Terry Eagleton

THE MEANING OF LIFE

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

First published in hardback 2007

First published as a Very Short Introduction 2008

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Eagleton, Terry, 1943–
The meaning of life: a very short introduction / Terry Eagleton.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN-13: 978–0–19–953217–9
1. Life. 2. Meaning (Philosophy) I. Title.
BD431.E14 2008
128–dc22 2007051203

ISBN 978–0–19–953217–9

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India
Printed in Great Britain by
Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

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Is life what you make it?

So far, we have looked more at meaning than at life. Yet the word 'life' is every bit as problematic as the word 'meaning', and it is not hard to see why. For surely the reason why we cannot talk about the meaning of life is that there is no such thing as life? Are we not, as Wittgenstein might say, bewitched here by our grammar, which can generate the word 'life' in the singular just as it can the word 'tomato'? Perhaps we have the word 'life' only because our language is intrinsically reifying. '*Essence* is expressed by grammar', as Wittgenstein remarks.[24] How on earth could everything that falls under the heading of human life, from childbirth to clog dancing, be thought to stack up to a single meaning? Isn't this exactly the delusion of the paranoiac, for whom everything is supposed to be ominously resonant of everything else, bound together in an oppressively translucent whole? Or, if you prefer, the delusion of philosophy, which as Freud mischievously commented is the nearest thing to paranoia? Not even an individual life adds up to a unified whole. It is true that some people see their lives as forming an elegant narrative all the way from Introduction to Epilogue, but not everyone views themselves like this. How, then, could countless millions of individual lives stack up to a coherent whole, if not even one of

[24] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1963), §371.

them does? Life surely does not have enough shape to it even to constitute a riddle.

'The meaning of life' might well mean 'what it all adds up to', in which case childbirth and clog dancing would indeed have to be viewed as aspects of a single, significant totality. And this is more than one would expect even from the most shapely, well-integrated works of art. Not even the most grandiose of historical narratives imagines that it can make sense of absolutely everything. Marxism has nothing to say about the anal scent glands of the civet, a silence which it does not consider a defect. There is no official Buddhist position on West Yorkshire waterfalls. It is wildly improbable that everything in human life constitutes part of a coherent pattern. Is it enough, then, for most of it to do so? Or does 'the meaning of life' mean rather 'the *essential* significance of life' – not so much what it all adds up to as what it all boils down to? A statement like 'The meaning of life is suffering' suggests not that suffering is the whole of life, or the point and purpose of life, but that it is the most significant or fundamental feature of it. By tracking this particular thread, so the claim goes, we can make sense of the whole baffling design.

Is there, then, a phenomenon called 'human life' which can be the bearer of a coherent meaning? Well, people certainly sometimes speak of life in such general terms. Life is a gas, a bitch, a cabaret, a vale of tears, a bed of roses. This bunch of shop-soiled tags may hardly seem much on which to build a case. Yet the assumption that all meta-statements about human life are vacuous is itself vacuous. It is not true that only concrete, particular truths have any force. What, for example, of the generalization that most men and women in history have lived lives of fruitless, wretched toil? This is surely more disturbing than the proposition that most people in Delaware have done so.

Perhaps it is impossible to generalize intelligently about human life, because in order to do so we would have to step outside it.

And this would be like trying to leap out of our skins. Surely only someone outside human existence altogether, like God, would be able to survey it as a whole and see whether it added up?[25] The case is akin to Nietzsche's argument in *The Twilight of the Idols* that life cannot be judged either valuable or valueless in itself, since the criteria we would have to appeal to in order to establish this would themselves be part of life. But this is surely questionable. You do not need to stand outside human existence in order to make meaningful comments about it, any more than you need to be in New Zealand in order to criticize British society as a whole. It is true that nobody has ever actually seen British society as a whole, any more than anyone has ever clapped eyes on the Boy Scout movement; but we can make reasonable inferences from the bits of reality that we are familiar with to the bits that we aren't. It is not a matter of seeing it all, just a matter of seeing enough to sort out what seems typical from what does not.

If generalizations about humanity can be valid, it is among other things because human beings, belonging as they do to the same natural species, share an immense amount in common. To say this is not to overlook the politically explosive differences and distinctions between them. But those postmodern thinkers who are enraptured by difference, and with dreary uniformity find it everywhere they turn, should not overlook our common features either. The differences between human beings are vital, but they are not a solid enough foundation on which to build an ethics or a politics.

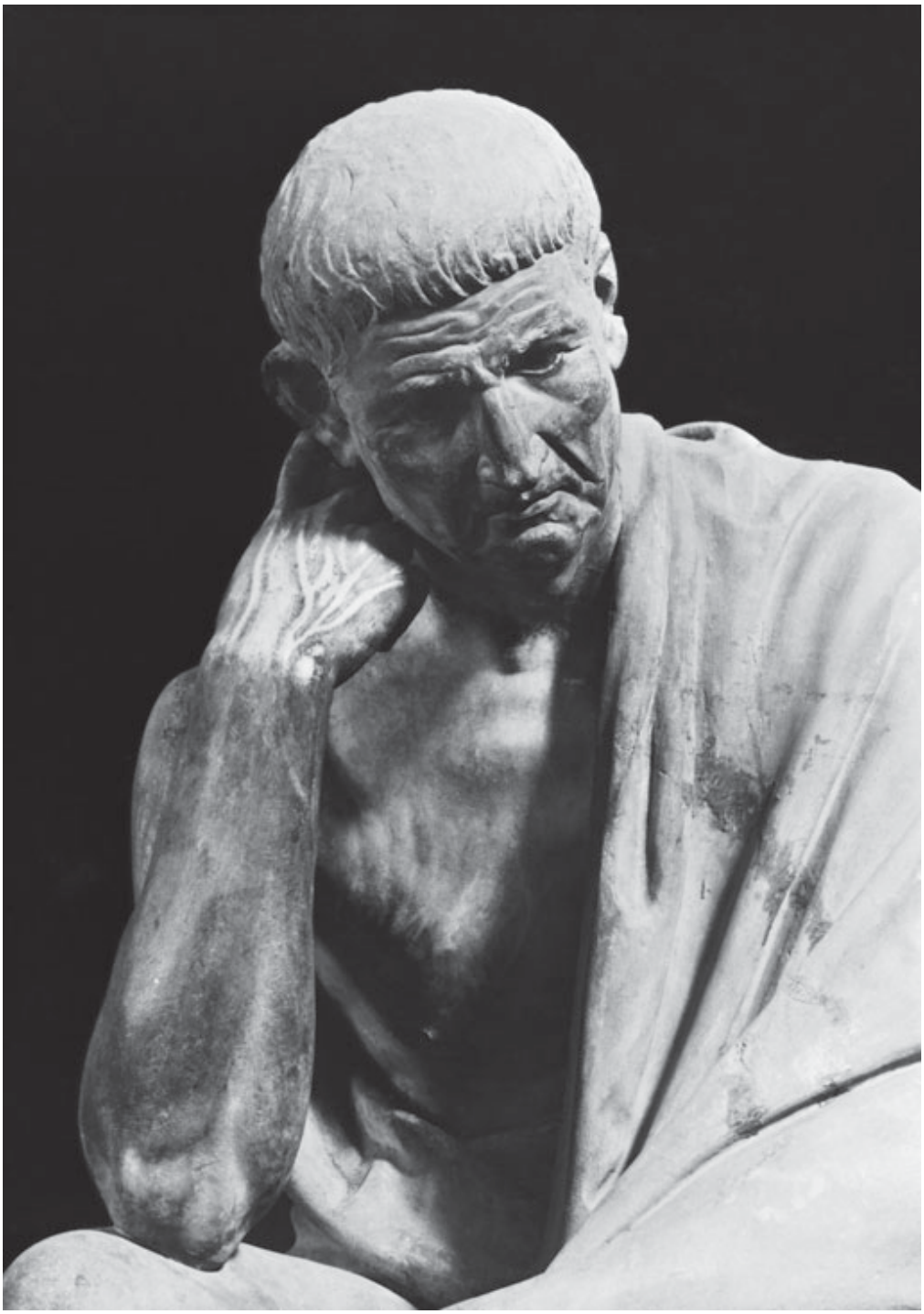
Besides, even if one could not speak of 'the human condition' in 1500, one can certainly do so in 2000. Those who find the idea objectionable seem not to have heard of globalization. It is

[25] John Cottingham seems to endorse this case in his *On the Meaning of Life* (London, 2003), and adduces Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in its defence. For the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, however, it is not only the meaning of life which falls beyond the bounds of the knowable, but subjectivity as such.

transnational capitalism which has helped to forge humanity into one. What we now at least have in common is the will to survive in the face of the various threats to our existence which loom up on every side. There is a sense in which those who deny the reality of the human condition also deny global warming. Nothing ought to unite the species as effectively as the possibility of its extinction. In death, at least, we come together.

If the meaning of life lies in the common *goal* of human beings, then there seems no doubt about what this is. What everyone strives for is happiness. 'Happiness', to be sure, is a feeble, holiday-camp sort of word, evocative of manic grins and cavorting about in a multicoloured jacket. But as Aristotle recognizes in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, it operates as a kind of baseline in human life, in the sense that you cannot reasonably ask *why* we should seek to be happy. It is not a means to something else, as money or power generally are. It is more like wanting to be respected. Desiring it just seems to be part of our nature. Here, then, is a foundational term of sorts. The problem is that it is so desperately indeterminate. The idea of happiness seems both vital and vacuous. What counts as happiness? What if you find it in terrorizing old ladies? Someone who is determined to become an actor may spend fruitless hours auditioning while living on a pittance. For much of the time she is anxious, dispirited, and mildly hungry. She is not what we would usually call happy. Her life is not pleasant or enjoyable. Yet she is, so to speak, prepared to sacrifice her happiness to her happiness.

Happiness is sometimes seen as a state of mind. But this is not how Aristotle regards it. 'Well-being', as we usually translate his term for happiness, is what we might call a state of soul, which for him involves not just an interior condition of being, but a disposition to behave in certain ways. As Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked, the best image of the soul is the body. If you want to observe someone's 'spirit', look at what they do. Happiness for Aristotle is attained by virtue, and virtue is above all a social



9. A statue of the Greek philosopher Aristotle

practice rather than an attitude of mind. Happiness is part of a practical way of life, not some private inner contentment. On this theory, you could look at someone's conduct over a period of time and exclaim 'He's happy!', as you could not on a more dualistic model of human beings. And he would not have to be beaming or cavorting about either.

Julian Baggini, in his discussion of happiness in *What's It All About?*, fails fully to register this point. In order to illustrate that happiness is not the be-all and end-all of life, he argues that if you are just about to embark on your quest for happiness and see someone sinking in quicksand, it would surely be better to save them than to pursue your own contentment.[26] The language of 'embark on your quest for happiness' is surely telling: for one thing, it makes happiness sound like a private pursuit, and for another thing it makes it sound like a good night out on the town. Indeed, it risks making happiness sound more like pleasure: saving someone from quicksand couldn't be part of it, since it clearly isn't pleasant. In fact, Baggini, in common with most moral philosophers, recognizes elsewhere in his book that pleasure is a passing sensation, while happiness at its best is an enduring condition of being. You can experience intense pleasure without being in the least happy; and just as it seems that you can be happy for dubious reasons (such as terrorizing old ladies), you can also relish morally disreputable pleasures, like rejoicing in your enemy's discomfort.

One objection to Baggini's example is thus surely obvious. Couldn't rescuing someone from quicksand be *part* of one's happiness, rather than a dutiful distraction from it? This is only unclear if one is thinking of happiness along the lines of pleasure, rather than of Aristotelian well-being. For Aristotle, happiness is bound up with the practice of virtue; and though he has nothing in particular to say about rescuing people from quicksand, this

[26] Julian Baggini, *What's It All About?* (London, 2004), 97.

would certainly count for his great Christian successor Thomas Aquinas as a sign of well-being. For Aquinas, it would be an example of love, which in his view is not ultimately in conflict with happiness. This is not to say that in Aristotle's eyes happiness and pleasure are simple opposites. On the contrary, virtuous people for him are those who reap pleasure from doing good, and those who do the decent thing without enjoying it are not in his view truly virtuous. But pleasure of a merely bovine or dissolute despot variety is certainly to be contrasted unfavourably with happiness.

Baggini's rather un-Aristotelian idea of happiness is also evident in a scenario he takes from the philosopher Robert Nozick. Suppose that you were plugged into a machine, one rather like the supercomputer in the film *The Matrix*, which allowed you a virtual experience of complete, uninterrupted happiness. Wouldn't most people reject this seductive bliss on account of its unreality? Don't we want to live our lives truthfully, without deception, aware of ourselves as the authors of our own lives, conscious that it is our own strivings and not some manufactured contraption which is responsible for our sense of fulfilment? Baggini believes that most people would indeed reject the happiness machine on these grounds, and he is surely right. But the idea of happiness he offers us here is once again un-Aristotelian. It is a mood or state of consciousness rather than a way of life. It is, in fact, exactly the kind of modern concept of happiness which Aristotle might well have found unintelligible, or at least objectionable. For him, you could not be happy sitting in a machine all your life – not just because your experience would be a matter of simulation rather than reality, but because well-being involves a practical, social form of life. Happiness for Aristotle is not an inward disposition that might then issue in certain actions, but a way of acting which creates certain dispositions.

In Aristotle's eyes, the reason why you could not be really happy sitting in a machine all your life is much the same reason as why you could not be fully happy confined to a wheelchair or an iron

lung. It is not, of course, that the disabled cannot know a precious sense of self-fulfilment, just like anyone else; it is simply that to be disabled is to be stymied in one's ability to realize certain powers and capacities. And such realization, on Aristotle's own rather specialist definition, is part of one's happiness or well-being. There are other senses of 'happy' in which disabled people can be perfectly so. Even so, the current mealy-mouthed fashion of denying that the disabled really are disabled, a self-deception especially prominent in a United States for which frailty is an embarrassment and nothing short of success will do, is as much a form of moral hypocrisy as the Victorian habit of denying that the poor were quite likely to be miserable. It belongs with a general Western disavowal of uncomfortable truths, an urge to sweep suffering under the carpet.

Sacrificing one's happiness for the sake of someone else is probably the most morally admirable action one can imagine. But it does not therefore follow that it is the most typical or even the most desirable kind of loving. It is not the most desirable because it is a pity that it is necessary in the first place; and it is not the most typical because, as I shall be arguing in a moment, love at its most typical involves the fullest possible reciprocity. One may love one's small infants to the point of being cheerfully prepared to die for them; but because loving in the fullest sense is something the infants themselves are going to have to learn, the love between you and them cannot be the prototype of human love, any more than can a less precious relationship like one's affection for a loyal old butler. In both cases, the relationship is not equal enough.

Happiness or well-being for Aristotle, then, involves a creative realization of one's typically human faculties. It is as much something you do as something you are. And it cannot be done in isolation, which is one way in which it differs from the pursuit of pleasure. The Aristotelian virtues are for the most part social ones. The idea of self-realization can have something of a virile, red-faced feel to it, as though we are speaking of a kind

of spiritual gymnastics. In fact, Aristotle's 'great-souled' moral prototype is much like this: a prosperous Athenian gentleman who is a stranger to failure, loss, and tragedy – interestingly, for the author of one of the world's great treatises on the latter topic. The good man for Aristotle often sounds more like Bill Gates than St Francis of Assisi. It is true that he is concerned not with being successful as this or that kind of person – a businessman, for example, or a politician – but with being successful at being human. For Aristotle, being human is something we have to get good at, and virtuous people are virtuosi of living. Even so, there is something amiss with a theory of happiness for which the idea of a happy woman might well be a contradiction in terms. So would the idea of a happy failure.

For Karl Marx, however, a moral philosopher in Aristotle's lineage, self-realization would also encompass, say, listening to a string quartet, or savouring a peach. Perhaps 'self-fulfilment' has a less strenuous ring to it than 'self-realization'. Happiness is a question of self-fulfilment, which is not to be confused with the Boy Scout or Duke of Edinburgh ideology of seeing life as a series of hurdles to be leapt over and achievements to be stashed beneath the belt. Achievements make sense within the qualitative context of a whole life, not (as in the mountaineering ideology of life) as isolated peaks of attainment.

By and large, people either feel good or they do not, and are generally aware of the fact. One cannot, to be sure, dismiss the influence of so-called false consciousness here. A slave may be conned into believing that he is blissfully content when his behaviour betrays the fact that he is not. We have remarkable resources for rationalizing our wretchedness. But when, for example, an astonishing 92 per cent of the Irish tell pollsters that they are happy, there is not much one can do but believe them. It is true that the Irish have a tradition of geniality to strangers, so perhaps they are claiming to be happy simply to make the pollsters feel happy. But there is no real reason not to take them

at their word. In the case of practical or Aristotelian happiness, however, the dangers of self-deception are more acute. For how are you to know that you are living your life virtuously? Perhaps a friend or observer might be a more reliable judge here than you are yourself. In fact, Aristotle might have written his books on ethics partly to put people right about what really counted as happiness. He may have assumed that there was a good deal of false consciousness on the issue. Otherwise it is hard to know why he should recommend a goal which all men and women pursue in any case.

If happiness is a state of mind, then it is arguably dependent on one's material circumstances. It is possible to claim that you can be happy despite those circumstances, a case not far from that of Spinoza or the ancient Stoics. Yet it is grossly improbable that you could feel content living in an unsanitary, overcrowded refugee camp, having just lost your children in some natural disaster. On an Aristotelian view of happiness, however, this is even more obvious. You cannot be brave, honourable, and generous unless you are a reasonably free agent living in the kind of political conditions which foster these virtues. This is why Aristotle sees ethics and politics as intimately bound together. The good life requires a particular kind of political state – in his view, one well supplied with slaves and subjected women, who do the donkey-work while you yourself sally forth to pursue the life of excellence. Happiness or well-being is an institutional affair: it demands the kind of social and political conditions in which you are free to exercise your creative powers. This is less evident when one thinks of happiness, as the liberal tends to do, primarily as an internal or individual affair. Happiness as a state of mind may require untroubled surroundings, but it does not require a particular kind of politics.

Happiness, then, may constitute the meaning of life, but it is not an open-and-shut case. We have seen, for example, that someone may claim to derive happiness from behaving

despicably. They may even claim perversely to derive it from unhappiness, as in 'He's never happier than when he's grousing'. There is always, in other words, the problem of masochism. As far as despicable behaviour goes, someone's life may be formally meaningful – meaningful in the sense of being orderly, coherent, exquisitely well-patterned, and full of well-defined goals – while being trivial or even squalid in its moral content. The two may even be interrelated, as in the shrivel-hearted bureaucrat syndrome. There are also, of course, other candidates for the meaning of life apart from happiness: power, love, honour, truth, pleasure, freedom, reason, autonomy, the state, the nation, God, self-sacrifice, contemplation, living according to Nature, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, self-abnegation, death, desire, worldly success, the esteem of one's fellows, reaping as many intense experiences as possible, having a good laugh, and so on. For most people, in practice if not always in theory, life is made meaningful by their relationships with those closest to them, such as partners and children.

A number of these candidates will seem to many people either too trivial, or too instrumental, to count as the meaning of life. Power and wealth belong fairly obviously to the instrumental category; and anything which is instrumental cannot have the fundamental quality which the meaning of life seems to demand, since it exists for the sake of something more fundamental than itself. This is not necessarily to equate the instrumental with the inferior: freedom, at least in some definitions of it, is instrumental, yet most people agree on its preciousness.

It seems doubtful, then, that power can be the meaning of life. All the same, it is a precious human resource, as the powerless are well aware. As with wealth, only those well furnished with it can afford to disdain it. Everything depends on who is exercising it for what purposes in which situations. But it would seem no more an end in itself than wealth – unless, that is, you take 'power' in the Nietzschean sense, which is closer to the idea of self-realization

than it is to domination. (Not that Nietzsche was in the least averse to a stiff dose of the latter.) 'Will to power' in Nietzsche's thought means the tendency of all things to realize, expand, and augment themselves; and it is reasonable to see this as an end in itself, just as Aristotle regards human flourishing as an end in itself. Spinoza viewed power in much the same way. It is just that, in Nietzsche's Social Darwinist vision of life, this ceaseless proliferation of powers also involves power as domination, as each life-form strives to subjugate the others. Those tempted to see power in the sense of domination as an end in itself should summon to mind the monstrous, grotesque figure of the deceased British newspaper proprietor Robert Maxwell, a swindler and bully whose body was an obscene image of his soul.

As for wealth, we live in a civilization which piously denies that it is an end in itself, and treats it exactly this way in practice. One of the most powerful indictments of capitalism is that it compels us to invest most of our creative energies in matters which are in fact purely utilitarian. The means of life become the end. Life consists in laying the material infrastructure for living. It is astonishing that in the twenty-first century, the material organization of life should bulk as large as it did in the Stone Age. The capital which might be devoted to releasing men and women, at least to some moderate degree, from the exigencies of labour is dedicated instead to the task of amassing more capital.

If the meaning-of-life question seems pressing in this situation, it is for one thing because this whole process of accumulation is ultimately as pointless and purposeless as the Schopenhaurian Will. Like the Will, capital has a momentum of its own, exists primarily for its own sake, and uses individuals as instruments of its own blind evolution. It also has something of the low cunning of the Will, persuading the men and women it employs as so many tools that they are precious, unique, and self-determining. If Schopenhauer names this deception 'consciousness', Marx calls it ideology.

Freud set out by believing that the meaning of life was desire, or the ruses of the unconscious in our waking lives, and came to believe that the meaning of life was death. But this claim can have several different meanings. For Freud himself, it means that we are all ultimately in thrall to *Thanatos*, or the death drive. But it can also mean that a life which contains nothing for which one is not prepared to die is unlikely to be very fruitful. Or it can suggest that to live in an awareness of our mortality is to live with realism, irony, truthfulness, and a chastening sense of our finitude and fragility. In this respect at least, to keep faith with what is most animal about us is to live authentically. We would be less inclined to launch hubristic projects which bring ourselves and others to grief. An unconscious trust in our own immortality lies at the source of much of our destructiveness.

10. The Grim Reaper: a still from Monty Python's 'The Meaning of Life'

Wryly alert to the perishability of things, we would be wary of clutching them neurotically to our bosoms. Through this enabling detachment, we would be better able to see things for what they are, as well as to relish them more fully. In this sense, death enhances and intensifies life, rather than voiding it of value. This is not some *carpe diem* recipe, but the exact reverse. The frantic *jouissance* of seizing the day, gathering rosebuds, downing an extra glass, and living like there's no tomorrow is a desperate strategy for outwitting death, one which seeks pointlessly to cheat it rather than to make something of it. In its frenzied hedonism, it pays homage to the death it tries to disavow. For all its bravura, it is a pessimistic view, whereas the acceptance of death is a realistic one.

Besides, to be conscious of our limits, which death throws into unforgiving relief, is also to be conscious of the way we are dependent on and constrained by others. When St Paul comments that we die every moment, part of what he has in mind is perhaps the fact that we can only live well by buckling the self to the needs of others, in a kind of little death, or *petit mort*. In doing so, we rehearse and prefigure that final self-abnegation which is death. In this way, death in the sense of a ceaseless dying to self is the source of the good life. If this sounds unpleasantly slavish and self-denying, it is only because we forget that if others do this as well, the result is a form of reciprocal service which provides the context for each self to flourish. The traditional name for this reciprocity is love.

Yet we also die every minute in a rather more literal sense. We live by a kind of perpetual negation, as we annul one situation in projecting ourselves into another. This constant self-transcendence, one possible only to the linguistic animal, is known as history. Psychoanalytically speaking, however, it has the name of desire, which is one reason why desire is a plausible candidate for the meaning of life. Desire wells up where something is missing. It is a question of lack, hollowing out the

11. From here to eternity

present in order to shuttle us on to some similarly scooped-out future. In one sense, death and desire are antagonists, since if we ceased to desire, history would grind to a halt. In another sense, however, desire, which for Freudians is the driving force of life, reflects in its inner lack the death to which it will finally bring us. In this sense, too, life is an anticipation of death. It is only because we carry death in our bones that we are able to keep on living.

If death sounds rather too gloomy an answer to the meaning of life, and desire a rather too steamy one, what about intellectual contemplation? From Plato and Spinoza to the neo-conservative guru Leo Strauss, the idea that reflecting on the truth of existence is the noblest goal of humanity has had its allures – not least, needless to say, among intellectuals. It is pleasant to feel that one has tuned in to the meaning of the universe simply by turning into one's university office every morning. It is as though tailors, when asked about the meaning of life, should reply 'A really fantastic pair of trousers', while farmers should propose a bumper harvest. Even Aristotle, for all his interest in practical forms of life, thought this the highest form of fulfilment. Yet the idea that the meaning of life consists in pondering the meaning of life seems curiously tail-chasing. It also assumes that the meaning of life is some kind of proposition, such as 'The ego is an illusion' or 'Everything is made out of semolina'. A small elite of the wise, having devoted their lives to brooding on these matters, may then be fortunate enough to stumble on whatever the truth of the question may be. This is not exactly the case for Aristotle, for whom such speculation, or *theōria*, is itself a kind of practice; but it is a danger that the case in general can court.

Yet if life does have a meaning, it is surely not of this contemplative kind. The meaning of life is less a proposition than a practice. It is not an esoteric truth, but a certain *form* of life. As such, it can only really be known in the living. Perhaps this is what Wittgenstein had in mind when he observed in the *Tractatus* that 'We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered,

then problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer. The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem' (6.52, 6.251).

What sense can we make of these cryptic sayings? What Wittgenstein probably means is not that the meaning of life is a pseudo-question, but that it is a pseudo-question as far as philosophy is concerned. And Wittgenstein had no great respect for philosophy, which he hoped his *Tractatus* would bring to an end. All the vital questions, he thought, lay outside the subject's stringent limits. The meaning of life was not something that could be said, in the form of a factual proposition; and for the early Wittgenstein, only this kind of proposition made sense. We come to glimpse something of the meaning of life when we realize that it is not the kind of thing that could be an answer to a philosophically meaningful question. It is not a 'solution' at all. Once we have recognized that it is beyond all such questions, we understand that *this* is our answer.

The words of Wittgenstein which I quoted earlier in the book – 'Not how the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is' – mean, perhaps, that we can speak of this or that state of affairs in the world, but not of the value or meaning of the world as a whole. This does not mean that Wittgenstein dismissed such talk as nonsense, as the logical positivists did. On the contrary, he thought it far more important than talk about factual states of affairs. It was just that language could not represent the world as a whole. But though the value and meaning of the world as a whole could not be stated, they could nevertheless be shown. And one negative way of showing them was to show what philosophy could *not* say.

The meaning of life is not a solution to a problem, but a matter of living in a certain way. It is not metaphysical, but ethical. It is not something separate from life, but what makes it worth

living – which is to say, a certain quality, depth, abundance, and intensity of life. In this sense, the meaning of life is life itself, seen in a certain way. Meaning-of-life merchants generally feel let down by such a claim, since it does not seem mysterious and majestic enough. It seems both too banal and too exoteric. It is only slightly more edifying than '42'. Or indeed, than the T-shirt slogan which reads 'What If The Hokey-Cokey Really Is What It's All About?' It takes the meaning-of-life question out of the hands of a coterie of adepts or *cognoscenti* and returns it to the routine business of everyday existence. It is just this kind of bathos that Matthew sets up in his gospel, where he presents the Son of Man returning in glory surrounded by angels for the Last Judgement. Despite this off-the-peg cosmic imagery, salvation turns out to be an embarrassingly prosaic affair – a matter of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, and visiting the imprisoned. It has no 'religious' glamour or aura whatsoever. Anybody can do it. The key to the universe turns out to be not some shattering revelation, but something which a lot of decent people do anyway, with scarcely a thought. Eternity lies not in a grain of sand but in a glass of water. The cosmos revolves on comforting the sick. When you act in this way, you are sharing in the love which built the stars. To live in this way is not just to have life, but to have it in abundance.

This kind of activity is known as *agapē*, or love, and has nothing to do with erotic or even affectionate feelings. The command to love is purely impersonal: the prototype of it is loving strangers, not those you desire or admire. It is a practice or way of life, not a state of mind. It has no connection with warm glows or personal intimacies. Is love, then, the meaning of life? It has certainly been the favourite candidate of a number of astute observers, not least of artists. Love resembles happiness in that it seems to be a baseline term, an end in itself. Like happiness, it seems to be of our nature. It is hard to say why you should bother giving water to the thirsty, not least if you know that they will die anyway in a few minutes' time.

In other ways, however, there are clashes between the two values. Someone who spends their life caring for a severely disabled child sacrifices their happiness to their love, even if this sacrifice is also made in the name of happiness (that of the child). Fighting for justice, which is a form of love, may bring you to your death. Love is a taxing, dispiriting affair, shot through with struggle and frustration, far removed from some beaming, bovine contentment. Yet it is still possible to argue that in the end love and happiness come down to different descriptions of the same way of life. One reason for this is that happiness is not in fact some beaming, bovine contentment, but (for Aristotle, at least) the condition of well-being which springs from the free flourishing of one's powers and capacities. And love, it can be claimed, is the same condition viewed in relational terms – the state in which the flourishing of one individual comes about through the flourishing of others.

How are we to understand this definition of love, remote as it is from both Catullus and Catherine Cookson? To begin with, we can return to our earlier suggestion that the possibility of human life having a built-in meaning does not depend on a belief in some transcendent power. It may well be that the evolution of human beings was random and accidental, but it does not necessarily follow from this that they do not have a specific kind of nature. And the good life for them may consist in realizing that nature. Bees evolved randomly as well, but can certainly be said to have a determinate nature. Bees do bee-like things. This is much less obvious in the case of human beings, since unlike bees it belongs to our nature to be cultural animals, and cultural animals are highly indeterminate creatures. Even so, it seems clear that culture does not simply annul our 'species being' or material nature. We are by nature, for example, sociable animals, who must co-operate or die; but we are also individual beings who seek our own fulfilment. To be individuated is an activity of our species being, not a condition at odds with it. We could not achieve it, for example, were it not for language, which belongs to me only because it belongs to the species first.

What we have called love is the way we can reconcile our search for individual fulfilment with the fact that we are social animals. For love means creating for another the space in which he might flourish, at the same time as he does this for you. The fulfilment of each becomes the ground for the fulfilment of the other. When we realize our natures in this way, we are at our best. This is partly because to fulfil oneself in ways which allow others to do so as well rules out murder, exploitation, torture, selfishness, and the like. In damaging others, we are in the long run damaging our own fulfilment, which depends on the freedom of others to have a hand in it. And since there can be no true reciprocity except among equals, oppression and inequality are in the long run self-thwarting as well. All this is at odds with the liberal model of society, for which it is enough if my uniquely individual flourishing is protected from interference by another's. The other is not primarily what brings me into being, but a potential threat to my being. And this, for all his celebrated belief that humans are political animals, is also true of Aristotle. He does not regard virtue or well-being as inherently relational. It is true that in his view other people are pretty essential to one's own flourishing, and that the solitary life is one fit only for gods and beasts. Yet Aristotelian man, as Alasdair MacIntyre has observed, is a stranger to love.[27]

The assumption that the meaning of life is primarily an individual affair is still alive and well. Julian Baggini writes that 'the search for meaning is essentially personal', involving 'the power and responsibility to discover and in part determine meaning for ourselves'.[28] John Cottingham speaks of a meaningful life as 'one in which the individual is engaged … in genuinely worthwhile activities that reflect his or her rational choice as an autonomous agent'.[29] None of this is false. But it reflects an individualist bias

[27] Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London, 1968), 80.
[28] Baggini, *What's It All About?*, 4, 86.
[29] Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, 66.

common to the modern age. It does not see the meaning of life as a common or reciprocal project. It fails to register that there can be by definition no meaning, whether of life or anything else, which is unique to myself alone. If we emerge into being in and through one another, then this must have strong implications for the meaning-of-life question.

On the theory I have just proposed, two of the strongest contenders in the meaning-of-life stakes – love and happiness – are not ultimately at odds. If happiness is seen in Aristotelian terms as the free flourishing of our faculties, and if love is the kind of reciprocity which allows this best to happen, there is no final conflict between them. Nor is there a conflict between happiness and morality, given that a just, compassionate treatment of other people is on the grand scale of things one of the conditions for one's own thriving. There is less need, then, to worry about the kind of life which seems to be meaningful in the sense of being creative, dynamic, successful, and fulfilled, yet which consists of torturing or trampling over others. Nor, on this theory, is one forced to choose between a number of different candidates for the good life, as Julian Baggini suggests we should. Baggini proposes a range of possibilities for the meaning of life – happiness, altruism, love, achievement, losing or abnegating the self, pleasure, the greater good of the species – and suggests in his liberal fashion that there is some truth in them all. A pick-and-mix model is accordingly advanced. In designer style, each of us can take what we want from these various goods and blend them into a life uniquely appropriate for ourselves.

It is possible, however, to draw a line through Baggini's points and see most of these goods as combinable with each other. Take, as an image of the good life, a jazz group.[30] A jazz group which is improvising obviously differs from a symphony orchestra,

[30] I am indebted for this image to G. A. Cohen.

12. The Buena Vista Social Club

since to a large extent each member is free to express herself as she likes. But she does so with a receptive sensitivity to the self-expressive performances of the other musicians. The complex harmony they fashion comes not from playing from a collective score, but from the free musical expression of each member acting as the basis for the free expression of the others. As each player grows more musically eloquent, the others draw inspiration from this and are spurred to greater heights. There is no conflict here between freedom and the 'good of the whole', yet the image is the reverse of totalitarian. Though each performer contributes to 'the greater good of the whole', she does so not by some grim-lipped self-sacrifice but simply by expressing herself. There is self-realization, but only through a loss of self in the music as a whole. There is achievement, but it is not a question of self-aggrandizing success. Instead, the achievement – the music itself – acts as a medium of relationship among the performers. There is pleasure to be reaped from this artistry, and – since there is a free fulfilment or realization of powers – there is also happiness in the sense of flourishing. Because this flourishing is reciprocal, we can even speak, remotely and analogically, of a kind of love. One could do worse, surely, than propose such a situation as the meaning of life – both in the sense that it is what makes life meaningful, and – more controversially – in the sense that when we act in this way, we realize our natures at their finest.

Is jazz, then, the meaning of life? Not exactly. The goal would be to construct this kind of community on a wider scale, which is a problem of politics. It is, to be sure, a utopian aspiration, but it is none the worse for that. The point of such aspirations is to indicate a direction, however lamentably we are bound to fall short of the goal. What we need is a form of life which is completely pointless, just as the jazz performance is pointless. Rather than serve some utilitarian purpose or earnest metaphysical end, it is a delight in itself. It needs no justification beyond its own existence. In this sense, the meaning of life is interestingly close to meaninglessness. Religious believers who

find this version of the meaning of life a little too laid-back for comfort should remind themselves that God, too, is his own end, ground, origin, reason, and self-delight, and that only by living this way can human beings be said to share in his life. Believers sometimes speak as though a key difference between themselves and non-believers is that for them, the meaning and purpose of life lie outside it. But this is not quite true even for believers. For classical theology, God transcends the world, but figures as a depth within it. As Wittgenstein remarks somewhere: if there is such a thing as eternal life, it must be here and now. It is the present moment which is an image of eternity, not an infinite succession of such moments.

Have we, then, wrapped up the question once and for all? It is a feature of modernity that scarcely any important question is ever wrapped up. Modernity, as I argued earlier, is the epoch in which we come to recognize that we are unable to agree even on the most vital, fundamental of issues. No doubt our continuing wrangles over the meaning of life will prove to be fertile and productive. But in a world where we live in overwhelming danger, our failure to find common meanings is as alarming as it is invigorating.