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On
the Meaning of Life

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The Question

One

'Alright', said Deep Thought. 'The Answer to the Great Question . . .'

'Yes!'

'Of Life the Universe and Everything . . .' said Deep Thought.

'Yes!'

'Is . . .' said Deep Thought, and paused.

'Yes!'

'Is . . .'

'Yes . . . !!! . . . ?'

'Forty-two', said Deep Thought, with infinite majesty and calm . . .

It was a long time before anyone spoke.

'Forty-two!' yelled Loonquawl. 'Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?'

'I checked it very thoroughly,' said the computer . . . 'I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is.'

'But it was the Great Question! The Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything' howled Loonquawl.

'Yes', said Deep Thought with the air of one who suffers fools gladly, 'but what actually *is* it?'

A slow stupefied silence crept over the men as they stared at the computer and then at each other.

'Well, you know, it's just Everything . . . Everything . . .' offered Phouchg weakly.

Douglas Adams, **The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy**[1]

THE QUESTION THAT WON'T GO AWAY

Not all important-sounding questions make sense. For a fair part of the twentieth century it was common in much of the anglophone world to dismiss many of the traditional grand

questions of philosophy as pseudo-questions. People who felt perplexed by the ancient puzzle of the meaning of life were firmly reminded that meaning was a notion properly confined to the arena of language: words or sentences or propositions could be said to have meaning, but not objects or events in the world, like the lives of trees, or lobsters, or humans. So the very idea that philosophy could inquire into the meaning of life was taken as a sign of conceptual confusion. The solution to the problem, as Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked, would lie in its disappearance.[2]

But somehow the problem does not go away; the search for life's meaning, confused or not, retains as powerful a hold on us as ever. The characters in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker* saga may seem absurd in their faith that a supercomputer could wrap it up for them, and hopelessly vague about how to formulate the problem in the first place, but a strong sense remains that the ancient quest that has held so many in thrall is more than just a philosopher's muddle.

For our human existence is mysterious – something strange, frightening, to be wondered at. Philosophy, said Aristotle, is the child of wonder;[3] and the capacity to be disturbed by what is ordinarily taken for granted is the hallmark of that questioning spirit that is inseparable from human nature itself. The human being is unique in that, as Heidegger put it, it is an entity for whom its own being is an *issue*. Or again: 'Man alone of all beings, when addressed by the voice of Being, experiences the marvel of all marvels: that what-is *is*.'[4]

What are we really asking when we ask about the meaning of life? Partly, it seems, we are asking about our relationship with the rest of the universe – who we are and how we came to be here. One aspect of this is a scientific question about our origins. To which the answer, only recently discovered, is

breathtaking: we came from the stars. If we manage (the experience is rarer and harder now) to find a spot far away from the city, where no seepage of noise and dazzle pollutes the night, and look up in wonder at the vast and silent blackness of space from which numberless brilliant points of light shine down upon us, then what we see is the same material from which we, and everything else on this fragile planet, were once formed. We humans are part of the cosmos: not just as a pebble is part of a miscellaneous heap, not just as an item on a haphazard inventory that happens to include whatever the universe contains; but truly one with it, sharing its common origin, built of its stuff. We are formed of stardust.

Of it, yet alienated from it? It may be so. The ancient Stoics thought that our human rationality was a microcosm of a governing principle of Reason, the spiritual substance pervading the whole cosmos; centuries later, the rationalist philosopher Leibniz declared that 'there is nothing waste, nothing sterile, nothing dead in the universe'.[5] But the dominant view nowadays is that life and rationality are, cosmically speaking, local and untypical features of reality: nature is predominantly blind, irrational, dead. As the poet A. E. Housman lamented:

> . . . nature, heartless, witness nature,
> Will neither care nor know
> What stranger's feet may cross the meadow
> And trespass there, and go.
> Nor ask amid the dews of morning
> If they are mine, or no.[6]

We humans may pride ourselves on our intellectual and cultural achievements, but against the backdrop of unimaginable aeons of time through which clouds of incandescent hydrogen expand without limit, we are a strange temporary

accident, no more significant than a slime or mould that forms for a few years or decades on a barren rockface and then is seen no more.

Assessments of this kind may seem linked to a modern scientific understanding of our origins, but in an important sense they plainly go beyond science: they do not just report the 'facts', but talk about what those supposed facts 'mean' for us, for our sense of ourselves and our self-worth. And it is hard to see how such judgements about the significance of our lives can be established by scientific inquiry alone. To quote Wittgenstein again, this time sounding rather more hospitable to our grand question, 'we feel that even when all possible scientific problems have been answered, the problems of life have not been put to rest'.[7] Why exactly should this be so?

SCIENCE AND MEANING

Science has advanced so spectacularly and with such an accelerated pace in the last century or so that we may be tempted to suppose that given a bit longer it could even succeed in explaining why we are here and what our existence means. This appears to be the view of one of our most distinguished contemporary scientists, Stephen Hawking:

> Up to now, most scientists have been too occupied with the development of new theories that describe *what* the universe is to ask the question *why*. . . However, if we discover a complete [and unified] theory [combining quantum physics with general relativity] . . . we shall all . . . be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason . . .[8]

The distinction between *what* something is and *why* it is has become something of a cliché; in similar vein, people often say science tackles *how* questions but not *why* questions. But in fact the distinction is not particularly helpful in sorting out what scientists characteristically do. Aristotle was rather more perspicuous in distinguishing four types of answer relevant to scientific inquiry:

(1) Answers indicating the component materials of which an object is made (its 'material' cause);
(2) Answers specifying the essence or kind of thing it is (its 'formal' cause);
(3) Answers pointing to the motive force that got it into its present state (its 'efficient' cause); and
(4) Answers citing the end or goal towards which it tends (its 'final' cause).[9]

Explanations of all four kinds can be good scientific answers to the question 'why?'

(1) 'Why was the bridge strong?' 'Because [material] it was made of steel.'
(2) 'Why do you classify that ice cube as water?' 'Because [formal] it is frozen H_2O.'
(3) 'Why did the billiard ball move?' 'Because [efficient] it was struck with a cue.'
(4) 'Why do trees have roots?' 'Because [final] in order to grow they need to take up water and nutrients.'

The last type of answer was particularly important in Aristotle's work, since he maintained that all things tend towards some natural end-state; but although modern scientists, especially biologists, still frequently use such goal-related or teleological explanations of phenomena, it has been

a guiding principle since the seventeenth century that such teleology must always eventually be explained in terms of underlying microstructures of an entirely mechanical nature. It is in this sense that the great seventeenth-century philosopher-scientist René Descartes is often said to have banished teleology from science. He envisaged a unified style of explanation based ultimately on the universal laws of mathematical physics that governed the behaviour of all natural phenomena, celestial and terrestrial alike. There was no room for any irreducible purposiveness or goal-seeking deep down in nature. The job of the scientist was to subsume all observable events under the relevant mathematical covering laws; and in respect of these ultimate laws there was no attainable answer to the question 'why?' One could say – and Descartes did say – that God had decreed that it should be so; but he immediately added that the rationale for God's decrees was not for human scientists to discover: it was 'forever locked up in the inscrutable abyss of His wisdom'.[10] David Hume, writing a century after Descartes, took an essentially parallel line, though couched in entirely secular language: the job of science was to map the observable natural world, but any supposed 'ultimate springs and principles' of nature were beyond human power to fathom.[11]

Although this position was first established by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, it has remained pretty much unshaken ever since; for it is hard to see how science, however it may develop, could address such 'ultimate' questions. So although modern scientists may often ask various kinds of 'why?' questions about particular structures or events, the ultimate and most general principles taken to underlie all phenomena are not regarded as admitting of the question 'why is it so?' If we were to achieve a complete and unified

theory of the universe (fulfilling the grand philosophical-cum-scientific vision that links Descartes and Hume, Newton and Einstein, right down to present-day cosmologists such as Hawking), such a theory would subsume all observable phenomena in the universe under the fewest and most comprehensive laws or principles; but as to *why* these principles obtain, this would have to remain, in Hume's graphic phrase, 'totally shut up from human curiosity and inquiry'.[12]

So we have a problem about the modern hope for a grand comprehensive physics that would be the 'ultimate triumph of human reason'. It is an inspiring aim, but one which leaves it very unclear why it should be supposed that a super-theory linking gravity and quantum physics might enable us to tackle the ultimate question of 'why it is that we and the universe exist'. It is sometimes suggested that such a unified theory might turn out to be the *only* possible theory, in view of the severe constraints that must govern any model that is to be consistent and capable accounting for the universe as we find it. But even if there were to be only one such candidate, it would still be merely the only possible theory *given* that the universe is as it is – which would still fall short of explaining why there should be a universe at all. Some cosmologists (including Hawking) have speculated that the grand unified theory 'might be so compelling that it brings about its own existence';[13] but it is hard to take this seriously. A theory cannot generate a universe.

SOMETHING RATHER THAN NOTHING

The position we have reached is that while science aims to provide as complete and comprehensive a description as it can of the universe, no matter how successful and unified the theory it ends up with, it cannot explain why there should be

a universe there to be explained. We collide with the ancient philosophical question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' and it seems clear on reflection that nothing within the observable universe could really answer this. If there is a solution to the 'riddle of life in space and time', it would have to lie outside space and time.[14] Here we run into another blank wall: if any such solution must lie beyond the limits of the temporal and spatial universe, outside the 'phenomenal world', as Immanuel Kant called it, then may it not be beyond the horizon of what is humanly knowable? If there is a transcendent realm of the 'noumenal' – something beyond the phenomena, which explains why we and the universe are here – then there is a risk that there will be nothing whatever we can coherently say about it.

We may have reached the limits of science here, but perhaps we have not necessarily reached the limits of human discourse. There is a rich tradition of religious language, both in our Western culture and elsewhere, that grapples with the task of addressing what cannot be fully captured by even the most complete scientific account of the phenomenal world. One might say that it is the task of religious discourse to strain at the limits of the sayable. Some kinds of theology, to be sure, have aimed at keeping entirely within the boundaries of observable evidence and rational demonstration, invoking God as an explanatory hypothesis to account for certain aspects of reality (such as order, design, motion, and so on), rather in the manner of a scientist looking for the best explanation of the data. That enduring strand of natural theology has appealed to many philosophers over the centuries, though it has suffered serious erosion in modern age from the success of rival non-theistic explanations of the relevant phenomena (in particular the triumph of Darwinism). But alongside this

quasi-scientific strand in theology, there is also a vast range of religious language that invokes symbol, metaphor, poetry, narrative, and other elements valued for their supposed revelatory power rather than for their strict demonstrative force; religious discourse is here aimed at addressing what cannot fully be put into words, at least into the words of our rational scientific culture, but which can still somehow be shown, disclosed, made manifest.[15]

Such religious discourse gropes towards something beyond the phenomenal world that may give meaning to the universe, and to our human lives. It may not provide a rational scientific solution to the old puzzle of why there is something rather than nothing, for, as we have seen, this is a question which may lie beyond the limits of systematic knowledge. But its advocates would urge that it none the less assuages the vertigo, the 'nausea', as Jean-Paul Sartre called it, that we feel in confronting the blank mystery of existence. The religious answer – one of several responses to the problem of life's meaning to be examined in the pages that follow – aims to locate our lives in a context that will provide them with significance and value. Instead of our feeling thrown into a arbitrary alien world where nothing ultimately matters, it offers the hope that we can find a home.[16]

A RELIGIOUS QUESTION?

Religion is clearly one way in which humans have found a meaning and purpose to their lives. But is it the only way? Albert Einstein asserted bluntly that 'to know an answer to the question "What is the meaning of human life?" *means* to be religious'.[17] That other giant of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud, also insisted that 'the idea of life having a purpose stands and falls with the religious system'.[18] Yet of

course it by no means automatically follows from this linkage that the religious stance is therefore something to be advocated. Freud himself regarded the solution offered by religion as pandering to something unhealthy and disordered in the human psyche:

> The moment a man questions the meaning and value of life, he is sick . . . By asking this question one is merely admitting to a store of unsatisfied libido to which something else must have happened, a kind of fermentation leading to sadness and depression.[19]

Belief in God, according to Freud's view in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, is based on an infantile response: the terrifying 'feeling of helplessness' in childhood aroused the 'need for protection' – for protection through love – which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a Father, but this time a more powerful one.[20]

This Freudian diagnosis has been highly influential, and can often be seen as informing the idea, voiced by many contemporary atheists, that God is merely a projection formed in response to our human insecurities. But there are at least two problems with this way of dismissing the religious impulse. First, though the abject helplessness of the infant is an apt image of the fragility of the human plight, that fragility, as Freud's own analysis confirms, is clearly not confined to infancy. Our vulnerability, and that of our loved ones, to death, disease and accident is an inescapable part of the human condition; and this being so, to be appropriately aware of it seems precisely what a normal rational human *ought* to be (even granted that constantly dwelling on it may be a sign of neurosis).[21] In the second place, talk of God as a

projection does not in the end advance the debate between theists and atheists very much, since it cannot settle the question of whether the impulse to project our longings outwards to an external source does or does not have an objective counterpart. It is certainly plausible that frail and insecure humans would want to project their need for security onto a protective heavenly Father; but a religious believer can equally maintain that since our true destiny lies in union with our creator, we will naturally feel insecure and restless until we find Him. Indeed, precisely this latter theme turns out to be the refrain of many ancient writers on theistic spirituality: *nata est anima ad percipiendum bonum infinitum, quod Deus est; ideo in eo solo debet quiescere et eo* frui – 'the soul is born to perceive the infinite good that is God, and accordingly it must find its rest and contentment in Him alone'.[22] The result of the debate over projection is thus a stand-off: the fact that humans feel a powerful need for God's loving protection logically says nothing either way about whether that protection is a reality.

For the sake of this phase of the argument, however, let us assume for the moment that there is no such divine reality – no objective correlative that could ground our search for life's significance. Would human life, in that case, be empty and pointless? If God is dead, one of Dostoevsky's characters famously declares, everything is permitted;[23] in similar vein, if there is no God, would everything be meaningless?

MEANING AFTER GOD

Depression, so say the experts, is of two kinds, exogenous and endogenous: it can either be triggered by some painful external circumstance, like job loss or bereavement, or it can be apparently spontaneous, presenting as an internal malaise for which there is no immediate outside cause. In a somewhat

analogous way, perhaps, it seems that meaning might be either exogenous or endogenous: someone might find their life meaningful in so far as it conformed to the will of a transcendent Creator 'out there' who was the ultimate source of value and significance; but they might instead find meaning 'within', as it were, constructing it from the inside as a function of their own choices and commitments. Friedrich Nietzsche, famous for his announcement of the 'death of God', was clear that humankind, in the post-theistic world, would have to generate significance from within itself – and indeed that this was the only available source for all value: 'Ultimately man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them: the finding we call science, the importing – art, religion, love, pride.'[24]

This conception of meaning as endogenous – the idea of Man as the creator and generator of the meaning of his own life – has plainly had a vast influence on our modern and postmodern culture. The Nietzschean vision can be seen as having three phases. The first is the idea of the 'death of God', which appears in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (*The Joyful Science*, 1882). A madman lights a lantern at midday and runs into the market place crying that he seeks God. He is laughed at by the atheists who are standing around: 'Did he get lost?', they sneer. 'Or has he gone on a journey, or emigrated?' At length the madman announces 'We have killed him, you and I!' And he goes off round the churches of the town to sing a requiem – one that parodies the traditional text of the mass: instead of a prayer for God to grant repose to the dead, it becomes 'requiem eternam *Deo*' – *God himself* is consigned to eternal rest.[25]

Over a century later, the shock value of Nietzsche's initial proclamation has faded a little. Walking round the ancient

cities of Western Europe, where typically less than 10 per cent of the people now attend religious services, one may feel like echoing the madman's challenge: 'What are all these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?' The culture which once made religious observance so central – in the rites of birth, marriage and death, in the celebration of the changing seasons of sowing and harvest, in the weekly gatherings of the community Sunday after Sunday, in the massive yearly solemnities of Nativity and Resurrection each winter and spring – the culture underpinning all these elaborate structures, if not quite extinct, seems in many places to have either vanished, or be fast crumbling away.

But here the second phase of Nietzsche's predictions comes into play. Just as, after the Buddha was dead, 'his tremendous, gruesome shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave', so, after God is dead, 'there may still be places for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown – and we still have to vanquish the shadow'.[26] Taking leave of God is not a simple process, like abandoning belief in phlogiston once a better scientific account of combustion comes along. Religious faith does not form an isolated corner of our conceptual map that can be torn off without affecting the main picture; instead (to change the metaphor) it lies at the centre of a vast web of beliefs and attitudes and feelings that are all subtly interconnected. Unravelling them, and coming to terms with the consequences of that unravelling, must involve a radical upheaval, not just in the cognitive sphere, like adjusting or modifying a scientific hypothesis, but in a way that is far more primitive, implying a shift, often at a pre-rational level, in fundamental aspects of our moral, social, aesthetic and psychological orientation towards reality. Large numbers of people may have formally abandoned the idea of God as

central to their world-view, but it seems that for relatively few does this feel like having 'arrived'; many instead are left with a sense of vague discomfort, manifested in some by a disquiet about the moral direction of a wholly secular society, in others by intermittent attraction to fashionable alternative modes of spirituality, in others again by a certain melancholic nostalgia for the nourishment and stability of the faith which no longer seems an option. In Nietzsche's eyes, it is as if mankind has acquired a debilitating dependency on the accumulated capital from its religious heritage, and learning to live without the weekly remittance will not be easy. 'Vanquishing the shadow' requires courage and determination.

Here emerges the third phase of the Nietzschean story. For Nietzsche's vision is not a purely destructive one; still less (like the brisk, cheerful atheism purveyed by contemporary secular apologists like Richard Dawkins)[27] is it a plea to sweep away all the religious rubble with the vigorous broom of science that is supposed to clean everything up. Instead, the cry of the madman is imbued with passionate yearning, a fierce lament for the loss of 'the holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned', and a determination to attempt the heroic task of constructing a human surrogate for the defunct God. 'Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worth of it?'[28] Meaning, that vivid sense of purpose without which life slides into flatness and banality, must at all costs be recovered; and to capture this Nietzsche proposes the existential myth of the Eternal Recurrence:

> This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will

> be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you – and all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it, a dust grain of dust.[29]

It is not that the envisaged eternal reiteration would somehow bestow objective or external meaning – for what difference could unlimited duration or endless repetition make to the significance of the spider I see in the moonlight? We are indeed alone, in Nietzsche's universe, thrown entirely on our own resources, without any of what he regards as the flabby comforts of religion designed to console the weak. The darkness is all around us, and the only thing that can illuminate it is our own indomitable will, a determination to say such a passionate 'Yes!' to each single existential moment of life that even on the condition of eternally repeating it we would chose no other. The question 'Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?' would 'weigh upon your actions as the greatest stress', to be overcome only by an affirmation so powerful that you would 'crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate confirmation and seal'.[30]

Meaning, in Nietzsche's vision, has to be generated entirely from the inside. The world we have to inhabit following the death of God is a world where, in the poet W. B. Yeats' celebrated lines,

> Whatever flames upon the night
> Man's own resinous heart has fed.[31]

MAN, THE MEASURE OF ALL THINGS?

Man, said the philosopher Protagoras, is the measure of all things: of what is, that it is, and of what is not, that it is not.[32] Socrates had little trouble refuting that piece of pretentiousness. Pretentious it is, in its arrogance; the Psalmist's cry 'It is He that hath made us and not we ourselves',[33] whatever one may think of the underlying creed, at least has the humility to acknowledge the basic truth that we exist in the universe as wholly contingent beings, dependent on a reality we did not create. And pretentious too, in its pseudo-profundity. For though Protagoras' modern successors never tire of pointing out that

> there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions[34]

the fact remains that none of these human procedures would have any use or value unless they were confronted by an independent non-human reality that in the long run allows those procedures that are effective to flourish, and eradicates those that are faulty. We, mankind, are *not* the measure of whether a given plant does well in a given soil, or a given engine works more efficiently than another, or the Earth revolves annually around the Sun or vice versa. We create our theories, certainly, but we can only delay, never ultimately prevent, their collapse when they fail to measure up to the bar of actual experience.

Of course there is a residual truth behind the inflated claims of Protagoras and his more sophisticated modern successors. Since we cannot jump outside of our human

culture, inspect reality 'as it really is', and then jump back and pronounce such and such a theory true and another false, we should acknowledge that we always have to operate within the context of a continuing dialogue with our peers, with no instant hotline to the truth, no privileged access to a Golden Rule or Procedure that will guarantee that our hypotheses fit reality. Yet to abandon the misguided hope for such guarantees should not lead us to forget that human science aims at discovering (or eliminating) realities that are there (or not there) irrespective of anything we decide. To put it in the more evocative terminology of Yeats' poem, the fuel from our own 'resinous hearts' does not after all 'feed' reality: it illuminates, *but cannot determine*, what is there to be seen upon the night.

How does this bear on Nietzsche's heroic attempt to generate meaning from within? By supposing the unaided human will can create meaning, that it can merely by its own resolute affirmation bypass the search for objectively sourced truth and value, he seems to risk coming close to the Protagorean fallacy. For meaning and worth cannot reside in raw will alone: they have to involve a fit between our decisions and beliefs and what *grounds* those decisions and beliefs. That grounding may, as some religious thinkers maintain, be divinely generated; or it may be based on something else – for example certain fundamental facts about our social or biological nature. But it cannot be created by human fiat alone.

The Nietzschean solution, in short, is untenable; and one may add that it is in any case inhuman, or at least inhumane. For a philosophy that exalts raw will as the key to value and meaning, that makes salvation dependent on the kind of heroic struggle, the greatest stress that can be endured only by

the strong, is not likely simultaneously to respect the claims of the tentative, the sceptical, the doubtful, the vacillating, the weak and the helpless – all those who are ill-equipped or disinclined to 'become gods'. Nietzsche, in the kind of rant that sporadically mars his literary and philosophical genius, feverishly welcomed 'the signs that a more manly, a warlike age is about to begin, an age which above all will give honour to valour once again'.[35] Over a century of dire experience later, it would be good to hope that mankind is increasingly seeing reason to prefer the more mundane virtues of compromise and compassion, the less heroic but more democratic values rooted (historically) in the religious ethic of universal brotherhood that Nietzsche scorned. But this postscript on Nietzsche will have to be left hanging for the moment, since it raises general issues about the connection between the quest for meaning and the foundations of morality that will need more time to unravel.

VARIETY, MEANING AND EVALUATION

If human beings cannot create meaning and value merely by an exercise of will, why can't they nevertheless find meaning in the various diverse human activities and projects they undertake? 'Various' and 'diverse' are the key words here. Perhaps the difficulty in the question that baffled the *Hitch Hiker* philosophers Loonquawl and Phouchg was that they were looking for *the* meaning – a single grand all-encompassing answer. That, of course, is the way most religious thinkers have traditionally seen it. But perhaps we need to get away from this spell, and to adopt instead a more modest, piecemeal approach, more in tune with the metaphysically lower-key aspirations of what one might call contemporary secular humanism. Perhaps, as Isaiah Berlin has neatly put it:

> The conviction . . . that there exists . . . a discoverable goal, or pattern of goals, the same for all mankind . . . is mistaken; and so too is the notion that is bound up with it, of a single true doctrine carrying salvation to all men everywhere'.[36]

Consider Alan, a golfer. He has retired, has a pension sufficient for his needs, is reasonably healthy, and enjoys above all his thrice-weekly game of golf. Let us assume that he is free from the self-deception and social manipulation that blight the lives of some of his fellow members of the local club: he is not there as a social climber, or to make business contacts, or to show off his expensive golfclubs; he just genuinely enjoys the game. His playing gives his life a structure: each week he looks forward to the coming games, and feels satisfied when they go well. Clearly he has not found 'The Meaning of Life', with capital letters. But why not say, quietly and in lower-case letters, that he has succeeded in finding a meaning, or some meaning, to his life; and that this, and countless similar stories for countless other individuals happily absorbed in their own favoured pursuits, amounts to all that can be said, or needs to be said, on the matter?

Notice that to reach this seemingly modest conclusion certain things need to be assumed. We've stipulated that Alan is comfortably off; and in this designation is included a whole nest of assumptions about a certain easy flow to his life, an absence of too much anxiety and constraint about day-to-day living, an available measure of free time, and an ability to exercise a degree of choice in the use of that time. We have also stipulated that he plays for the sheer joy of the game – uninfluenced by demeaning motives like vain self-importance, or a desire to crawl to the boss; and there is a host of further presuppositions here, this time about the extent to

which the chosen pursuit reflects Alan's status as an autonomous agent. If he was playing out of abject fear of losing his job, or because of a subconscious compulsion to surpass his father's sporting achievements, then we would be more doubtful in allowing he had found a meaning to his life – or at least the favourable implications of that phrase would be put in question.

This last point brings out the fact that talk of 'meaning' in life is inescapably evaluative talk. To describe an activity, or a life, as meaningful is evidently to approve or commend it. Now there are many people who have come to think of valuing as a matter of subjective preference; indeed, sentences like 'That's just a value judgement!' are often used to mean something like 'That's no more than your arbitrary personal preference!' But in fact, although there may be some things we just arbitrarily 'take a fancy to', without any objective rhyme or reason, typically we value things *in virtue of objective features* which those things possess. We value a medicine because of its curative properties; we value a piece of music because it is uplifting, or relaxing, or beautifully harmonised; we value a colleague because of her skill or good humour or intelligence. In short, value is typically *grounded* not in arbitrary preference but in objectively assessable features of the world. And characteristically, our value terms reflect this 'grounding' by being what philosophers term 'thick' concepts: they don't just say, thinly, 'wow, that's good!', but rather they carry, packaged-in with them so to speak, those factual features in virtue of which we judge the object to be good.[37] Thus concepts like 'generous' or 'courageous' carry with them a package or checklist of qualifications relevant to the positive evaluation – courage has to do with standing firm in the face of danger, generosity with a certain liberal attitude

towards giving to others. Granted for the moment that 'meaningful' is one of these thick concepts – and it certainly seems to be, since to call a life meaningful is not just thinly to say 'wow, it's great!' but to commend it in virtue of some specific features you can point to – let us ask what *is* the package typically associated with this term.

WHAT MEANINGFULNESS IMPLIES

In the first place, to call an activity or a life meaningful normally implies a certain *profundity* or *seriousness* (though 'serious' here need not at all imply 'solemn'). Pursuits can be meaningful in a more or less deep way, but not, as it were, in a shallow way; so to appraise something as meaningful excludes its being trivial or silly. Pastimes like golf appear somewhat borderline here: it seems they can just about qualify as meaningful, but only provided they have a substantial and important recreational function (fostering, perhaps, a certain relaxation, harmony or expansiveness of spirit), or else play some further role, for example by promoting health, or furthering a professional sporting career. But lining up balls of torn up newspaper in neat rows cannot normally be meaningful (except in some special context – maybe it keeps one sane in a prisoner-of-war camp). This links with a second feature: to be meaningful an activity must be *achievement-oriented*, that is, directed towards some goal, or requiring some focus of energy or concentration or rhythm in its execution. Aimlessly throwing darts without any attempt to keep score or any concern for accuracy could not count as a meaningful activity (again, in the absence of special circumstances).

Perhaps the most salient feature of meaningfulness derives from its original semantic home within the domain of language. Meaningfulness is what might be called a hermeneutic

concept: for something to be meaningful to a agent, that agent must *interpret* it or *construe* it in a certain way. The words of a marriage ceremony are meaningful because they are construed by the parties as an exchange of promises; exercise in the gym is meaningful because, rather than being an aimless set of bodily movements, it is seen as a programme designed to improve cardiovascular fitness; thrusting a bunch of flowers in someone's hand is meaningful because it is intended as an expression of romantic interest.

Extrapolating from these examples of intentional speech and action, we may draw the further conclusion that meaningfulness in action implies a certain degree of *self-awareness* or *transparency to the agent*: for me to engage in a meaningful activity I must have some grasp of what I am doing, and my interpretation of it must reflect purposes of my own that are more or less transparent to me. This is why someone who is in the grip of psychological distortions or projections, and whose goals are therefore not self-transparent, risks an erosion of their status as an autonomous agent engaged in meaningful activities. Their actions – the obsessive washing of a tablecloth, for instance – may have a deeper resonance that is not properly accessed at the time, so that the agent's own conscious rationalisations of what she is doing ('the household linen must be kept clean') signally fail to justify the endless relaundering of an already spotless cloth. Only when analysis brings to the surface the true significance of the soiled linen (in Freud's famous example, the repressed memory of an embarrassment suffered on the wedding night) is the subject in a position to become self-aware of about her actions, and to regain control of her life.[38] Introducing convoluted cases of this kind is not meant to suggest that all our actions have to be subjected to minute psychoanalytic scrutiny before they meet

the transparency condition that allows us to be sure that the way we view our actions does indeed correspond with their true significance. But it is none the less undeniable that the dynamics of human agency are often extremely complex, and that there is therefore something amiss with simplistic accounts that blandly assure us the meaning of a life can be read off as a straightforward function of the goals that an agent consciously declares he has set himself to achieve or the activities he has consciously elected to pursue.

Suppose, however, that an agent is fully engaged, in a self-aware way, undistorted by external manipulation or unconscious projection, on systematic projects that reflect her own rational choice as an autonomous agent. Is this all we need to call their life meaningful? It may be so; but a problem immediately arises that on this showing we could not avoid calling meaningful the life of a dedicated torturer, working devotedly in the service of a corrupt regime. Admittedly, some of those who have reflected on this sort of case have had no difficulty biting the bullet:

> That immoral lives may be meaningful is shown by the countless dedicated Nazi and Communist mass murderers . . . and by people whose rage, resentment, greed, ambition, selfishness and sense of superiority or inferiority give meaning to their lives and lead them to inflict grievous unjustified harm on others. Such people may be successfully engaged in their projects, derive great satisfaction from them, and find their lives . . . very meaningful.[39]

They may perhaps 'find' their lives meaningful, but are such lives *really* meaningful? It would certainly not be a very natural use of our language to bestow the epithet 'meaningful' on the life of the angry, resentful, greedy, ambitious, selfish

torturer. But perhaps that is just a cosy parochial prejudice: 'me and my mates' would shrink from calling such a life meaningful, but that might be mere squeamishness, or else an irrational hangover from an outmoded religious world-view – a sentimental wish that only good people can find real meaning in their lives. Can a radically immoral life be really meaningful?

MEANING AND MORALITY

We have already observed that the term 'meaningful' carries with it a package of criteria for its appropriate use (there are problems, for example, in describing trivial projects or the projects of psychologically confused or unself-aware agents, as meaningful). We are now asking whether the life of the dedicated Nazi torturer can indeed qualify as meaningful, and the only way to answer this is to unpack the example more carefully. If such a person is acting out of anger, resentment or a sense of inferiority, for example, it already looks as if they may be falling short of the autonomy and selfhood that is necessary for us to say that their projects represent their own unmanipulated choices about how best to live. A prostitute's life is not meaningful if her 'choice' to go on the streets is the acting out of pain and confusion arising from her being a victim of childhood abuse. The life of the bully who serves the Nazis because he 'derives great satisfaction' from hurting others begins to looks less meaningful when we explore the background and find out that such satisfaction stems from a damaged sense of self-worth produced by his upbringing at the hands of a tyrannical and sadistic father. To be sure, the unhealthy choices and actions described in these sorts of case have a certain sort of significance, just as the stunted growth of a plant sown in polluted ground is significant – it points to

something that has gone awry. But it would be wrong to infer, just because the agents find some kind of satisfaction in their activities, that these lives qualify as meaningful in the richer evaluative sense we have identified as belonging to the package typically associated with the label 'meaningful' – the sense that implies an agent's involvement in projects that reflect his or her free and autonomous choices.

But could there not be a completely immoral life that none the less reflected the wholly unmanipulated rational choices of the agent? Could not the rational immoralist – that familiar figure from philosophical discussions of the old question 'Why should one be moral?' – enjoy a perfectly meaningful life? If we make the case one of excessive or perverted cruelty and inhumanity, then we may be drawn back into questions about the psychological equilibrium of the agent; so let us stipulate instead that the immoralist we have in mind is no monster of vice, nor victim of gross childhood trauma, but is instead just very, very selfish – and selfish, moreover, in a way that signally promotes his chosen projects. He might be like Percy Berkeley, the gourmandising officer in Simon Raven's *Alms for Oblivion* sequence, who 'had not had a thought in his head for twenty years that was not connected with his own immediate pleasure or comfort'.[40] To make the case even harder, let us assume that the chosen projects are very much more impressive than the shallow indulgences of the bon viveur, amounting instead to projects of great creative significance. The much discussed case of Paul Gauguin, who selfishly dumped his family to pursue a self-indulgent but highly creative life in Tahiti, is the case of someone now widely regarded as a painter of genius;[41] and (our critic might ask) if the life of an artistic genius is not meaningful, whose is?

It would be hard to deny that achievements of a high creative order are naturally seen, both by the agents themselves and by onlookers, as meaningful. What holds good for artistic achievement seems to hold good for athletic, technical or intellectual achievement: the great athlete, the brilliant engineer or the gifted mathematician may all feel they have found meaning in their projects and achievements, and may be judged by those around them to lead meaningful lives. Yet in none of these cases does it at first sight appear necessary that the lives in question have to be morally decent lives: just as the artistic genius can be a selfish philanderer, so the great athlete could be a thug, the brilliant engineer a tax dodger, the gifted mathematician a heartless miser, all apparently without affecting the meaningfulness of their lives, so judged. This brings out a disturbing feature of the pluralistic account of life's meaning provided by the brand of secular humanism we are considering. If there is no overarching structure or theory that confers meaning on life, no normative pattern or model to which the meaningful life must conform, then a meaningful life reduces to little more than an engaged life in which the agent is systematically committed to certain projects he makes his own, irrespective of their moral status.

But this is not quite good enough. It is not as if we are speculating in a vacuum about disembodied, deracinated beings who have a clean slate on which to devise the plan that will confer meaning on their lives. We are talking about *human* lives – the lives of a very special kind of animal, subject to an array of interlinked imperatives – biological imperatives (for food, warmth, shelter, procreation), social imperatives (the need to cooperate, the drive to communicate), emotional imperatives (the need for such things as mutual recognition and affection), and lastly and just as importantly what might

be called 'rational imperatives'. Uniquely among known living things we are capable of standing back from our environment, questioning the way things are, challenging the actions of our fellows, entering into dialogues of criticism and justification. In the light of this complex context of interaction and interpersonal dialogue within which we must live our lives, there has to be something unstable about a compartmentalised vision in which individual pursuits and activities can be thought of as bestowing meaning in isolation, irrespective of their moral status, of how they impinge on others. Fulfilment and meaning pursued in ways that involve deceiving or hurting others, or making use of them as mere instrumental fodder for one's own success, closing one's heart and mind to the voice of one's fellow creatures – these are modes of activity that make one *less human*, because the favoured activities have to be conducted at the cost of sealing off one's rational awareness and emotional sensibility so that one is no longer open to such dialogue.

This in turn suggests that to pursue meaning in these inhuman ways risks being self-defeating. Unless the concentration camp guard proposes to turn himself into nothing more than a machine for the infliction of cruelty, he will presumably need, if only in his off-duty hours, human conversation, emotional warmth, the cultivation of friendships, family ties . . . Furthermore, since the sensibilities required for such human pursuits cannot be switched on and off at will, but are necessarily a matter of permanently ingrained dispositions of character, the gratification our guard is supposed to be deriving from his gruesome work will inevitably create a psychic dissonance, which will sooner or later to endanger a collapse – either a breakdown of his ability to continue as a torturer or a breakdown of his ability to live a

fulfilling home life. Of course it is (unhappily) conceivable that a job that involves cruelty and bullying may produce excitements that may make it horribly attractive to certain individuals; that is not in dispute. The point is that it cannot, for the reasons just given, constitute a coherent model for a meaningful human life.

HUMANITY AND OPENNESS

The factors which constrain our ability as humans to find meaning in our lives depend partly on our emotional make-up and partly on our rational endowments. There is no need to take sides here in an artificial philosopher's battle between David Hume, the champion of sensibility as the basis of morals, and Immanuel Kant, the apostle of rationality. Will anyone who 'wears a human heart', asks Hume, 'tread as willingly on another's gouty toes, whom he has no quarrel with, as on the hard flint and pavement?'[42] There is, on this account, no plausible picture of a truly fulfilled human life cut off from the patterns of feeling that make us naturally disposed to have some minimal concern for our fellow creatures. Can I, asks Kant, rationally conceive of myself as worthy of respect, without recognising as a matter of reason that 'every other rational being conceives his existence on the same rational ground'?[43] Legislating a privilege for oneself which one will not extend to others shows a defective rationality; for to make use of others as a mere means to one's selfish ends is to cut oneself off from the operation of that rational dialogue which defines our humanity. Those determined to take issue with these famous defences of morality could perhaps produce imaginary (and maybe actual) examples of people who insist they have satisfying and meaningful lives despite blocking off their natural sympathies for others, or despite

somehow managing to insist on personal privileges they refuse to consider extending to others. But there will always be a certain fragmentation and isolation about such lives. They cannot, by their very nature, flourish into lives that fully embrace our human potentialities for fellow feeling and rational dialogue with others.

If the compartmentalised life is less than fully human, it follows that a truly meaningful life as a human being can be achieved only by one whose pattern of living is in a certain sense *open* rather than closed; that is, whose fundamental dispositions are structured is such a way as not to foreclose the possibility of genuine emotional interaction and genuine critical dialogue with their fellows. This need not mean that in a meaningful life any moral value always has to override all other values: perhaps no one could be a successful artist or scientist or athlete if they were so saintly as to sacrifice all their time and resources to the needs of others. But it does mean that the meaningful life for human beings is an *integrated* life – one where my pet projects and plans are not kept in an isolated category which allows me to pursue them perpetually shielded from the demands on me as a parent, or a friend, or a colleague, or a citizen. Though I may of course have my own special priorities and goals – as I must do, if my life is to be genuinely my own, if I am to be a human agent, not a mere insect in the social hive – [44] nevertheless the walls created by those priorities will never become so thick as to allow me to domineer like a tyrant within the domain of my own creative self-importance.

So what of the Gauguin-type figure? What of the great creator whose string of neglected families and discarded mistresses and betrayed friends are regarded by him as walking wounded, casualties in the all-consuming struggles of a

genius? Well, it would be naive and silly to deny that great artists often behave badly. Both Tolstoy and Dickens, though they were in a certain sense 'family men', could in some respects be regarded as husbands from hell. The claim is not that a meaningful life can only be one of untiring virtue: lapses and failures of all kinds are a universal feature of all human lives, as prevalent among the great as they are among the ordinary. Indeed, they may be more prevalent, since the determination required to excel perhaps needs the kind of single-mindedness that has a certain kinship to raw egoism. But one can concede this obvious truth without succumbing to the muddled romantic fantasy that greatness somehow requires or justifies callousness. All the evidence surely points the other way; for great art is great precisely because of its humanity – its heightened vision of the pathos and tragedy and comedy and precariousness of the human condition; and it verges on the absurd to suggest that such a vision is best cultivated through a coarsened and blunted sensitivity to the needs of those fellow humans with whom one is most closely involved. Further reflection along these lines suggests a serious tension, if not downright incompatibility, between the morally insensitive life and the pursuit of artistic creativity. Artistic excellence does not after all operate in a compartment sealed off from the deeper humanity of the artist. That openness we have identified as central to a meaningful life will be as much in point here as anywhere.

This chimes in with an old intuition of Aristotle – that the virtues cannot be fully present in isolation, but are somehow integrated or interconnected.[45] And it accords with the idea to be found in many religious traditions that, in order to be meaningful, life must meet the standards of some pattern tailored to our human nature, rather than being a pure

function of isolated individual choice. To the followers of Nietzsche, the champions of creativity and the lordship of the will, such ideas can appear restrictive and confining, like a strait-jacket. But nothing about the idea of the meaningful life as integrated presupposes that every human has to lead the same kind of existence, or that there is not room for many varieties of human flourishing – artistic, athletic, intellectual, and so on. What *is* presupposed is that to count towards the meaningfulness of a life these varied activities have to be more than just performed by the agent with an eye to personal satisfaction; they have to be capable of being *informed* by a vision of their value in the whole,[46] by a sense of the worthwhile part they play in the growth and flowering of each unique human individual, and of the other human lives with which that story is necessarily interwoven.

The notions here may sound piously high-minded: moral, perhaps even spiritual, values seem to be being invoked as touchstones for a meaningful life. This raises the question: what can be the basis of such exalted conceptions of meaning and value in a universe where, if current scientific orthodoxy is correct, our entire human existence is not much more than a random blip on the face of the cosmos? To that question we now turn.

CODA: INTIMATIONS OF MEANING

The Corn was Orient and Immortal Wheat, which never should be reaped nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The Dust and Stones of the Street were as Precious as GOLD . . . And yong Men Glittering and Sparkling Angels, and Maids strange Seraphic Pieces of Light and Beauty! . . . Eternity was Manifest in the Light of the Day and som thing infinit Behind evry thing appeared: which talked with my Expectation and moved my Desire.

Thomas Traherne[60]

Instruction may make men learned, said Bernard of Clairvaux, but feeling makes them wise.[61] Learned academics, whose livelihood is linked to displays of their erudition and cleverness, may act as if all the questions of religion and the meaning of life could be answered from the study or the seminar room. But the illuminations that come from the practice of spirituality cannot be accessed by means of rational argument alone, since the relevant experiences are not available to us during those times when we are adopting the stance of detached rationality.

To *access*, however, is not the same as to *assess*. Even if we cannot gain access to spiritual illumination via rational analysis, this is not to say philosophy, or critical rationality, can have nothing to say about the quest for meaning via the path of spirituality. For philosophy has an obligation to take into account all experience that is part of the human condition. And although claims about the divine may lie beyond the horizon of scientific knowledge, it is not as if embarking on the spiritual quest is a total 'leap in the dark'. For our human awareness, even of the everyday variety, indisputably includes experiences in which spiritual values are made manifest – experiences in which, arguably, we have intimations of a transcendent world of meaning that breaks through into the ordinary world of our five senses. Our apprehension of beauty, the beauty of the natural world, is one example. As simple an experience as that of seeing the *colours* of the leaves in autumn discloses the world around us as resonating with an astonishing harmony and richness; it reveals objects as qualitatively irradiated in modalities which even the most sober of analytic philosophers have agreed are not fully capturable in the language of physics.[62] When William Blake urged us 'To see a World in a Grain of Sand and Heaven in a

Wild Flower',[63] he was not advocating some strange incoherent mindset of the kind philosophers sometimes disparage by using the label 'mystical'. Rather, he was pointing to something that few humans can honestly deny: our ability, in those lucid moments that Wordsworth called 'spots of time',[64] to see the world transfigured with beauty and meaning. There is a clear and unbroken continuum from our immediate everyday experience of the natural world, through the more reflective poetic musings of Blake and Wordsworth, through to the ecstatic vision of Thomas Traherne quoted above, a vision in which the wonder and preciousness of the world, and its human inhabitants, is so vividly manifest.

The pervasive modern vision of the cosmos as bleak and meaningless, with life no more than an accidental scum on the barren rocks, is a vision that is seen through the lens of our own fouled-up lives – the empty concrete wastes of littered parking lots, the dirty, graffiti-defaced walls of decaying warehouses and overcrowded office buildings. But take away the grime our own greed has created, take away the perpetual fog of exhaust fumes and the endless drone of jetliners ripping up the ozone layer, the constant flickering of screens and blaring of speakers. Think back instead only two or three centuries ago, to the limpid scenes captured by Canaletto, or the translucent interiors of Vermeer, the pure air shimmering and sparkling, the colours of everyday objects bright and vivid and new. Think instead of Moses emerging from his tent to gaze up at the brilliant canopy of blazing stars in the clear night of the Sinai desert; the clean pure silence, the astonishing radiance of beauty. *That* is our world: the beauty is not 'projected' onto it by the observer, but is inescapably real, calling forth an irresistible response in our hearts. We *respond* to beauty, as we respond to truth and goodness: as objective

realities beyond ourselves, that have the power to inspire us and draw us forward into the light. Of course it is possible, as many philosophers since Hume have argued, that such objectivity is an illusion, resulting from the mind's tendency to 'spread itself' or project its own feelings outwards onto the world.[65] But it is at least worth considering that talk of 'projection' may apply most aptly *not* to our natural joy and wonder at the immeasurable beauty of the natural world but rather to the bleak modernistic vision of the universe as void of meaning and value. It may stem from our own confusions and bitterness as we wilfully turn away from the light, as we steadily advance with our bulldozers until we cover the whole planet in concrete and then complain that the cosmos we live in is no more than meaningless rubble.

Our aesthetic experience gives us intimations of a world of value outside our own urgent self-oriented concerns. But to call the wonder expressed in a vision like Traherne's 'aesthetic' is in a certain sense to trivialise it, to make it seem like the precious exclamations of an effete art critic showing off his refinement in a picture gallery. In reality, aesthetic wonder is also suffused with a moral significance: it was no accident that Immanuel Kant linked the brilliancy of the starry heavens above with the moral law within, as the two most awe-inspiring objects in creation.[66] What is manifest in the beauty of the people who walk through Traherne's cornfields, the young men who are 'angels' and the young women who are 'seraphic pieces of light and beauty', is their human worth: the preciousness of individuals who are vulnerable, mortal, and yet somehow of eternal value, since their human lot of fragility and suffering has the capacity to deepen their understanding and sympathy – 'that one poor word that involves all our best insight and our best love' –

and ultimately, mysteriously, to provide the grace for redemption and rebirth.

To see the world as Traherne saw it is not something that is dictated by a scientific analysis of the given facts, yet neither is it incompatible with those facts. The moral categories of our experience, so closely bound up with the question of life's meaning, are not arcane or mystical categories, but are inseparable from our human way of being in the world. Inseparable, but not automatically achieved. When things go wrong,

> Life's but a fleeting shadow, a poor player
> that struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> and then is heard no more. It is a tale
> told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> signifying . . . nothing.[67]

Macbeth's hell, his deep depression about his life and future, is bound up with a vivid sense of the collapse of any meaning in life. That in turn is triggered by his interior moral collapse, his capitulation to greed and ambition, which lets him take the first step towards betrayal and murder: that capitulation, which was supposed to give him the crown and solve all his problems, turned out to be the first step to ethical disintegration, the first step on the 'primrose path to the everlasting bonfire'. Human beings cannot live wholly and healthily except in responsiveness to objective values of truth and beauty and goodness. If they deny those values, or try to subordinate them to their own selfish ends, they find that meaning slips away.

Perhaps there are some who can achieve a systematic responsiveness to these values without the kind of focus provided by the disciplines of spirituality; but the argument of

this book has been that such a 'go it alone' strategy is fraught with problems. We cannot create our own values, and we cannot achieve meaning just by inventing goals of our own; the fulfilment of our nature depends on the systematic cultivation of our human capacities for wonder and delight in the beauty of the world, and the development of our moral sensibilities for compassion, sympathy and rational dialogue with others. Yet, because of the fragility of our human condition, we need more than a rational determination to orient ourselves towards the good. We need to be sustained by a faith in the ultimate resilience of the good; we need to live in the light of hope.[68] Such faith and hope, like the love that inspires both, is not established within the domain of scientifically determinate knowledge, but there is good reason to believe it is available to us through cultivating the disciplines of spirituality. Nothing in life is guaranteed, but if the path we follow is integrally linked, as good spiritual paths are, to right action and self-discovery and respect for others, then we have little to lose; and if the claims of religion are true, then we have everything to gain. For in acting as if life has meaning, we will find, thank God, that it does.