What's It All About?

Philosophy and the Meaning of Life

Julian Baggini

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Why are we here?

'Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.'

Any creature capable of conscious reflection will almost certainly ask questions like these at some point, often without being able to find satisfactory answers. The questioner in this instance, however, is in a rather unusual position. He is the creation of Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's Gothic fable. And unlike humans, this creature was able to find out the truth about his origins and why he was created. Did that mean that he discovered the meaning of his own life? And might we discover the meanings of our lives by finding out more about our origins?

Frankenstein will reappear later. First, as I indicated in the introduction, to find the right answers we have to start with a clear understanding of the questions. 'What's it all about?' could be taken to mean 'Why are we here?' However, this question is ambiguous, inviting two very different kinds of response. One explains the *causes* of why we are here; it is past-orientated and about origins. The other explains the *purpose* of our existence; it is future-orientated and about destinations. In Aristotle's terminology, the first kind of explanation is about efficient causes, the second, final causes (although it does not involve any causation in the modern sense). So, for example, what goes on in the kitchen is the efficient cause of my dinner, and my eating it is the final cause.

Sometimes the two kinds of answer fit together. That is to say, the story of what caused something to exist is also the story of its future purpose. For example, the story of why a road was built is also the story of what its future purpose is: to allow cars to travel along it. However, the two answers need not be connected. Consider wild berries that are gathered for food by humans. The story of their origins – how they evolved – is not the story of what purpose they serve for humans who come along and eat them, unless we say that God created wild berries *so that* we could eat them. This is a kind of answer I would resist for reasons I will shortly explain. For the moment we simply need to note that we cannot assume that answering the question about something's origins tells us about its future or present purpose.

For this reason, in this chapter I'm going to focus on the question of the origins of human life and what, if anything, that can tell us about life's meaning. The question of future or present purpose will be the subject of the next chapter.

Corners of dots on specks on fragments

In some ways there isn't really any big mystery about the origins of human life. Rather there are two major competing clusters of theories, both of which leave many details unexplained; but which also provide enough of a framework for us to consider their implications for life's meaning. These two theories are creationism and naturalism.

Creationist theories claim that the originator of human life is some supernatural agency working with some conscious purpose in mind. Naturalist theories claim that human life emerged as part of a blind process that is not the product of any intelligent design. There are some hybrid positions, such as those that see the creator God as being an inextricable part of nature itself rather than a supernatural agency working outside it. But even these hybrids can be classified for our current purposes as either creationist or naturalist on the grounds of whether they see the origins of life as a result of intelligent purpose (creationism) or purposeless natural processes (naturalism).

Consider naturalism first. There is now a standard naturalist story about the origins of human life. Many details remain contentious but the broad framework is largely agreed upon by scientists. This story begins with the Big Bang fifteen billion years ago, continues with the formation of our sun ten billion years later, and comes up to date with the relatively recent emergence of primitive single-cell life forms, which through the process of evolution culminated – from our point of view – in the emergence of *Homo sapiens* a mere 600,000 years ago. When asked how God fits into this picture, scientists will usually echo the words of the French scientist Laplace, who responded to a similar question from Napoleon by saying, 'I have no need of that hypothesis.'

It is remarkable how well corroborated this story is, when you consider that the evidence for it comes from a number of disparate sciences, including cosmology, theoretical physics, astronomy, biology and biochemistry. The evidence that the naturalist account is broadly true is overwhelming. Nevertheless, my concern here is not to show that it is true, but to consider the implications for life's meaning *if* it is true. Many see these implications as profoundly disturbing.

The worry many people have is that if the naturalist account is true, then life can only be a meaningless accident of nature. If there is any meaning at all, then it only concerns the grander unfolding of the universe's destiny and human beings are irrelevant. As Bertrand Russell put it, 'The universe may have a purpose, but nothing we know suggests that, if so, this purpose has any similarity to ours.'

Consider, for example, the account of human evolution presented in Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene*. According to Dawkins, natural selection takes place at the level of the gene rather than at the level of the whole organism or species. This means that individual organisms, including human beings, are in his words 'survival machines', built according to the instructions encoded in DNA, and with the 'purpose' of ensuring the survival of the gene, not the organism itself. From a biological point of view, then, the life of an individual human is not of prime importance. What matters is that the genes carried by the human are passed on and survive.

I needed to put 'purpose' in scare-quotes because we cannot attribute purposes to genes or organisms in the usual sense. This is because genes are not designed to fulfil any purpose, nor do they have desires or goals, conscious or otherwise. Genes simply survive if they have effects, first on the organisms that carry them and second on the wider environment, which are conducive to their survival. But because those that do survive by definition have the

characteristics suitable to ensure their survival, there is an appearance or illusion that these characteristics serve the purpose of ensuring their survival. But these purposes are not designed or given in advance, just as Dawkins does not believe that the eponymous 'selfish' genes are literally self-centred and egotistical.

Where does this leave individual human beings, or even the species *Homo sapiens*? At best, if we do serve a purpose, that purpose is to continue the existence of our genes. At worst, we can't talk about purpose or meaning at all, since the process of random mutation and replication has no purpose and no goal as its end. As the Monty Python song goes, 'we're just simply spiralling coils of self-replicating DNA.'

The naturalist story as a whole provokes similar reactions. To quote Russell again,

> 'In the visible world, the Milky Way is a tiny fragment; within this fragment, the solar system is an infinitesimal speck, and of the speck our planet is a microscopic dot. On this dot, tiny lumps of impure carbon and water, of complicated structure, with somewhat unusual physical and chemical qualities, crawl about for a few years, until they are dissolved again into the elements of which they are compounded.'

Seen from this vantage point, human life is a purposeless, insignificant accident.

Sartre's paper-knife

This is the conclusion often associated with the late-nineteenth- and

early-twentieth-century existentialist philosophers. A superficial reading of their key texts might support this interpretation. Friedrich Nietzsche described himself as 'the first perfect nihilist of Europe'; Albert Camus's most famous idea is that life is 'absurd'; and Jean-Paul Sartre talked about 'anguish, abandonment and despair'. With the supernatural removed from the world-view of modernity, all meaning has been ripped out of the universe and life is left without purpose.

However, even if we confine ourselves to existentialism's canonical texts, the full picture is not as bleak as these stark soundbites might suggest. Consider, for example, Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism*, originally delivered as a public lecture to explain the basic tenets of existentialism. In it, Sartre does indeed talk of anguish, abandonment and despair; but he also claims that 'existentialism is optimistic'. Uncharitable readers may see this as evidence of Sartre's incoherence, but more sensitive interpreters will see it as a warning against taking some of the more strident of existentialism's slogans at face value.

It can be misleading to generalize too much about what 'existentialists' have to say about life's meaning, since those thinkers labelled as existentialist differed enormously in their beliefs. Most strikingly, although many of the best-known existentialists were atheists – including Sartre, Nietzsche and Camus – there were also religious existentialists, including Søren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel and Karl Barth.

Nonetheless, the atheist existentialists do have something in common which relates importantly to our discussion of naturalism. All would agree that the 'discovery' that there is no God has created a crisis of meaning for human life. The reason for this is that we assumed that purpose and morality had their source in something outside of ourselves. When this assumption was overturned, we lost the source of life's meaning.

Sartre explains this with the analogy of a paper-knife. A paper-knife has a determinate 'essence' by virtue of the fact that it was created by someone to fulfil a certain function. In contrast, a sharp object like a flint has no essence, even though it too could be used to cut paper. It *just so happens* that humans have found a use for it.

Sartre's point is that we have assumed ourselves to be like paper-knives, not like pieces of flint. We believed that we had some kind of essential nature because God created us with a particular purpose in mind. But if God does not exist and the naturalist story is true, this picture is false. We are like the pieces of flint that just *are*. We may find uses for ourselves and others, but these purposes do not derive from our essential nature. And if naturalism is true, this observation holds for the entire universe and everything in it.

There are at least two ways of responding to this apparently bleak picture. One is simply to accept that life is therefore meaningless. The other is to question the assumption underpinning the pessimistic conclusion: that we need to be like paper-knives for life to have meaning. The crisis in meaning which the atheist existentialists identified is the result of our coming to realize that what we assumed to be true of human beings – that their purpose was given to them by their creator – is actually false. Far from leaving life meaningless, this may simply lead us to conclude that the source of life's meaning is not where we thought.

This is roughly the direction in which Sartre's thought goes. For Sartre, the crucial truth we have to recognize is that because purpose and meaning are not built in to human life, we ourselves are responsible for fashioning our own purposes. It is not that life has no meaning, but that it has no *predetermined* meaning. This requires us to confront our own responsibility for creating meaning for ourselves, something which Sartre believes we would much rather

not do. We would prefer to live our lives in 'bad faith', pretending that how we live and ought to live are not down to our choice but a product of fate, outside forces or supernatural design.

The idea that our destinies are in a sense in our own hands, that we are free to create our own purposes, can sound empowering and liberating. For many, however, it rings hollow. It is as though we confront the reality of a meaningless universe by saying we're just going to make meaning up for ourselves. But a made-up meaning is no real meaning at all. Sartrean purpose is pretend purpose, existentialist values are counterfeit values.

There are, however, reasons for believing this response is misguided. Why should we think that assigned purposes are inferior to predetermined purposes, and that only the latter can make life meaningful? There is no general principle that purposes are more 'real' or important if they are introduced at the design stage. Consider the history of the Post-it note. The repositionable adhesive that the notes use was discovered by a scientist working for 3M in 1968. However, neither he nor anyone else in the company had any idea what possible use such an adhesive could be put to. Six years later, another 3M scientist, tired of losing his place in the hymnal while singing in his church choir, thought how useful a lightly adhesive bookmark would be. He then realized that the apparently useless glue was useful after all. Now Post-it notes are ubiquitous.

The Post-it note may seem like a trivial example, but it illustrates neatly the point that, when it comes to use or purpose, what matters is not necessarily what the inventor had in mind, but the uses or purposes the innovation actually has.

Human life may be a very different context, but the same logic applies. What matters is surely that life has a purpose for us, here

and now. Whether this purpose was dreamed up by a creator or is assigned or invented by ourselves is not of paramount importance. If we can give life purpose and meaning, there is no obvious reason why this should be considered an inferior kind of meaning to that which could have been given by a creator.

Indeed, predetermined purposes could conceivably make life less meaningful. Consider, for example, the case of a latter-day Frankenstein who might create a human being for the sole purpose of cleaning his house. Surely this life would have less dignity and meaning than the life of a person born into a naturalistic universe? It would be better for this creature to determine its own purposes than simply to fulfil the desires of its creator.

This is one reason why Sartre thought his existentialism was optimistic. Because human beings have the power to determine their own purposes, they have greater potential for leading meaningful lives than mere artefacts that are assigned an essence by their creators. For the ability to choose one's own purposes is part of what distinguishes what Sartre calls a conscious 'being-for-itself' from an unconscious 'being-in-itself'. The being-for-itself can take control of its own life and use its conscious thought to direct its own purposes, whereas the being-in-itself can only be what it is and what others use it for.

Where does this leave the problem of meaning in a naturalist universe? If we take the naturalist view that the universe is the product not of intelligent design but of natural forces, then the explanation of why we are here does not bring with it any answer to the question of what purpose our lives may hold. This may appear to lead to a form of nihilism, in which we see the universe as devoid of meaning. But this conclusion only follows if we make the false assumption that purpose has to come built in to human life.

The fact, then, that we can find no purpose or meaning in the origins of human life is no reason for supposing human life *has* no purpose or meaning.

Although many of these ideas were first clearly articulated by the existentialists, philosophers of many different stripes agree with their basic claims. Daniel C. Dennett, for example, a contemporary American philosopher no one would describe as an existentialist, writes, 'Why should our purposes have to be inherited from on high? (I call that the trickle-down theory of importance – everything important has to get its importance from something else that is even more important.) Why can't we invent our own purposes?'

This case should seem to strengthen as this book progresses, for we will be looking at other ways in which life can be said to be meaningful, as well as returning to the theme that ultimately human life is itself the source of its own meaning. But first we must consider the alternative to the naturalist view: that life's origin and meaning are explained by intelligent design.

Adam's puzzling purpose

For most of human history, and even today, most people have not accepted the naturalist view that the universe is the product of blind, purposeless forces. They think that the universe must have some kind of creator, usually called God.

This belief is vividly expressed in the various creation stories of the world's religions. Jews and Christians have the stories of Genesis, in which God created the world in six days. Hinduism has the Puranas, which tell a different tale, one that involves Lord Vishnu lying on his serpent, Shesha, and a lotus growing out of his

navel, from which emerges Brahma, who then creates the entire universe in a little golden egg. Though many people view these as myths, it has to be remembered that many others believe them to be literally true.

Still other people reject these myths as literal truth but do believe that God is the ultimate cause of the universe: that the stories of Genesis and the Puranas are only metaphors, but reflect the truth that the universe was created deliberately and for a purpose. The idea that there must be some kind of cosmic designer is sometimes justified by sophisticated arguments but is perhaps more commonly supported by a kind of gut instinct, a strong compulsion many feel to believe that the universe can't be just a brute fact.

For example, the last man to walk on the moon, Eugene Cernan, said, 'No one in their right mind can look in the stars and the eternal blackness everywhere and deny the spirituality of the experience, nor the existence of a Supreme Being.' However, assertions like this are no more than expressions of personal conviction. When Cernan jumps from claims about the nature of his own internal, 'spiritual' experience to external facts about the existence of a creator, he does not provide any arguments or reasons for others to believe as he does. He merely maintains that everyone in his or her right mind will believe with the same certainty as him.

As with naturalism, my prime concern here is not to assess the merits of the various creationist views but to examine what accepting them would mean for our views about life's meaning and purpose. However, I should declare that I am not an impartial observer. I think that the creation stories of religious texts are obviously false in that they conflict with each other and our best scientific understanding of how the universe began. And along with the vast majority of contemporary philosophers, I am unpersuaded

by versions of the so-called cosmological and teleological arguments in philosophy that attempt to demonstrate that God must be the first cause or designer of the universe.

But assume that I am wrong and that creationism is true. As we saw in the previous section, people are quick to conclude that if there is no creator God then there is no meaning or purpose to life. Yet it is not clear how *with* a creator God there *is* meaning or purpose. All that seems to follow from a belief that the universe was created is that the designer has some purpose in mind for us. What that purpose is and whether we should welcome it are left undetermined.

This is not intended as a criticism or argument against religion, but a simple fact about the limitations of religious explanation which believers too should (and often do) accept. No Christian or Jew, for example, can provide an adequate answer to the question of why God created us by referring to their sacred texts. All we are told in Genesis is that God told man to 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground' (Genesis 1:28).

Indeed, as the account progresses, even more mundane claims for the purpose of humanity are made. 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it,' it says (2:15), and Eve was created because 'no suitable helper was found' (2:20). Many interpret this as indicating that we have been given custodianship of the planet. But we don't have any idea why it needs looking after in the first place or how doing this job can give our lives meaning.

Of course, no Christian or Jew who holds these texts to be sacred would claim that they exhaust all there is to say about why

God created us. But other religious explanations don't provide adequate accounts either. For instance, it is often said that we are here to do God's will. If this were true we would be like the house-cleaning monster described earlier. Our lives would have a purpose for the being that created us but not a purpose for us. We would each be like Sartre's being-in-itself – an object to be used for the ends of others – and not a being-for-itself – a conscious being making choices meaningful for itself. If we found that our sole purpose was to serve God then we might think that was a worse fate than to have no predetermined purpose at all. Is it better to be slaves with a role in the universe or to be free people left to create a role for ourselves?

This view that we are created to serve God is not only objectionable on the grounds that it robs humanity of its dignity. It also has to be seen as extremely implausible within the world-view of the religions that sometimes propound it. After all, what could seem more unlikely than that the supreme being would feel the need to create human beings, with all their complexity, and with all the suffering and toil that human life entails, solely so that it can have creatures to serve it? This is an image of God as an egotistical tyrant, determined to use its power to surround itself with acolytes and have praise heaped upon it. This is not the God which most religious believers worship, and so the idea that we are here just to serve such a God is not one that should be seriously countenanced either.

A more plausible answer can be traced back to Jesus' words in the Gospels: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (John 10:10). That's a better answer even if it is not a particularly enlightening one. For one thing, an atheist can agree with it. Atheists too think that we should live life to the full, not because

that is God's purpose but because this is the only life we've got and so we ought to make the most of it. In a sense, the sentiment expressed is just a platitude: who could think humans should not have life, and have it to the full?

Furthermore it doesn't tell us what makes one life fuller than another. Many religious believers will say that is what their sacred texts are for: follow the advice within and you will live life more fully. But it is significant that only fundamentalists follow this rule with any rigour. Most religious believers use their own judgement. They follow the rules set out in their sacred texts only if they think these promote a better life for all. Where they don't, the passages are mercifully ignored. For example, not many people believe that 'when any man reviles his father and his mother, he shall be put to death' (Leviticus 20:9) or that 'you may also buy the children of those who have settled and lodge with you . . . [and] may use them as slaves permanently' (25:45–46).

This is, I think, sensible. But it means that religious believers are following a simple rule: do what the sacred texts tell you to do if it promotes a better life for all and ignore it if it doesn't. But then this is the equivalent of an even simpler rule: do whatever promotes a better life for all. The sacred texts no longer have any particular authority and the rule to be followed is one that non-believers can embrace too. So the idea that our purpose in this life is to live full lives does not need to be rooted in any God-given instructions.

For this answer to have any particular religious content, it needs to be connected with the idea of an afterlife. If a full life includes life after death, then atheist and religious conceptions do part company. I'm going to set this question to one side for now, since I discuss the possibility of life after death in Chapter 3. What we

should note for now is that only a belief in the afterlife seems to make the idea that God's purpose for us is to live full lives distinctive from the banal claim that life is to be lived.

I think that most reflective religious believers would agree that saying God's purpose for us is to serve it or live full lives is not adequate. They might prefer to say that the existence of God shows that there must be a purpose, since God wouldn't have created us without one, but that we do not know what that purpose is. Faith requires us to trust God and its purposes for us. As Jesus is reported in John's Gospel to have said, 'Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms' (14:1–2). This is a perfectly coherent position and probably the one most sensible religious believers occupy. But doing so requires an honest acceptance that they have no more idea as to what the purpose of life is than the atheist has.

The leap of faith required to adopt such a position also needs to be clearly understood. This is faith that a God we cannot know to exist has a purpose we cannot discern for an afterlife we have no evidence is to come. Further, we would also be trusting that this purpose is one we would be pleased with. If it turned out that our purpose was to fight Satan's hordes for eternity or just to have lived as a beacon of fortitude under duress on earth before dying, we might not be too pleased that God had a purpose for us after all.

A belief that we were created by God for a purpose does not then provide us with the kind of adequate account of life's meaning we might expect. Religions are not clear about what this purpose is. The idea that it is to serve God seems deeply implausible and contrary to most conceptions of God's nature. The idea that it is to live life to the full is a platitude, only turned into something more by a belief in an afterlife. The idea that God's purpose is something

we just have to trust is an admission that we have no answer to the question of why we are here and must leave everything to the unknown. Believing that our origins are with a supernatural being does not, then, provide us with an explanation of what the meaning or purpose of life is. At best it merely reassures us that there is one.

Santa Claus and Frankenstein

Perhaps we should not be surprised that a consideration of why we are here, couched in terms of what explains our origins, has not been more enlightening. Consider again the case of Frankenstein's creature. Unlike us, he was actually able to discover why he was made and for what purpose. He chanced upon the journal Frankenstein kept in the four months leading to his creation. His initial reaction to reading it was rage and despair. 'Accursed creator!' he screamed. 'Why did you form a monster so hideous that even *you* turned from me in disgust?'

But these revelations did not have any significant lasting effect on the creature's journey through life and his quest for meaning. In many ways, he was in the same position after he discovered the truth about his origins as he was before: he was still an outcast, feared by humans yet longing for their company and affection. Nothing in the revelations about his creation helped or hindered him in his struggle to cope with these facts. In the end, what he decided would make his life at least tolerable was a female companion, and this he ordered Frankenstein to create.

Shelley was right to show that knowledge of the creature's origins did not reveal his life's meaning, for there is no reason why looking to the past will inform us about our present state and future

prospects. The idea that it does is known as the 'genetic fallacy'. This term was coined by two philosophers, Morris Cohen and Ernest Nagel. The mistake they identified was of confusing the origins of a belief with its justification. Since then, the expression has come to be used more loosely to describe any kind of confusion between an account of origins and an account of something's current or future nature.

An obvious example of this fallacy is to think that the etymology of a word always provides a vital insight into how it is now used. For instance, consider the origin of the word 'digit'. It derives from the Latin *dicere*, which means to tell, say or point out. This gave rise to the meaning of a finger or thumb; and because these were used for counting, it also came to mean a numerical figure. This is all very interesting, but if you want to know what is meant when someone talks about a 'three-digit figure' your understanding is not best helped by considering the origins of the word 'digit'. Indeed, if you think too much about origins you might be misled.

It is also possible to pay too much attention to origins in other areas. For example, what if the urban myth were true and Santa Claus's coat was usually green until Coca-Cola's advertising campaigns in the 1930s dressed him in their corporate colours of red and white? Would that mean that all Santas today were subliminal advertisements for Coca-Cola? Some anti-capitalists might have you think so, but the claim would not be credible. The campaign would explain why Santa's coat came to be red, but it wouldn't explain how the image of Santa functions today.

When we think about the origins and purpose of life, a similar kind of genetic fallacy can be committed. The mistake is to think that understanding the origins of life automatically tells us its end goal or present purpose. But the one does not necessarily follow

from the other. A piece of flint or an adhesive which came into being with no purpose at all can later be given purpose by a human who uses it. A building that was created with a specific purpose, such as a tollbooth, can become purposeless if the road is made into a free one. An original purpose or lack of purpose does not necessarily fix the purpose of the object for eternity. Purposes can be gained, lost or changed. That is why a consideration of life's origins has not enabled us to come up with any clear answer as to what life's purpose is, and why the naturalist belief that life was not created for a purpose does not mean that life can have no purpose.

Where else, then, can we look? As I said at the beginning of this chapter, the question 'Why are we here?' can have two interpretations. One looks back to our origins. The other looks at our future goals. That is the subject of the next chapter.

Conclusion

Well, that's the end of the film. Now, here's the meaning of life. (An envelope is handed to her. She opens it in a businesslike way.) *Thank you, Brigitte.* (She reads.) . . . *Well, it's nothing very special. Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations.*

MONTY PYTHON'S THE MEANING OF LIFE

The meaning of life may not be quite as simple as the end of the Monty Python film suggests, but if the arguments I have offered are correct, the movie is not far off the mark. As I said in the introduction, this book has offered, not a big secret, but a deflationary account of life's meaning, reducing the vague, mysterious question of the meaning of life to a series of more specific and thoroughly unmysterious questions about what gives life purpose and value. To understand life's meaning therefore does not require rare wisdom.

Like the conclusion of the Monty Python film, in one sense the account I have offered is 'nothing very special'. But the simplicity of the conclusion should not detract from its significance. The mere fact that life's meaning is available and potentially evident to all is a major challenge to those who see themselves as the guardians of life's significance: the priests, gurus and teachers who would have us think life's meaning is beyond ordinary mortals. To challenge this

view is to challenge the power others seek to exert over us by their claims to special knowledge. The main argument of this book is therefore democratic and egalitarian, in that it returns to each of us the power and responsibility to discover and in part determine meaning for ourselves.

The simplicity of the conclusion is also deceptive because what is simple is not always easy or obvious. It is straightforward enough to say that life can be worthwhile in itself, particularly if it is a life with a balance of authenticity, happiness and concern for others; one where time is not wasted; one which engages in the ongoing work of becoming who we want to be and being successful in those terms. But putting this all into practice is difficult. Indeed, it carries with it a risk we saw when looking at success, namely that we will set ourselves an unrealistically high standard and end up being dissatisfied with life as a result. The sobering truth is that life involves ongoing struggle. One can understand what the elements of a meaningful life are, but they do not provide a simple recipe for contentment and satisfaction.

This is part of the reason why I feel a little uneasy finishing this book. Writers no longer complete books by sitting at their typewriters and punching out 'The End' triumphantly. Today, the end is marked by clicking the computer mouse to save and close for what one decides is the last time. Yet with a subject like the meaning of life, how can one ever feel that one has said enough or covered everything? Like the tourists who spend a weekend in Rome and say they've 'done' the eternal city, there would be something suspect about writing this book and concluding I had 'done' the meaning of life.

The obvious truth at the source of this unease is that there is no last word on this subject. The ambitions of this book, which are in

some ways modest and in other ways immodest, have been to articulate the general philosophical considerations which bring clarity to the question of life's meaning. This leaves us with a kind of framework, one which is provisional and may be adapted, but more significantly one which can be fleshed out and made real in more ways than are imaginable by any one mind. In adding these details, in actually trying to live a meaningful life, we need to look to psychologists, novelists, artists and poets as well as philosophers. Philosophy has a valuable contribution to make, but to live life meaningfully, we need to be more than philosophers. As David Hume said, 'Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man.'

One further reason why no book can provide the last word on life's meaning is that we are each of us different and when we set about living our own particular lives we have to make many choices that only we can make. We have the same needs as other people – for friendship, food, pleasure, happiness, success and so forth – but these needs vary greatly in their nature and intensity from person to person. For instance, some people can barely stand being alone for an hour, others love solitude. Some are thrill seekers, genuinely needing bursts of intense experience, while others prefer quieter lives and find such intensities distracting. Some like to live the life of the mind, some live to feel the pulsating beats of dance music, while others feel both needs strongly. For that reason any 'guide to the meaning of life' cannot be a complete instruction manual but can only establish the framework within which each individual can construct a worthwhile life.

To do so, however, means confronting the fragility, unpredictability and contingency of life and doing the best we can with it. This should be a source of hope rather than despair. If the

meaning of life is not a mystery, if leading meaningful lives is within the power of us all, then we do not need to ask the question 'What's it all about?' in despair. We can look around us and see the many ways in which life can be meaningful. We can see the value of happiness while accepting that it is not everything, which will make it easier for us at those times when it eludes us. We can learn to appreciate the pleasures of life without becoming slaves to appetites which can never be satisfied. We can see the value of success, while not interpreting that too narrowly, so that we can appreciate the project of striving to become what we want to be as well as the more visible, public signs of success. We can see the value of seizing the day, without that leading us into a desperate scramble to grasp the ungraspable moment. We can appreciate the value in helping others lead meaningful lives, too, without thinking that altruism demands everything we have. And finally, we can recognize the value of love, as perhaps the most powerful motivator to do anything at all.