other things being equal, more valuable to us in a self-regarding way than that of pursuing a trivial goal. We have seen that the tension between the self and other-regarding values does not constitute a contradiction so long as we do not regard the relation as purely instrumental. I am not merely an instrument to the important goal, and it is not merely a means to make my life more meaningful. In this way, the integrity of both sides of the value relationship are maintained.

By this, I do not mean that one cannot enter into such purely instrumental relationships. One can regard oneself purely as an instrument to an important goal, and one can treat a cause merely as a means to meaningfulness, something one draws value from. Similarly, in a relationship, one can enslave oneself or the other person. Neither am I suggesting that such purely instrumental relations are morally wrong. Moral worth is not the issue. The point is that there is an alternative way to understand and live such relations of meaning. This alternative allows non-instrumental value as such to enter one's life. It explains how the meaning of life can be other people.

Reading

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is a classic on the nature of friendship, especially Books VIII and IX. Clifford Williams has a nice collection of articles, called *On Love and Friendship*, 1995. Robert Solomon's *The Passions*, 1976, has an interesting discussion of some of the themes of this chapter.

11

Metaphysical Expressions

Stories have a meaning, which is not reducible to the sum of the meanings of the sentences that compose them. Can we compare the life of a person to a story or text? In this sense, how can we read the meaning of our lives? Or are we the novelists? Our lives might have meaning in the way that both novels or plays do. In other words, they might say or express something. If this is true, then we need to answer the question: 'How should one interpret one's life?' As we indicated in Chapter 1, this is another way to understand the question 'What is the meaning of a life?' - in terms of expressive value.

There are two ways to understand this general idea: one as a claim about human life in general, and the other as a claim about the life of particular persons. We shall consider the first in this chapter, as generic, metaphysical characterizations of the human situation. The second, which pertains to questions such as: 'How should one understand the story of one's own life?' will be the subject of the next chapter.

The idea to be examined now is that to know the meaning of life is to know a true metaphysical narrative about the human life in general that somehow makes sense of our lives. The idea is still vague. However, we can already see that the idea should not be confused with some of the issues that we have already addressed in this book and which we do not want to re-open. For example, we have already examined the idea that life has a plan and that the meaning of life consists in fulfilling some Divine purpose. We have already discussed the idea that the meaning of life consists in the goals of personal development and spiritual liberation. Furthermore, the idea of this

chapter pertains neither to the instrumental value nor to the intrinsic value of life, but rather to its expressive value. We should not reduce the latter to the former.

Contrast the Greek sense of the drama of human life with the existentialism. The Greeks might have said the meaning of life is our fate. In the end, we are the playthings of the gods. Compare this with the existentialist portrait of human life as told by Camus and Sartre, according to which a human being has no essence, except the power to freely choose in a universe bereft of God and any objective values. There is nothing to determine our choices except ourselves (see Chapter 7). These are two sharply opposite pictures of the human situation, and they cannot both be correct, but both attempt to make sense of our lives by drawing a metaphysical picture of the human condition. In this sense, the meaning of life is a worldview or metaphysical view that shows the significance of our lives. In this way a theory of meaning should ask and answer 'What does it mean for us to exist?'

Heidegger

Heidegger (1889-1976) is one philosopher who clearly thinks that the meaning of human life is what we are, metaphysically understood. His *Being and Time* was first published in German in 1927, the first English translation appeared in 1962. Heidegger was the star pupil of Husserl, the founder of phenomenology (which we discussed in Chapter 9). Husserl was of Jewish descent and, when Heidegger joined the Nazi party in 1933 (for a year), this sealed the rift between the two philosophers. (In his work *Heidegger and Nazism*, Victor Farias argues that Heidegger was more deeply involved with Nazism than the above suggests, and this claim has generated a huge controversy). By this time, Heidegger had already developed a philosophical method quite different from Husserl's phenomenology.

Heidegger's revolutionary approach to philosophy was to reject the study of metaphysics as an investigation of what kinds of things exist (an ontic question). His primary concern is to question what it means to be (an ontological question). This question has to be understood and answered by investigating different modes of Being, in particular the mode of Being that we have. We are Dasein, or beings who can question the significance of Being:

Dasein is an entity for which, in its Being, that Being is an issue (Heidegger, 1962, p.236).

The meaning of our mode of being is given by the a priori existential characteristics of being Dasein, which, as we shall see, are primarily to be in the world and to care.

On Heidegger's approach, an analysis of the concept of the world does not involve thinking about the world as a cosmological entity, but rather understanding what it means for us to be in the world. Such an analysis will reveal the subjective concerns we have. Heidegger calls this kind of investigation 'fundamental ontology,' which is to contrasted with an ontic investigation into what entities exist. According to Heidegger, this ontological investigation is more fundamental than the ontic one that is characteristic of traditional metaphysics, because an investigation of what exists cannot be separated from a study of what it means for us humans.

An ontological analysis will uncover what it means to be first by examining different modes of being, which Heidegger calls existentials. Heidegger argues that there are two kinds of existentials: those from an everyday, inauthentic perspective, and those that are authentic and take seriously the dimension of time. Authentic are those modes of being in which Dasein is aware of his/her own existence and its meaning. The authentic/inauthentic distinction can be applied to every way in which we can exist. For example, there is authentic talking, listening, thinking etc (Heidegger, p.68). This point has an important significance, which we will return to later.

The existentials are a priori characteristics of Dasein's mode of being, which are modes of living rather than just the necessary forms of thought. The first is Being-in-the-world. I find myself in the midst of a world that constitutes my surroundings and dwelling place, and which affects me and which is meaningful to me. My primary relationship to things in that world is to use them; they are ready at hand as opposed to present at hand, or independent of any function, which is a derivative or secondary relationship and an abstraction (Heidegger, p.95-101). This is a point of great importance for understanding Heidegger and the issues we raised in Chapter 8. Normally thinkers assume that the world is as science portrays it to be and that we add in, or project our interests onto this neutral world. Heidegger offers the opposite analysis: our primary understanding of the world is and must be pre-theoretical and in accordance with our concerns. The world as it is described by theoretical physics, consisting of things present at hand, is an abstraction from this world of things ready at hand.

The self is inherently part of the world in which other persons live. Heidegger writes:

The world of Dasein is a with-world. Being-in is being with Others. Their Being-in-Themselves within the world is Dasein-with (Heidegger, p.155).

There is no separate solipsistic Cartesian ego. On the contrary, I share the world with other Daseins, who also view things in the world as ready at hand. This constitutes the second existential, Being-with. To be Dasein is to be with other Daseins, for whom the world also consists of equipment and who themselves are not pieces of equipment or mere instruments (Heidegger, p.153-163).

Another existential, or a priori aspect of Dasein's mode of being, is translated as 'state-of-mind' or the state in which one is found; these states are moods, the way we find ourselves disposed to life. By 'mood,' Heidegger does mean not a passing emotional or mental state, but rather a way of attuned to the world, which involves our whole being. According to Heidegger, we are always in some mood or other, and the idea of moods emphasizes two points about our general condition. First, it draws attention to our 'thrownness'- that we are (as it were) thrown into a world in which many factors are beyond our control. Second, it stresses that what we encounter in the world matters to us (Heidegger, p.172-7). Moods constitute Dasein's awareness of his or her actual existence. For example, fear is one way to relate to the given nature of the world and one way in which it becomes significant for us - as a threat. Fear is possible because part of my existence is to be concerned about what is (Heidegger, p.179).

Heidegger contrasts moods with understanding (Heidegger, p.182). Moods are various kinds of awareness of our actual condition; in contrast, our awareness of possible existence is due to understanding. Understanding enables us to project the possibilities that Dasein is (Heidegger, p.185). The understanding of possibilities is fundamental to Heidegger's characterization of the human condition for three reasons. First, it indicates that we are more than the actual. We are beings with possibilities and a future ahead of us. Second, as the first point shows, we are essentially temporal beings and, therefore, death is an essential and important feature of the human condition. Third, the potential of Dasein marks the difference between the authentic self and the inauthentic they-self. As we shall see, these three points are very closely linked.

It is important to note that the two general features of the human condition are equally significant for Heidegger. On the one hand, there is actuality, or our being thrown into the world, which has aspects that we cannot control and, on the other hand, there is possibility, or the fact that our existence consists of more than we actually are at any time.

One lives inauthentically when one is unaware of the meaning of Being, and one is lost in the anonymous 'they':

The 'they' prescribes one's state-of-mind, and determines what and how one sees (p. 213).

Such a state is marked by an ambiguity in relation to oneself, idle talking or chatter with other people, and casual curiosity in relation to things (Heidegger, p.210-219). All three states display tranquil unconcern, or the passive and detached lack of care. The inauthentic state consists of being aware only of the actual, and not realizing that one's being also consists of possibilities. In particular, inauthenticity is marked by unawareness of one's non-existence as a possibility. When Dasein is not aware of its own meaning, then it is not conscious of its finitude.

To show the primacy of care, Heidegger gives analysis of *angst*, or anxiety or dread (Heidegger, p. 229-235). Although Heidegger's analysis of Angst or anxiety or dread is famous, many different kinds of attunement or mood could be described, to show the primacy of care, *Angst* is a turning away from the self and, as such, it reveals something about what it is a turning away from. It reveals care. This *angst*, or existential anxiety, is unlike fear in that it does not have a specific object. Fear is always directed towards something, but angst is not. It is a general feeling of dread that one has, especially at the prospect of death or our own non-existence or nothingness. However, to emphasize the point, angst is not fear of death; it is a general feeling of not being at home in the world or of being alienated. It makes one confront oneself and one's possibilities: either to be truly oneself or to lose oneself in the 'they' and everyday life.

The last existential, care, is the most important of them all because it unifies the others, and thus it provides the meaning of being Dasein in the most general sense. In this way it constitutes the meaning of life (Heidegger, p. 227).

Care is the primary characteristic of Dasein as Dasein. That this is so is shown by the fact that the other important existentials involve care as part of their structure (Heidegger, p.237). The existential of moods reveals the self in its an actual state, which Heidegger calls facticity. The existential of understanding displays what the self can be (which Heidegger calls existentiality). The existential of inauthenticity shows that the self is hiding from itself (which Heidegger calls falliness). All these three aspects of Dasein's mode of being are different forms of caring. We care about the things ready at hand within the world; we care for the other beings around us; we care in our anxiety, in

our fleeing from ourselves and in the possibility of an authentic existence (Heidegger, p.236-7).

Time and Death

Heidegger's analysis is not complete. He needs to move from a study of the ways in which human beings exist, which is the existential analytic that comprises part I of *Being and Time*, towards a study of what it means to be (the fundamental ontology that comprises part II of *Being and Time*). The investigation must shift from ways of being more towards what it means to be. The analysis up to now has not emphasized the authentic ontological awareness that Dasein can have of itself as a being in time. This shift is a question of emphasis, because by examining ways of being, we shall come to understand more specifically the meaning of Being.

Each person dies his or her own death, which cannot be shared with another. Heidegger expresses this by affirming that death is my 'ownmost.' This is an existential, a mode of being, part of what we are thrown into. In an inauthentic mode of existence, Dasein tries to flee from death.

Strangely enough, Heidegger regards an authentic awareness of death as being conscious of it as the *possibility* of not-being, rather than just as an actual future event. This is because the awareness of death as a possibility, in contrast to it as a future event, focuses on our being-able-to-be. Authenticity requires full awareness of one's capacity and freedom to really be. For this reason, Heidegger stresses that authentic awareness of death must be consciousness of it as a possibility, namely that of not-being. In this way, awareness of death as a possibility comprises consciousness of one's finitude.

Furthermore, according to Heidegger, the meaning of Being must be regarded as a possibility rather than an actuality. Thus, the meaning of my not-being also must be conceived as a possibility rather than as an actuality. If a person does not actually exist, then the individual's not being cannot have any meaning for him or her. Because the question 'What is the meaning of not-being?' is about possibility, so too the question 'What does it mean to be?' must be also about my possibilities (Gelven, p. 153).

Death is the future that can never arrive as an actuality. It can never become a past, nor a 'could have been.' Thus, it will never be an actuality for the individual. Death is the possibility of the individual's own non-being. In facing this possibility, one confronts the removal of all possibility, which turns possibility into impossibility. Nonetheless,

by confronting death, the individual makes possible for the first time authentic being.

Furthermore, death reveals the essentially temporal nature of our existence. For Dasein, to be is to be temporal. What does this mean? Heidegger analyzes the temporal nature of Dasein in terms of care. To have a future means to anticipate, to look, or rather to care forward. To have a past means to have come from something that one was and cared about. For the future and the past to have meaning, they must be essentially tied to Dasein's existence. In this way, the structure of time corresponds to that of care. The past reveals our thrownness; the future, the awareness of possibilities, and the present, the actual.

Conclusions

The main point of our brief examination of Heidegger is to give an example of a thinker who claims that the meaning of life is best understood as the question: What does it mean to be? According to Heidegger, this in turn is best understood as 'What does it mean to be Dasein?' An answer to these questions must give the most general metaphysical characteristics of the human situation.

How does a metaphysical system explain, constitute or reveal the meaning of life? In this work, we do not want to adjudicate between different metaphysical views. Instead, we should ask 'How does a metaphysic impinge on the meaning of life? One way a metaphysic might appear to constitute the meaning of life is by implying some purpose for human life, individually or collectively. However, we have already examined and rejected this general idea, by arguing that meaning should not be identified with purpose. Second, a metaphysic might show us how living is non-instrumentally valuable. This was one of our concerns in Chapters 6-9. Thirdly, a metaphysic might disclose the meaning of life by showing us what it means to be, or by revealing what human existence in general expresses. This is what Heidegger's metaphysic claims to do.

Reading

Heidegger's *Being and Time* is a notoriously difficult book, but it is strongly recommended. A good commentary on the text is Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*. There is also a good introductory discussion of Heidegger in Robert D'Amico, *Contemporary Continental Philosophy*.

12

The Novelist

Some metaphysical worldviews try to make sense of our lives by showing us the general characteristics of human existence and their implications. While such attempts may be illuminating, they leave unanswered the more specific question 'What does my life mean?' Like their generic metaphysical counterparts, answers to this specific question should not be understood primarily as an account of the instrumental or non-instrumental value of one's life, such as the kinds of theory discussed in Chapters 4 to 10 of this book. Instead, they should be taken as a request to make one's life intelligible.

The Meaning of Actions

Let us begin by considering the intelligibility and meaning of actions. Simply, an action is something a being intentionally does. Actions are not the same as mere bodily movements. The difference is that we are responsible for our actions, but not for mere movements, such as the beating of the heart. This is because, whereas bodily movements, such as knee jerks, should be explained purely physiologically, the explanation of an action as an action involves psychological factors. To explain an action as such is to show why somebody did it, which means citing the psychological reasons or causes. Typically, these psychological reasons are the desires and beliefs that caused the action. For example, walking to the bank is an action, because it is caused by a desire (to have money at hand), directed by a

belief (that I can obtain money readily at the bank). This is the standard belief-desire model of action explanation, which we mentioned in Chapter 7.

This brief account of the notion of an action suggests that the meaning of action should be stated in terms of the intention of the agent, where the intention is a function of the relevant desires and beliefs. When someone performs an action, he or she has an intention and what the person intended to do defines what the action is. Suppose your action of turning a switch causes someone to be electrocuted. Does this imply that you electrocuted someone? If it was in no way your intention to cause such an effect, then the answer is 'No.' We can assert that your action caused an electrocution, but this is not the same as asserting that the electrocution was an action of yours.

Consequently, we can affirm tentatively that actions are individuated at the level of intention. It is the agent's intention that collects or throws a lasso around some events, and excludes others, as the action of an agent. In this way too, it draws the boundary between one action and another. For example, I intend to clear up the kitchen table, so my moving my arm towards the dirty plate is part of that larger action, rather than being a separate and distinct action on its own account. My bodily movements are structured around that intention and it is the intention that defines what is to count as one action distinct from another.

These points have an important implication. The characterization of action as such requires a particular level of description. Some descriptions would be too microscopic to count as identifying an action, such as 'Moving my arm an inch to the left.' Others would be too macroscopic, such as 'Every month he grows more mature.' The first are too finely detailed, and the second too broad, and do not describe what is happening in terms of actions. This point will become important later.

From these considerations, we can see that actions are intentional. The concept of intentionality was explained in earlier chapters, but it is worth repeating. Intentionality is a feature of mental states in virtue of which they are about something. The intentionality of mental states is expressed by the italicized clause in the following sentence: 'Mary believes *that P*.' The letter 'P' specifies the content of the mental state; by virtue of having such a content, belief-states are intentional. To be clear, the concept of intentionality should not be confused with the idea of an intention, despite the verbal similarity. Whereas intentionality is a characteristic of most mental states, intentions are a specific kind of mental state.

Mental states are intentional, because they have content and, in this way, they have meaning. From this we can see that actions are also

intentional. To describe what a person is doing, it is necessary to describe the action from his or her perspective. To resort to the earlier example, I cannot truly describe your action of turning on the switch as an electrocution. To be characterized as such, this would have to have been your intention. As a consequence, actions are intentional and sentences describing actions are intensional (see Chapter 8).

Because actions are intentional, we can regard them as having meaning or content and, in turn, this is why we have to interpret or make sense of a person's actions. For example, when we see a person doing something strange, we try to understand his or her action by interpreting the meaning of the action in the context. This usually consists of attributing appropriate beliefs and desires to the agent. Once we know the causally relevant beliefs and desires, we may be said to understand the action.

This last point suggests an approach to the question of the meanings of a person's life. Remember the overall context. We are now trying to examine the expressive meaning that a life might have. Whereas in the previous chapter we examined the idea that human life has a generic expressive meaning, we are now concerned with the idea that each person's life has a specific expressive meaning. Here is an approach suggested by our brief analysis of action: the expressive meaning of a person's life is the meaning of all the actions that constitute that individual's life, and the meaning of any action is the intention the agent had in performing that action. According to this picture, the meaning of a life would be all the intentions that the person had.

This suggestion has two problems. First, the meaning of an action need not be identical to the intention the person had in performing that action. Actions can have unintended meanings. For example, by definition, Freudian slips have an unintended meaning. Sometimes, after the fact, we can see the unintended meanings of our actions. Second, should we think of a person's life as a collection of actions? Is there more to a life than that?

Beyond the Atomistic

We tend to think of our lives as composed of actions. After all, the actions we perform are what we actually do, or will to happen. It is at the level of action that we have most control over our lives, most choice and most awareness. We also think of the lives of others in terms of the actions they performed. However, suppose that we answered the question 'What did you do today?' for each and every day of a lifetime. Would that be a fair description of a person's life?

Here is one preliminary basis for doubt. When actions are defined in terms of their intended results, an exclusive emphasis on action interprets our lives in terms of achievement. If one regards a person's life only as a collection of actions, then we equate the individual's life with what he or she has done. This conception of a life has its counterpart concerning values. We tend to conceive of values in terms of reasons for action. This way of thinking assumes that values are no more than reasons for action. In Chapter 9, we saw that this assumption ignores the role that values can have in appreciation, perception and feeling. This role is important because it forges a direct connection to the quality of one's life. In a similar way, regarding a life as simply a collection of actions seemingly omits the experiential aspect of living.

Furthermore, the notion of an action embodies a fragmented and atomistic view of life. The life of a person cannot consist merely of a collection of discrete actions because there are patterns to our lives that transcend daily doings. By understanding these patterns, we can make sense of our lives and find meaning in the connections between actions that were not part of our intentions in performing them. To repeat an old theme, this is not a question of *giving* one's life meaning, but rather of finding meaning or being able to read it.

There are other descriptions of what happens to a person that are too wide-angled to be thought of as actions. They are broader than our intentions. For example, I become alienated from my job, acquire new interests and friends. These are not intentional actions. These are things that happen to me. Although in a sense I am still responsible for them, I did not bring them about intentionally. These long-range descriptions of what happens to me enable me to see meanings in my life that cannot be reduced to the sum of the individual meanings of each particular action.

This idea should be familiar to us. For example, newspapers usually report a day in the life of the world as consisting of a collection of events. The bomb explodes in London; the unemployment figures in Germany are announced; the Prime Minister of Japan resigns in a scandal. However, to understand, for instance, the peace process between the Arabs and Israelis, one needs to know the process of history, and this requires more than a reporting on a series of particular events, such as the signing of a treaty. It also requires connecting events into a whole, making sense of them, fitting them into a pattern by telling a story. It requires a different type of reporting. To make sense of the event requires seeing it as part of a larger process.

Much the same can be said about the understanding of history in general. All English school children know what happened in 1066. But if they know it only as an isolated event, then it is a boring fact that

does not connect with other events into a meaningful whole. The ancient Greek philosopher Thales (624-545 BC) said that the world was made of water. As yet another piece of information to learn, as a fact on its own, it means nothing. When we appreciate that the ancient Greeks were the first to look for unity in nature, to seek unifying principles and explanations, we can begin to see Thales' claim as an important first step in a long tradition.

When one thinks of a business meeting as a series of events, one cannot see the process as a whole, and so one will look upon the result of the meeting as yet one more event in that series, rather than as a part of the process itself. In which case, one cannot perceive the result as part of the process undergone by the participants. Instead, one will conceive of the meeting as an instrument to the result, such as a contract or a written agreement. In a meeting of people with strong personalities, there are dramas of power, and the opening and closing of minds to new understanding, all which are part of what working together is. None of this can be reduced to merely a means to attain a signed contract. To understand the deeper processes at play in the meeting, one cannot think of it as a series of disconnected events.

For similar reasons, the important value-questions one has to ask about oneself cannot always be framed in terms of actions. The idea of action requires viewing life discretely, chopped up into small segments. However, a person's life does not consist of discrete sections and to understand it, it is necessary to see it as a continuous whole, almost like a story. To see patterns and meaning, we look beyond individual events.

Furthermore, the term 'reasons for action' can mislead us into thinking about our lives as if they were divorced from the type of persons we are. Sometimes, it is not so important what a person does, but rather what that person's action expresses about his or her state of being, how it influences or reinforces the individual's personality, and how it fits into a larger pattern that defines the individual's character.

Life Plans

One might think the following. 'I agree that the notion of an action is too narrow and atomistic. The expressive meaning of a person's life should not be thought of as the collection of the meanings of the actions he or she performed. Instead, we should understand the expressive meaning of a life in terms of the person's life-plan. Such a plan helps define what is importantly good or bad for a person: something harmful damages one's life-plan, and an important benefit facilitates one's life-plan. The concept of a life-plan allows for

individual variations between people: 'Life plans come in all shapes and sizes, like persons' (Lomasky, 1987). Consequently, if we wish to interpret a person's life in a way that transcends particular actions, then we should look to the notion of a life-plan as the defining characteristic. As intention is to action, so life-plan is to a life. A correct interpretation of a person's action will be framed in terms of his or her intentions in performing that action. Similarly, the correct manner to interpret someone's life is in terms of his or her life-plan.' As an example of this approach, Fischer writes:

It is in virtue of freely generating (in some sense) our plans of life—even extremely sketchy and inchoate plans, open to extensive subsequent specification and modification—that we give meaning to our lives (J. Fischer, 1993).

In the above, I have mixed two distinct ideas that now need to be separated. First, there is the claim that a life-plan gives life meaning or that the non-instrumental values of a life should be explained in terms of a life-plan. The second idea is that we should interpret a person's life in terms of his or her life-plan. I will now argue against both ideas.

First a warning: Beware of life-plans; they tend to carry instrumental rationality beyond its limits. Having a plan means having longer-term goals, planning a strategy, monitoring your performance towards those goals, and perhaps even having a time budget for the different goals. All this suggests that what matters are the goals, which implies treating life's processes, and ultimately oneself, as merely instrumentally valuable to a set of goals. Life-plans tend to make achievement the central concern of a person. They take the idea of a goal-oriented action as a paradigm and write it large for a whole life. This point is not an argument against life-plans per se, but rather indicates a limitation of the culture that fosters life-plans.

More decisively, if we try to explain value and meaning in terms of life-plans, then we end up with no more than an expanded version of the desire account. After all, a life-plan is what somebody wants to do with his or her life. Thus, understanding value and meaning in these terms has all the problems inherent in the desire model, which we rejected in Chapter 6. As we noted in that chapter, desire does not constitute value, even if it can be a good guide to it. We can have bad or harmful desires. Similarly, we can have mistaken life-plans: people can adopt life-plans that do not suit them. People can live by scripts, which others have authored for them. Life plans, like desires, can be evaluated as good or bad for a person, and so they cannot themselves constitute the ground for such an assessment. Such plans need

evaluation, and so they are not the basis for such evaluation. We cannot answer the question 'What makes a life-plan good or bad for a specific person?' by simply citing his or her life-plan.

Thirdly, suppose a person does not have a life-plan. The idea of planning a life is particular to some cultures and not others. Many people live more from day to day, and in some respects, this may be a better way to live. Sometimes, what matters most in life is the unplanned and the spontaneous. Living day to day can, of course, itself be a life-plan; but it need not be a consciously adopted strategy. Consequently, not everybody has a life-plan and, thus, we have reason to doubt that such plans are central to the definition of the meaning of life and to its interpretation.

Fourth, planning is a deliberative intellectual activity. The claim that one ought to have a life-plan is equivalent to the idea that the conscious mind can guide a whole life. The planning-conscious mind is not the whole of a person, and the planning intellect does not always understand feelings and emotions well. For example, typically, when we plan our actions, we do not take into sufficient consideration our own feelings and those of the other people around us. Consequently, what one's intellect might project as the content and direction of one's life would probably be unsatisfactory and less meaningful than a life lived more spontaneously. A life-plan is limited by one's own preconceptions of oneself and what is possible for one. Can you plan how your sense of humor will change? How your interests will change? What you find important in friendship will change? Even if a flower had a huge brain, it would not be able to plan having petals. A tree could not plan its own growth.

A similar point applies to the interpretation of a life. The story I might write to understand my own life based on my life-plans would be very limited. This is because planning is like making lists of things to do and, thus, an interpretation based exclusively on my life-plans would focus on what I have done, leaving aside those aspects of my life that have changed more spontaneously without my willing them. Making life-plans central to the interpretation of life leaves no room for those aspects of life that are beyond the self-conscious planning mind. It builds a picture of how a life has been led based on past expectations.

Narratives

To summarize, action embodies a limited metaphysic and prescribes an intention-based focus on life. It is atomistic and result defined and, consequently, a life as a whole cannot be merely a collection of actions. To see life as a process, we need a wider non-

result-oriented concept with which to frame this perspective. The notion of a life plan does not fulfill this role adequately. Perhaps that of a narrative will. Some writers urge that we should view our life as a story (Dworkin, 1993).

In some ways, this is an illuminating analogy; in others, it is misleading. For instance, characters in novels do not have to really live their plots! The characters are put there for artistic reasons, for the sake of a readership. In contrast, we have to live through both the most melodramatic and fictional aspects of our lives, as well as the mundane. In this vital sense, our lives are quite unlike stories (see Ricoeur, 1991). Furthermore, people who consciously live their lives as an artistic creation are thereby thinking of themselves as literary products narrated for the sake of some unspecified audience. It is not a good idea to turn yourself into a novel.

The analogy is also misleading in quite a different way. If one were to conceive of one's life as a story which oneself had to write, then one would pen the chapters of one's future with the ink of one's wishes. One would project one's current wishes onto the rest of one's life. However, in fact, this probably would be a poor way to make sense of one's life. Furthermore, characters in novels do not write their own plots and what the author has in store for the character usually would be beyond his or her ken. Even though we exercise some control over our actions, we do not intentionally write our own story.

A Pattern of a Thousand Pieces

These were some of the misleading features of comparing life to a story. Nevertheless, the analogy has some more perceptive aspects. Derek Parfit asks us to imagine a situation in which 1000 people each turn a dial and contribute a tiny electric shock to a person (Parfit, 1984). The sum effect of them all doing this is that the person suffers a tortuous death. No single one of those persons is responsible for the death, and yet they all are. Parfit's example is an analogy for many social actions, such as the destruction of the earth, where each person performs what is individually a harmless action, but which collectively is destructive. It is also an interesting analogy for how life means more than just actions.

Often, we think of decisions and actions in a one to one relation: we decide and then act, and the action either has the good consequences we foresaw or unanticipated negative results. Parfit's example illustrates how many important choices are not like this. Individual actions build up into complex patterns which have a character of their own and which define a life. In St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, there is a statue of St.

Peter. All devoted visitors kiss the feet of St. Peter. The net effect over the years has been that St. Peter now virtually has no feet. Each single act of devotion, harmless in itself, has over the centuries vandalized the statue. The net pattern has a characteristic that is entirely different from those of the individual actions. What is true of many lives can be true within one life, and this is a reason why we should not think of what we do in purely atomistic terms.

We can see now another way in which the idea of life as an unfinished story is little misleading. The story is not deliberately written, in the way that an author writes a book, but is made of lots of tiny actions, like the kissing of St. Peter's feet. If my life is a book, then I write it indirectly only and, consequently, I have to struggle to try to read it correctly.

Interpretation

'How should I read my life?' is a question of self-perception and interpretation. However, some people doubt that this kind of question even makes sense. Julian Jaynes, the famous psychologist, writes

There is no answer because *words* have meaning, not life or persons, or the universe itself... (Julian Jaynes quoted in Friend, p72).

Jaynes' view is that meaning is necessarily restricted to language. However, there is a strong argument against that position. First as a preliminary, we can try to dissolve the distinction between the linguistic and the non-linguistic. Gestures can have meaning, but they are not linguistic, even though they are communicative. However, if gestures can have meaning, then perhaps postures and rituals can. And if postures and rituals can have meaning, why not simple actions? Underlying this idea is the following point. In our brief study of Husserl, we saw that mental states can have meaning, in the sense of having content and being intentional. This kind of meaning is primary because it seems plausible to maintain that the meaningfulness of language is derived in some way from the content of mental states (see, for example, J. Searle 1983 and J. Bennett, *Linguistic Behavior*). In general, actions (and not just linguistic actions) can have meaning or content, because they are caused by and are expressive of intentional mental states that themselves have content. This is why actions have to be interpreted, and the part of philosophy most concerned with interpretation is called hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a relatively new branch of philosophy that in part has arisen because literary critics,

legal thinkers, social scientists and historical scholars have seen that their work involves a common set of problems and a common approach.

The hermeneutical approach has five characteristics. First, it applies to things that have some kind of intentionality, even if it is derivative. Consequently, for example, there can be interpretation and a hermeneutics of people's behavior, of social practices, of texts, of paintings, of animal behavior, and of legal precedents and traditions. However, there is no hermeneutics of landscapes or cloud formations or star clusters, unless there is a reason for treating these systems as intentional.

Second, interpretation is usually contrasted with causal explanation. In part, hermeneutics originated as a response to the logical positivist idea that the methodology of the natural sciences could be imported into the social sciences. In the natural sciences, we explain an event by citing its causes, which would include some physical laws. However, the hermeneutic tradition opposes the claim that the methodology of the natural sciences can be extended into social studies because, in the social sciences, we are concerned with actions as such, or with intentional states as such, all of which have content or meaning. The point of interpretation is to understand the content or meaning of these states and of actions, and this hermeneutical process will not involve citing law-like causes. For example, interpreting a social ritual would require understanding the meaning of that ritual for the people engaged in it, from their point of view, and not in explaining the ritual causally, for example, in terms of its potential survival value.

Third, interpretation is essentially holistic. For example, to understand a ritual requires comprehending a host of other concepts that the people concerned employ, which in turn requires understanding other social practices of the group. There is a web of interrelated meanings to understand. This holistic nature of interpretation is reflected in the famous hermeneutical circle, according to which interpretation involves a circle: to understand the parts of a text or practice, one needs to grasp the meaning of the whole, but to do that requires understanding the parts. However, this is not a vicious circle; it is a question of correcting one in light of the other. Habermas expresses the point as follows:

We can decipher parts of a text only if we anticipate an understanding, however diffuse, of the whole; and conversely, we can correct this anticipation only to the extent that we explicate individual parts (quoted from D'Amico, p.182).

Fourth, look at the following contrast. On the one hand, there is no such thing as presupposition-free interpretation. All interpretation must start from the set of concepts and meanings of the interpreter, which Heidegger calls 'the fore-structure.' However, on the other hand, interpretation consists in entering into the point of view of another. When one characterizes the content of someone's intentional mental state, one must do so in terms of his or her point of view. When one tries to understand a text, one cannot simply impose one's own ideas on it; one needs to interpret it correctly.

How do we reconcile these two points? The hermeneutical approach claims that we can reconcile the two points through the self-reflective nature of interpretation. To understand something requires us to examine critically the fore-structures or presuppositions of our own interpretation in light of the uncovered meanings in what is being interpreted. In other words, we should place our presuppositions into a critical dialogue with the text that is being read. In this way, our own understanding changes through the process of interpretation. The French hermeneutical thinker Hans George Gadamer (1900-) says:

The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own foremeaning (Gadamer, p.269).

Viewed in this fashion, the cultural presuppositions one brings to an interpretation cannot be regarded as an obstacle to understanding. They are a necessary part of it. However, interpretation must be both open and critical in order for it to be enriching and self-reflective.

Gadamer stresses that the process of interpretation must be deeply self-reflective because it must be constrained by truth. A reading of a text ought to be true or not erroneous. This requirement necessitates the element of self-reflection, as opposed to some rigid pre-defined method (One of Gadamer's books is called *Truth and Method*). However, we should emphasize that this point may not mean that there is necessarily only one correct way to understand a text. Nevertheless, it does rule out the idea that it is merely a matter of opinion. There is such a thing as misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

Finally, the hermeneutical approach stresses that the interpretation of a text should not consist in an attempt to reconstruct the intentions of the author. The meaning of a text and the intention of the author might be two distinct issues. The project of interpreting a text is one of making the best overall sense of it in the present context. Gadamer points out that:

a hermeneutical consciousness exists only under specific historical conditions (Gadamer, p.xxxiii)

For example, according to this view, knowing the intentions of the framers of the constitution of the United States is not necessary or sufficient for understanding the meaning of the document itself; interpreting the meaning of the text must include understanding its significance in our context, today.

Application to Life

Knowing the meanings of one's life can be understood as knowing how to interpret it as one would a text. Applying some of the principles of hermeneutics, we arrive at the following conclusions.

First, the hermeneutical approach only applies to things with intentionality or meaning, such a text. Although one's life is not a text or a narrative, it is similar to one. We write our lives and construct our phenomenological world, but only indirectly.

Second, according to the hermeneutical circle, we must understand the whole in terms of the parts and vice versa. This seems to imply that the full meaning of an action can be understood only by knowing the life of that person. Is this claim plausible? One may wonder whether this is true; surely, we can understand the meaning of particular actions, such as drinking a glass of water, without the need of such a wide context. However, a little thought makes the holistic claim of hermeneutics appear more plausible. For example, where was I when I drank the water? Was I walking in the desert? At home? At work? On an airplane? Any reply brings with it a whole story, which to be understood will need to be interpreted in the context of my whole life. In isolation, the interpretation of the action will be partial or incomplete. Note that the phrase 'my whole life' needs the qualification 'up to now.'

Third, it is possible to misinterpret one's life. However, at the same time, because of the intentionality of interpretation, there is not just one correct interpretation of one's life. There are countless ways to interpret it. For example, there are love stories. There are stories about one's relationship to one's parents and children, about the development of one's talents, the aging of one's body. One could interpret one's life in terms of transactional analysis, the attempt to characterize how the parent, child and adult of each person interacts with those of others in our relationships (E. Berne, 1964). Or, one could try to understand it in terms of one's changing perception of oneself, or one's self-image. There are countless dimensions of interpretation, and this is why it is a

mistake to refer to *the* meaning of one's life, as if there were only one. However, affirming this last point is not the same as denying the possibility that one might make an error in understanding one's own life.

Fourth, to understand one's own life may be exceptionally difficult because interpretation requires critical self-reflection. Just as one has to be willing and able to modify one's assumptions and preconceptions in approaching a text, so one must be able to do the same to read one's own life. The critical dialogue must be with oneself about oneself; the otherness that Gadamer refers to must be provided by one's own life (see page 149). This means that the required critical distance is difficult to attain, but it also means that it is all the more liberating when it is achieved.

Reading

Gadamer's main work is *Truth and Method*, 1989. Of especial interest is the second part, II, Chapters 1-3. Another interesting work on interpretation is Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 1971, especially Chapters 7 and 8. The French hermeneutical thinker, Paul Ricoeuer, has written an interesting article 'Life in Quest of Narrative' (1991) directly relevant to this chapter.

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Everyday Life

The meanings of life must be found in everyday life, because that is where we live most of the time and because meaning is immanent. Of course, a person may have outstandingly meaningful moments, or even whole days, liberated from the sufferings and habits of everyday life. However, typically, such moments are rare and, even if we can find a way to make them more frequent, nevertheless one has to find the meanings of one's life in everyday existence, whether everyday life contains special moments or not.

We began this book by examining very general and metaphysical answers to the question 'What is the meaning of life?' Although later on we considered the more specific question 'What are the meanings of my life?', we have not examined the particular question: 'What are the meanings of my life at this time, in this particular context I find myself?' Because of its particularity, this is one of the most potent questions a person can ask him or herself. It requests one to specify the particular challenges and struggles that one faces. Despite the fact that meaning does not consist in attaining some goal, it can include the process of self-development, and to answer the particular question 'What are the meanings of my life now in this specific context?' requires identifying the particular ways one most needs to develop now.

The specific question is also a request to identify the real possibilities one faces for non-instrumentally valuable activities and experiences. In turn, this requires one to be able to separate, on the one hand, the inescapable aspects of one's life-situation that one must

accept and, on the other, what constitutes real hope for a better future. The question is not an invitation to false hope, nor to despair. In particular, there is a kind of despair that does not necessarily manifest itself as a feeling, but rather consists of limiting or reducing one's possibilities and, thereby, making one's life seem less meaningful than it really is.

The specific question is also a request that one make sense of one's life in its context and this too requires identifying real possibilities for the future, and accepting the inescapable without limiting the future. As we saw in the last chapter, it also requires honesty about the significance and reality of one's past and present.

The fact that the question 'What are the meanings of my life at this time, in this particular context I find myself?' is poignant does not necessarily mean that generic questions about the meaning of life are meaningless, useless or unknowable. It just means that, because they are general, they do not require one to think about the specific context of one's life and what one should do next in those circumstances.

We have assumed that, at least at some level of generality, there are some universally applicable answers to the question 'What is the meaning of life?' We defended this assumption briefly in Chapters 1 and 7. Let us review some of these points.

The idea that there are universally applicable answers to the question certainly does not imply that those answers will be universally accepted. The fact that there may be no universally accepted replies, however, does not mean that there are no universally applicable ones. This is because a statement can be true even if it is not believed or accepted.

One of the objectionable aspects of the idea of a universally applicable meaning of life is that it apparently rules out the possibility of individual differences and, thereby, abstracts the question from the particular contexts of our lives. However, this objection does not hold water because a general account of meaning can allow for individual differences and contexts. For example, suppose part of the meaning of life is to develop one's talents or to engage in non-instrumentally worthwhile activities, then this is a universal answer that admits of individual differences. Furthermore, a universal claim should be distinguished from an unqualified one. Universal statements can be subject to qualifications. For example, the sentence 'If one lives in such and such a culture and has such and such interests, then part of the meaning of one's life would be X' is a universal claim, despite all its qualifications. Therefore, we can conclude that what is objectionable is the attempt to specify a unique, unqualified, universal answer that admits of no variations and is insensitive to the differing contexts of

individual lives. But this does not rule out generic answers per se so long as they are suitably qualified.

Another apparently objectionable aspect of the concept of a universal answer is that it seems to imply that people in our western culture have the right to impose our conception of life's meanings and our value-assumptions on other cultures. However, in reply, no such right follows. This is basically because the truth of a statement and the right to impose one's view about that statement are two entirely different issues. Even if what you say is true, this does not mean that you have the right to impose your view on me. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that any answer we provide to the question 'What are the meanings of life?' will be framed in the terminology of our culture and, in this way, it will be limited. While this means that we should be cautious in making cross-cultural generalizations, such as those made in Buddhism, it does not imply that they are impossible. Moreover, as we learned in Chapter 11, cross-cultural dialogue is a hermeneutical process through which we can expand and transform our own preconceptions to make them more inclusive.

The Nine Mistakes

In Chapter 1, I asserted that there are nine importantly mistaken ways to think about meaning and value, each of which leads us to deny the meaning of life. I said that, in part, my aim would be to show why these ways of thinking are mistaken. Since this is a good way to review some of the major themes of this book, I shall conclude by listing these mistakes. However, please bear in mind the qualifications noted in Chapter 9, on page 120. These are the errors:

- 1) Only the infinite has meaning; the finite can only have meaning insofar as it participates in the infinite (Chapter 2).
- 2) The meaning of life consists in some goal or purpose (Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 10).
- 3) The meaning of life is happiness (Chapter 6).
- 4) The meaning of life must be invented (Chapter 7).
- 5) Life cannot have a meaning if the universe is entirely composed of matter, as science teaches us (Chapter 8).

6) The sole or primary purpose of evaluations is to guide our choice of actions, and value judgments are reducible to reasons for action (Chapter 9).

7) The meaning of a person's life cannot extend to things beyond the boundaries of his or her mode of living (Chapters 10 and 11).

8) A person's life does not have a meaning because only linguistic items can be meaningful (Chapters 9, 11, and 12).

9) The meaning of our lives consists in our living in accordance with a self-determined life-plan (Chapter 12).

We have considered many themes not mentioned in this list and I invite the reader to expand the list.

What do we learn from rectifying these mistakes? What are the overall positive lessons?

1) First, the meanings of life must be in the living of it. This is because, a) in a sense, the meaning of one's life is oneself, and b) it is the person that has primary non-instrumental value. The individual has value and, consequently, so does his or her life and so do the processes that constitute that life. The finite processes of life have meaning, without need of the Absolute.

2) Second, if a person's life consists of processes, which themselves are comprised of more specific activities and experiences then, a more meaningful life consists in part of more valuable activities and experiences. There are two dimensions to this value: the valuable nature of the activities themselves and the phenomenology of our appreciation of them. One way in which one's life can be more meaningful to oneself is through more active and attentive appreciation of those values. One can improve one's appreciation not only of one's activities and experiences, but also of things of value beyond oneself. In this way, we can construct a more meaningful phenomenological 'world.' Additionally, we can train ourselves to be aware of the untapped value possibilities around us. Meaning is 'out there' waiting to be discovered and cherished. In this sense, there are grounds for hope.

3) However, the need for appreciation does not diminish the importance of building a better real world-situation or life for oneself. The kinds of activities one engages in define the processes of one's life, and a life that is meaningful to the subject him or herself must consist

of activities that are non-instrumentally valuable. Meaning requires acting and living in accordance with value. This is the second dimension of the relevant values. These values cannot be characterized directly in terms of the satisfaction of wants or desires, nor in terms of fulfilling a life-plan based on those desires. Nevertheless, it requires understanding, the patterns and motivational sources of one's desires, that is the interests or needs that motivate them. It requires an interpretation of intrinsic desires, which are an expression of and a guide to what is non-instrumentally good for one. It requires a hermeneutic of desire. In this way, it involves neither accepting our desires at face value, nor rejecting them as irrelevant to the meanings of life.

4) These points require a conception of value that is not absolute but also is not subjective. The appreciation or the emotional cognition of value requires a realistic and objectivist or cognitivist framework. In other words, things really can have value and we can recognize and perceive that value. Nevertheless, at the same time, those values are not absolute because they depend on the nature of our interests. In this sense, the meanings of life are determined by the desirability characterizations that reflect our interests and structure our desires, such as 'friendship' and 'beautiful.' In this way, linguistic meaning and the meaning of our lives are intimately connected. The semantic meaningfulness of these important parts of our vocabulary captures and reflects what makes our activities meaningful.

5) The appreciation and living of meaning also involves extending ourselves so as to connect to other persons, who also have primary non-instrumental value. We connect meaningfully to other people by appreciating their value, by recognizing their interests as valuable and by acting appropriately. By making their interests our concern, we develop 'we'-consciousness. In this way, we can transcend the boundaries of our own lives.

6) We can also connect to valuable states of affairs beyond ourselves, such as those pertaining to goodness, beauty and truth. Recognition of these values can lead us to care in appropriate ways and to form goals based on that recognition. However, this does not imply that meaning can be identified with such purposes or goals. The meaningfulness of one's life does not consist in its instrumental value. Instead, in part, it consists in the non-instrumental value of life's processes that involve connecting to values beyond ourselves.

7) We can understand the search for meaning also as an attempt to read or interpret our lives in a way that transcends the significance of

particular actions. Our lives express and reveal much about ourselves and, understanding ourselves more deeply can enable one to live more in accordance with the kinds of values that we have mentioned.

8) If life has a spiritual significance, it must be understood in the above terms, and not as a transcendent state that ultimately denies life's immanent meanings. It consists of our extending our boundaries and enhancing our appreciation. It must consist in the process of development, not according to an externally imposed divine plan or purpose, nor as a personally invented one, but rather in accordance with the fundamental nature of our interests. It should be conceived, in part, as the process of our reaching out to values beyond ourselves with our attention and actions.

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