

CHAPTER 1

LINGUISTIC PHILOSOPHY AND 'THE MEANING OF LIFE'

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I

Anglo-Saxon philosophy has in various degrees 'gone linguistic'. From the faithful attention to the niceties of plain English practiced by John Austin, to the use of descriptive linguistics initiated by Paul Ziff in his *Semantic Analysis*, to the deliberately more impressionistic concern with language typical of Isaiah Berlin and Stuart Hampshire, there is a pervasive emphasis by English-speaking philosophers on what can and cannot be said, on what is intelligible, and on what is nonsensical. When linguistic philosophy was first developing, many things were said to be nonsense which were not nonsense. However, this is something of the past, for linguistic philosophy has for a long time been less truculent and more diffident about what it makes sense to say, but only to become – some would say – unbelievably bland, dull and without a rationale that is of any general interest.¹

Critics from many quarters have raised their voices to assault linguistic philosophy as useless pedantry remote from the perennial concerns of philosophy or the problems of belief and life that all men encounter when, in Hesse's terms, they feel to the full 'the whole riddle of human destiny'. Traditionally the philosophical enterprise sought, among other things, to give us some enlightenment about our human condition, but as philosophy 'goes linguistic', it has traitorously and irresponsibly become simply talk about the uses of talk. The philosopher has left his 'high calling' to traffic in linguistic trivialities.

Criticism of linguistic philosophy has not always been this crude, but there has typically been at least the implied criticism that linguistic philosophy could not really do justice to the profound problems of men with which Plato, Spinoza or Nietzsche struggled.

It is my conviction that such a charge is unfounded. In linguistic philosophy

1. John Passmore remarks in his brief but thoroughly reliable and judicious *Philosophy in the Last Decade* (Sydney University Press: 1969) 'Philosophy is once again cultivating areas it had declared wasteland, or had transferred without compunction to other owners', p. 5.

there is a partially new technique but no 'abdication of philosophy'. Surely most linguistic philosophy is dull, as is most philosophy, as is most anything else. Excellence and insight in any field are rare. But at its best linguistic philosophy is not dull and it is not without point; furthermore, though it often is, it need not be remote from the concerns of men. It is this last claim – the claim that linguistic philosophy can have nothing of importance to say about the perplexities of belief and life that from time to time bedevil us – that I wish to challenge.

With reference to the concepts of human purpose, religion and the problematical notion 'the meaning of Life', I want to show how in certain crucial respects linguistic philosophy can be relevant to the perplexities about life and conduct that reflective people actually face. 'What is the meaning of Life?' has been a standby of both the pulpiteer and the mystagogue. It has not come in for extended analysis by linguistic philosophers, though Ayer, Wisdom, Baier, Edwards, Flew, Hepburn and Dilman have had some important things to say about this obscure notion which when we are in certain moods perplexes us all and indeed, as it did Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, may even be something that forces itself upon us in thoroughly human terms.² I want to show how the use of the analytical techniques of linguistic philosophy can help us in coming to grips with the problems of human purpose and the meaning of Life.

Part of the trouble centers around puzzles about the use of the word 'meaning' in 'What is the meaning of Life?' Since the turn of the century there has been a lot of talk in philosophical circles about 'meaning' or 'a meaning criterion' and a good measure of attention has been paid to considerations about the meanings of words and sentences. But the mark (token) 'meaning' in 'What is the meaning of Life?' has a very different use than it has in 'What is the meaning of 'obscurantist'?' 'What is the meaning of 'table'?' 'What is the meaning of 'good'?' 'What is the meaning of 'science'?' and 'What is the meaning of 'meaning'?' In these other cases we are asking about the meaning or use of the word or words, and we are requesting either a definition of the word or an elucidation or description of the word's use. But in asking: 'What is the meaning of Life?' we are not asking – or at least this is not our central perplexity – about 'What is the meaning of the word 'Life'?' What then are we asking?

Indirection is the better course here. Consider some of the uses of the general formula: 'What is the meaning of that?' How, in what contexts, and

2. A. J. Ayer, 'The Claims of Philosophy', in M. Natanson (ed.), *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Random House, 1963.

for what purposes does it get used? Sometimes we may simply not know the meaning of a word, as when we come across a word we do not understand and look it up in a dictionary or ask the person using it in conversation what it means. It is not that he is using the word in an odd sense and we want to know what *he means* by it, but that we want to know what is meant by that word as it is employed in the public domain.

There is the quite different situation in which it is not about words that we are puzzled but about someone's non-linguistic behavior. A friend gives us a dark look in the middle of the conversation in which several people are taking part and afterwards we ask him 'What was the meaning of those dark looks?' We were aware when we noticed his dark look that he was disapproving of something we were doing but we did not and still do not know what. Our 'What was the meaning of that?' serves to try to bring out what is the matter. Note that in a way here we are not even puzzled about the meaning of words. The recipient of the dark look may very well know he is being disapproved of; but he wants to know what for. Here 'What is the meaning of that?' is a request for the point or the purpose of the action. In this way, as we shall see, it is closer to the question 'What is the meaning of Life?' than questions about the meaning of a word or a sentence.

We also ask 'What is the meaning of that?' when we want to know how a particular person on a particular occasion intends something. We want to know what *he means* by that. Thus if I say of some author that he writes 'chocolate rabbit stories' you may well ask me what I mean by that. Here you are puzzled both about the meaning of the phrase 'chocolate rabbit stories', for as with 'the pine cone weeps' or 'the rock cogitates' it is a deviant collection of words of indeterminate meanings, and about the point or purpose of making such a remark. After all, the point of making such an utterance may not be evident. Suppose I had said it to a stupid and pompous writer blown up with a false sense of his own importance. I could explain my meaning by saying that I was obliquely giving him to understand that his stories, like chocolate rabbits, were all out of the same mold: change the names and setting and you have the same old thing all over again. And the point of my utterance would also become evidence, i.e., to deflate the pompous windbag. The phrase 'chocolate rabbit stories' has no fixed use in human discourse, but language is sufficiently elastic for me to be able to give it a use without generating any linguistic or conceptual shock. To explain my meaning I must make clear the use I am giving it and make evident why I choose to use such an odd phrase.

'What is the meaning of Life?' is in some very significant respects like this last question though it is of course also very different. It is different in being

non-deviant and in being a profoundly important question in the way the other question clearly is not. But note the likeness. In the first place when we or other people ask this question we are often not at all sure what we are asking. In this practical context we may in a way even be puzzled about the word 'life', though, as I have said, the question does not primarily function as a request for the explanation of the use of a word. There is a sense in which life does and there is a sense in which life does not begin and end in mystery. And when we ask about life here we are not asking Schrodinger's question or J. B. S. Haldane's. We are not in search of some property or set of properties that is common to and distinctive of all those things we call 'living things'. We are typically concerned with something very different and much vaguer. We are asking: 'Is life just one damn thing after another until finally one day we die and start to rot? Or can I sum it up and find or at least give it some point after all? Or is this just a silly illusion born of fear and trembling?' These are desperately vague, amorphous questions, but – as Wisdom would surely and rightly say – not meaningless for all that. And for some of us, and perhaps for all of us, *sometimes*, they are haunting, edging questions, questions we agonize over, then evade, then again try to come to grips with.

First, I want to say that, like 'What is the meaning of calling them chocolate rabbit stories?', 'What is the meaning of Life?' does *not* have a clear use; but that it does not have a clear use does not, I repeat, entail or in any way establish that it does not have a use or even that it does not have a supremely important use.³ Secondly, 'What is the meaning of life?' most typically – though not always – functions as a request for the goals *worth* seeking in life though sometimes it may serve to ask if there are *any* goals worth seeking in life.⁴ We are asking what (if anything) is the point to our lives? What (if anything) could give our lives purpose or point? In anguish we struggle to find the purpose, point or rationale of our grubby lives. But if this is the nature of the question, what would an answer look like? For this to be a fruitful question, all of us must ask ourselves individually: what would we take as an answer? When we ask this we are apt to come up with a blank; and if we are readers of philosophical literature we may remember that, along with others, a philosopher as persuasive and influential as A. J. Ayer has said that all such questions are unanswerable. But if they are really unanswerable – or so it

3. John Wisdom has driven home this point with force. In particular see his 'The Modes of Thought and the Logic of "God"' in his *Paradox and Discovery* (California, 1965).
4. Ronald Hepburn has correctly stressed that this for some people may not be what is uppermost in their minds when they ask that question. See Hepburn's essay in this volume. See also Ilham Dilman's remarks about Hepburn's analysis in 'Life and Meaning', *Philosophy*, 40, October 1965.

would seem – then they are hardly genuine questions.

I will concede that *in a sense* such questions are unanswerable, but in a much more important sense they *are* answerable. We can be intelligent about and reason about such questions. Any analysis which does not bring this out and elucidate it is confused and inadequate. In destroying pontifical pseudo-answers the baby has frequently gone down with the bath. In showing what kind of answers could not be answers to this question, the temptation is to stress that there are no answers at all and that indeed no answers are needed. I want to try to show this is wrong and what an answer would look like.

II

How then is it possible for our life to have a meaning or purpose? For a while, oddly enough, Ayer in his ‘The Claims of Philosophy’ is a perfectly sound guide.⁵ We do know what it is for a man to have a purpose. ‘It is a matter, Ayer remarks, ‘of his intending, on the basis of a given situation, to bring about some further situation which for some reason or other he conceives to be desirable.’

But, Ayer asks, how is it possible for life *in general* to have a meaning or a purpose?

Well, there is one very simple answer. Life in general has a purpose if all living beings are tending toward a certain specifiable end. To understand the meaning of life or the purpose of existence it is only necessary to discover this end.

As Ayer makes perfectly clear, there are overwhelming difficulties with such an answer. In the first place there is no good reason to believe living beings are tending toward some specifiable end. But even if it were true that they are all tending toward this end such a discovery would not at all answer the question ‘What is the meaning or purpose of life?’ This is so because when we human beings ask this exceedingly vague question we are not just asking for *an explanation of* the facts of existence; we are asking for a *justification* of these facts. In asking this question we are seeking a way of life, trying as suffering, perplexed, and searching creatures to find what the existentialists like to call an ‘authentic existence’. And as Ayer goes on to explain,

5. See Ayer, *op. cit.* The rest of the references to Ayer in the text are from this essay. His brief remarks in his ‘What I Believe’ in *What I Believe* (London: 1966) pp. 15–16 and in his introduction to *The Humanist Outlook*, A. J. Ayer (ed.), (London: 1968) pp. 6–7 are also relevant as further brief statements of his central claims about the meaning of life.

a theory which informs them merely that the course of events is so arranged as to lead inevitably to a certain end does nothing to meet their need. For the end in question will not be one that they themselves have chosen. As far as they are concerned it will be entirely arbitrary; and it will be a no less arbitrary fact that their existence is such as necessarily to lead to its fulfillment. In short, from the point of view of justifying one's existence, there is no essential difference between a teleological explanation of events and a mechanical explanation. In either case, it is a matter of brute fact that events succeed one another in the ways they do and are explicable in the ways they are.

In the last analysis, an attempt to answer a question of why events are as they are must always resolve itself into saying only *how* they are. Every explanation of why people do such and such and why the world is so and so finally depends on a very general description. And even if it is the case, as Charles Taylor powerfully argues, that teleological explanations of human behavior are irreducible, Ayer's point here is not all weakened, for in explaining, teleologically or otherwise, we are still showing how things are; we are not justifying anything.⁶

When we ask: 'What is the meaning of life?' we want an answer that is more than *just* an explanation or description of *how* people behave or *how* events are arranged or *how* the world is constituted. We are asking for a *justification* for our existence. We are asking for a justification for why life is as it is, and not even the most complete explanation and/or description of *how* things are ordered can answer this quite different question. The person who demands that some general description of man and his place in nature should entail a statement that man ought to live and die in a certain way is asking for something that can no more be the case than it can be the case that ice can gossip. To ask about the meaning of our lives involves asking how we should live, or whether any decision to live in one way is more *worthy* of acceptance than any other. Both of these questions are clearly questions of value; yet no statement of *fact* about how we in fact do live can by itself be sufficient to answer such questions. No statement of what ought to be the case can be deduced from a statement of what is the case. If we are demanding such an answer, then Ayer is perfectly right in claiming the question is unanswerable.

Let me illustrate. Suppose, perhaps as a result of some personal crisis, I want to take stock of myself. As Kierkegaard would say, I want to appropriate, take to heart, the knowledge I have or can get about myself and my condition in order to arrive at some decision as to what sort of life would be most meaningful for me, would be the sort of life I would truly want to live if I could act rationally and were fully apprised of my true condition. I might say to myself, though certainly not to others, unless I was a bit of an

6. Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behavior*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964.

exhibitionist, 'Look Nielsen, you're a little bit on the vain side and you're arrogant to boot. And why do you gossip so and spend so much of your time reading science fiction? And why do you always say what you expect other people want you to say? You don't approve of that in others, do you? And why don't you listen more? And weren't you too quick with Jones and too indulgent with Smith?' In such a context I would put these questions and a host of questions like them to myself. And I might come up with some general explanations, good or bad, like 'I act this way because I have some fairly pervasive insecurities'. And to my further question, 'Well, why do you have these insecurities?' I might dig up something out of my past such as 'My parents died when I was two and I never had any real home.' To explain why this made me insecure I might finally evoke a whole psychological theory, and these explanations about the nature of the human animal would themselves finally rest, in part at least, on various descriptions of how man does behave. In addition, I might, if I could afford it and were sufficiently bedevilled by these questions, find my way to a psychiatrist's couch and there, after the transference had taken place, I would eventually get more quite personalized explanations of my behavior and attitudes. But none of these things, in themselves, could tell me the meaning of life or even the meaning of my life, though they indeed might help me in this search. I might discover that I was insecure because I could never get over the wound of the loss of my father. I might discover that unconsciously I blamed myself. As a child I wished him dead and then he died so somehow I did it, really. And I would, of course, discover how unreasonable this is. I would come to understand that people generally react this way in those situations. In Tolstoy's phrase, we are all part of the 'same old river'. And, after rehearsing it, turning it over, taking it to heart, I might well gain control over it and eventually gain control over some of my insecurities. I could see and even live through again what *caused* me to be vain, arrogant and lazy. But suppose, that even after all these discoveries I really didn't want to change. After stocktaking, I found that I was willing to settle for the *status quo*. Now I gratefully acknowledge that this is very unlikely, but here we are concerned with the *logical* possibilities. 'Yes, there are other ways of doing things', I say to myself, 'but after all is said and done I have lived this way a long time and I would rather go on this way than change. This sort of life, is after all, the most meaningful one. This is how I really want to act and this is how I, and others like me, ought to act'. What possible facts could anyone appeal to which would prove, in the sense of logically entail, that I was wrong and that the purpose of life or the meaning of life was very different than I thought it was? It is Ayer's contention, and I think he is right, that there are none.

‘But you have left out God’, someone might say. ‘You have neglected the possibility that there is a God and that God made man to His image and likeness and that God has a plan for man. Even Sartre, Heidegger and Camus agree that to ask ‘What is the Meaning of Life?’ or ‘What is the purpose of human existence?’ is, in effect, to raise the question of God. If there is a God your conclusion would not follow, and, as Father Copleston has said, if there is *no* God human existence can have no end or purpose other than that given by man himself’.⁷

I would want to say, that the whole question of God or no God, Jesus or no Jesus, is entirely beside the point. Even if there were a God human existence can, in the relevant sense of ‘end’, ‘purpose’ or ‘meaning’, have no other end, purpose or meaning than what we as human beings give it by our own deliberate choices and decisions.

Let us see how this is so. Let us suppose that everything happens as it does because God intends that it should. Let us even assume, as we in reality cannot, that we can know the purpose or intentions of God. Now, as Ayer points out, either God’s ‘purpose is sovereign or it is not. If it is sovereign, that is, if everything that happens is necessarily in accordance with it, then it is true also of our behavior. Consequently, there is no point in our deciding to conform to it, for the simple reason that we cannot do otherwise’. No matter what, we do God’s purpose. There is no sense in saying it is *our* purpose, that it is something we have made our own by our own deliberate choice. I have not *discovered* a meaning for my life and other people have not *discovered* a meaning for their lives. If it were possible for us *not* to fulfill it, the purpose would not be God’s *sovereign* purpose and if it is His sovereign purpose, it cannot, in the requisite sense, be *our* purpose, for it will not be something that necessarily happens to us because of God’s intentions. If we are compelled to do it, it is not *our* purpose. It is only our purpose if we want to do it and if we could have done otherwise.

On the other hand, if God’s purpose is not sovereign and we are not inexorably compelled to do what God wills, we have no reason to conform to God’s purpose unless we independently judge it to be *good* or by our own independent decision make it our purpose. We cannot derive the statement ‘x is good’ from ‘that Being whom people call ‘God’ says ‘x is good’’ or from ‘that Being whom people call ‘God’ wills x’ unless we *independently* judge that whatever this Being *says* is good *is good* or whatever that Being wills *ought* to be done. Again, as Ayer remarks, this ‘means that the significance of our behavior depends finally upon our own judgments of value; and the

7. See his discussion of existentialism in his *Contemporary Philosophy*.

concurrence of a deity then becomes superfluous'.⁸

The basic difficulty, as Ayer makes clear, is that in trying to answer the questions as we have above, we have really misunderstood the question. 'What-is-the-meaning-of-that?' and 'What-is-the-purpose-of-that?' questions can be very different. We have already noted some of the differences among 'What-is-the-meaning-of-that?' questions, and we have seen that 'What is the meaning of Life?' in many contexts at least can well be treated as a 'What-is-the-purpose-of-that?' question. But 'What is the purpose of life?' is only very superficially like 'What is the purpose of a blotter?' 'What is the purpose of brain surgery?' or 'What is the purpose of the liver?' The first is a question about a human artifact and in terms of certain assumed ends we can say quite explicitly, independently of whether or not we want blotters, what the purpose of blotters is. Similarly brain surgery is a well-known human activity and has a well-known rationale. Even if we are Christian Scientists and disapprove of surgery altogether, we can understand and agree on what the purpose of brain surgery is, just as we all can say Fearless Fosdick is a good safecracker, even though we disapprove of safecrackers. And again, in terms of the total functioning of the human animal we can say what livers are for, even though the liver is not an artifact like a blotter. If there is a God and God made man, we *might* say the question 'What is the purpose of human life?' is very like 'What is the purpose of umbrellas?' The human animal then becomes a Divine artifact. But, even if all this were so, we would not – as we have already seen – have an answer to the *justificatory* question we started with when we asked, 'What is the meaning of life?' If we knew God's purpose for man, we would know what man was made for. But we would not have an answer to our question about the meaning of life, for we would not know if there was purpose *in* our lives or if we could find a point in acting one way rather than another. We would only know that there was something – which may or may not be of value – that we were constructed, 'cut out', to be.

Similarly, if an Aristotelian philosophy is correct, 'What is the purpose of life?' would become very like 'What is the purpose of the liver?' But here again a discovery of what end man is as a matter of fact tending toward would not answer the perplexity we started from, that is to say, it would not answer the question, 'What is the meaning of life, how should men live and die?' We would only learn that 'What is the purpose of life?' could admit of two very different uses. As far as I can see, there are no good reasons to believe either

8. While I completely agree with the central thrust of Ayer's argument here, he has, I believe, overstated his case. Even if our behaviour finally depends on our own standards of value, it does not follow that the concurrence of the deity, if there is one, is superfluous, for we could still find crucial moral guidance from our grasp of something of God's wisdom.

that there is a God or that the human animal has been ordered for some general end; but even if this were so it would not give us an answer to the question: 'What is the meaning of life?'

This is so because the question has been radically misconstrued. When we ask: 'What is the meaning of life?' or 'What is the purpose of human existence?' we are normally asking, as I have already said, questions of the following types: 'What should we seek?' 'What ends – if any – are worthy of attainment?' Questions of this sort require a very different answer than any answer to: 'What is the meaning of 'obscurantism'?' 'What is the purpose of the ink-blotter?' and 'What is the purpose of the liver?' Ayer is right when he says: 'what is required by those who seek to know the purpose of their existence is not a factual description of the way that people actually do conduct themselves, but rather a decision as to how they *should* conduct themselves'. Again he is correct in remarking: 'There is – a sense in which it can be said that life does have a meaning. It has for each of us whatever meaning we severally *choose* to give it. The purpose of a man's existence is constituted by the ends to which he, consciously or unconsciously, devotes himself'.

Ayer links this with another crucial logical point, a point which the existentialists have dramatized as some kind of worrisome 'moral discovery'. Ayer points out that 'in the last resort ... each individual has the responsibility of making the choice of how he ought to live and die' and that it is logically impossible that someone else, in some authoritative position, can make that choice for him. If someone gives me moral advice in the nature of the case I must decide whether or not to follow his advice, so again the choice is finally my own. This is true because moral questions are primarily questions about what to do. In asking how I ought to live, I am trying to make up my mind how to act. And to say I deliberately acted in a certain way implies that I decided to do it. There is no avoiding personal choice in considering such questions.

But Ayer, still writing in the tradition of logical empiricism, often writes as if it followed from the truth of what we have said so far, that there could be no reasoning about 'How ought man to live?' or 'What is the meaning of life?' Thus Ayer says at one point in 'The Claims of Philosophy': 'He [the moral agent] cannot prove his judgments of value are correct, for the simple reason that no judgment of value is capable of proof'. He goes on to argue that people have no way of demonstrating that one judgment of value is superior to another. A decision between people in moral disagreement is a 'subject for persuasion and finally a matter of individual choice'.

As we have just seen there is a sound point to Ayer's stress on choice vis-à-

vis morality, but taken as a whole his remarks are at best misleading. There is reasoning about moral questions and there are arguments and proofs in morality. There are principles in accordance with which we appraise our actions, and there are more general principles, like the principle of utility or the principles of distributive justice in accordance with which we test our lower-level moral rules. And there is a sense of 'being reasonable' which, as Hume and Westermarck were well aware, has distinctive application to moral judgments. Thus, if I say, 'I ought to be relieved of my duties, I'm just too ill to go on' I not only must believe I am in fact ill, I must also be prepared to say, of any of my colleagues or anyone else similarly placed, that in like circumstances they too ought to be relieved of their duties if they fall ill. There is a certain *generality* about moral discourse and a man is not reasoning morally or 'being reasonable' if he will not allow those inferences. Similarly, if I say 'I want x' or 'I prefer x' I need not, though I may, be prepared to give reason why I want it or prefer it, but if I say 'x is the right thing to do' or 'x is good' or 'I ought to do x' or 'x is worthy of attainment', I must – perhaps with the exception of judgments of intrinsic goodness – be prepared to give *reasons* for saying 'x is the right thing to do', 'x is good', 'I ought to do x' and the like. (Note, this remark has the status of what Wittgenstein would call a grammatical remark.)

It is indeed true in morals and in reasoning about human conduct generally that justification must come to an end; but this is also true in logic, science and in common sense empirical reasoning about matters of fact; but it is also true that the end point in reasoning over good and evil is different than in science and the like, for in reasoning about how to act, our judgment finally terminates in a choice – a decision of principle. And here is the truth in Ayer's remark that moral judgments are '*finally* a matter of individual choice'. But, unless we are to mislead, we must put the emphasis on 'finally', for a dispassioned, neutral analysis of the uses of the language of human conduct will show, as I have indicated, that there is reasoning, and in a relevant sense, 'objective reasoning', about moral questions. It is not at all a matter of pure persuasion or goading someone into sharing your attitudes.

I cannot, of course, even begin to display the full range of the reasoning which has sought to establish this point. But I hope I have said enough to block the misleading implications of Ayer's otherwise very fine analysis. Early linguistic philosophy was primarily interested in (1) the descriptive and explanatory discourse of the sciences, and (2) in logico-mathematico discourse; the rest was rather carelessly labeled, 'expressive or emotive discourse'. But the thrust of the work of linguistic philosophers since the Second World War has corrected that mistaken emphasis, as recent analytical

writing in ethics makes evident. Here I commend to you R. M. Hare's *The Language of Morals*, and his *Freedom and Reason*, Stephen Toulmin's *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics*, Kurt Baier's *The Moral Point of View*, Marcus Singer's *Generalization in Ethics*, P. H. Nowell-Smith's *Ethics*, Bernard Mayo's *Ethics and the Moral Life*, or George von Wright's *The Varieties of Goodness*. They would also reinforce the point I tried briefly to make against Ayer, as would an examination of the essays of Philippa Foot or John Rawls.⁹

III

There are, however, other considerations that may be in our minds when we ask 'What is the meaning of life?' or 'Does life have a meaning?' In asking such questions, we may *not* be asking 'What should we seek?' or 'What goals are worth seeking really?' Instead we may be asking 'Is *anything* worth seeking?' 'Does it matter finally what we do?' Here, some may feel, we finally meet the real tormenting 'riddle of human existence'.

Such a question is not simply a moral question: it is a question concerning human conduct, a question about how to live one's life or about whether to continue to live one's life. Yet when we consider what an answer would look like here we draw a blank. If someone says 'Is anything worthwhile?' we gape. We want to reply: 'Why, sitting in the sunshine in the mornings, seeing the full moon rise, meeting a close friend one hasn't seen in a long time, sleeping comfortable after a tiring day, all these things and a million more are most assuredly worthwhile. Any life devoid of experiences of this sort would most certainly be impoverished'.

Yet this reply is so obvious we feel that something different must be intended by the questioner. The questioner knows that we, and most probably he, ordinarily regard such things as worthwhile, but he is asking if these things or *anything* is worthwhile *really*? These things *seem* worthwhile but are they in reality? And here we indeed do not know what to say. If someone queries whether it is really worthwhile leaving New York and going to the beach in August we have some idea of what to say; there are some criteria which will enable us to make at least a controversial answer to this question. But when it is asked, in a philosophical manner, *if anything, ever* is really worthwhile,

9. I have discussed these issues in my 'Problems of Ethics' and 'History of Contemporary Ethics', both in Vol. 3 of *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards (ed.), Macmillan, 1967.

it is not clear that we have a genuine question before us. The question borrows its form from more garden-variety questions but when we ask it in this general way do we actually know what we mean? If someone draws a line on the blackboard, a question over the line's straightness can arise only if some criterion for a line's being straight is accepted. Similarly only if some criterion of worthiness is accepted can we intelligibly ask if a specific thing or anything is worthy of attainment.

But if a sensitive and reflective person asks, 'Is anything worthwhile, really?' could he not be asking this because, (1) he has a certain vision of human excellence, and (2) his austere criteria for what is worthwhile have developed in terms of that vision? Armed with such criteria, he might find nothing that man can in fact attain under his present and foreseeable circumstances *worthy* of attainment. Considerations of this sort seem to be the sort of considerations that led Tolstoy and Schopenhauer to come to such pessimistic views about life. Such a person would be one of those few people, who as one of Hesse's characters remarks, 'demand the utmost of life and yet cannot come to terms with its stupidity and crudeness'. In terms of his ideal of human excellence nothing is worthy of attainment.

To this, it is natural to respond, 'If this is our major problem about the meaning of life, then this is indeed no intellectual or philosophical riddle about human destiny. We need not like Steppenwolf return to our lodging lonely and disconsolate because life's 'glassy essence' remains forever hidden, for we can well envisage, in making such a judgment, what would be worthwhile. We can say what a meaningful life would look like even though we can't attain it. If such is the question, there is no 'riddle of human existence', though there is a pathos to human life and there is the social-political pattern problem of how to bring the requisite human order into existence. Yet only if we have a conception of what human life should be can we feel such pathos'.

If it is said in response to this that what would really be worthwhile could not possibly be attained, an absurdity has been uttered. to say something is worthy of attainment implies that, everything else being equal, it ought to be attained. But to say that something ought to be attained implies that it *can* be attained. Thus we *cannot* intelligibly say that something is worthy of attainment but that it cannot possibly be attained. So in asking 'Is anything worthy of attainment?' we must acknowledge that there are evaluative criteria operative which guarantee that what is sincerely said to be worthy of attainment is at least in principle attainable. And as we have seen in speaking of morality, 'x is worthy of attainment' does not mean 'x is preferred', though again, in asserting that something is worthy of attainment, or worthwhile, we

imply that we would choose it, everything else being equal, in preference to something else. But we cannot intelligibly speak of a choice if there is no possibility of doing one thing rather than another.

Life is often hard and, practically speaking, the ideals we set our hearts on, those to which we most deeply commit ourselves, may in actual fact be impossible to achieve. A sensitive person may have an ideal of conduct, an ideal of life, that he assents to without reservation. But the facts of human living being what they are, he knows full well that this ideal cannot be realized. His ideals are intelligible enough, logically their achievement is quite possible, but as a matter of *brute fact* his ideals are beyond his attainment. If this is so, is it worthwhile for him and others like him to go on living or to strive for anything at all? Can life, under such circumstances, be anything more than an ugly habit? For such a man, 'What is the meaning of life?' has the force of 'What *point* can a life such as mine have under these circumstances?' And in asking whether such a life has a point he is asking the very question we put above, viz. can life be worth living under such conditions.

Again such a question is perfectly intelligible and is in no way unanswerable any more than any other question about how to act, though here too we must realize that the facts of human living *cannot* be sufficient for a man simply to read off an answer without it in any way affecting his life. Here, too, *any* answer will require a decision or some kind of effective involvement on the part of the person involved. A philosopher can be of help here in showing what kind of answers we cannot give, but it is far less obvious that he can provide us with a set of principles that together with empirical facts about his condition and prospects, will enable the perplexed man to know what he ought to do. The philosopher or any thoughtful person who sees just what is involved in the question can give some helpful advice. Still the person involved must work out an answer in anguish and soreness of heart.

However, I should remind him that no matter how bad his own life was, there would always remain something he could do to help alleviate the sum total of human suffering. This certainly has value and if he so oriented his life, he could not say that his life was without point. I would also argue that in normal circumstances he could not be sure that his ideals of life would permanently be frustrated, and if he held ideals that would be badly frustrated under almost any circumstances, I would get him to look again at his ideals. Could such ideals really be adequate? Surely man's reach must exceed his grasp, but how far should we go? Should not any ideal worth its salt come into some closer involvement with the realities of human living? And if one deliberately and with selfunderstanding plays the role of a Don Quixote can

one justifiably complain that one's ideals are not realized? Finally, it does not seem to me reasonable to expect that *all* circumstances can have sufficient meaning to make them worthwhile. Under certain circumstances life is not worth living. As a philosopher, I would point out this possibility and block those philosophical-religious claims that would try to show that this could not possibly be.

Many men who feel the barbs of constant frustration, come to feel that their ideals have turned out to be impossible, and ask in anguish – as a consequence – ‘Does life really have any meaning?’ To a man in such anguish I would say all I have said above and much more, though I am painfully aware that such an approach may seem cold and unfeeling. I know that these matters deeply affect us; indeed they can even come to obsess us, and when we are so involved it is hard to be patient with talk about what can and cannot be said. But we need to understand these matters as well; and, after all, what more can be done along this line than to make quite plain what is involved in his question and try to exhibit a range of rational attitudes that could be taken toward it, perhaps stressing the point that though Dr. Rieux lost his wife and his best friend, his life, as he fought the plague, was certainly not without point either for him or for others. But I would also try to make clear that finally an answer to such a question must involve a decision or the having or adopting of a certain attitude on the part of the person involved. This certainly should be stressed and it should be stressed that the question ‘Is such a life meaningful?’ is a sensible question, which admits of a non-obscurantist, non-metaphysical treatment.

IV

There are many choices we must make in our lives and some choices are more worthwhile than others, though the criteria for what is worthwhile are in large measure at least context-dependent. ‘It’s worthwhile going to Leningrad to see the Hermitage’ is perfectly intelligible to someone who knows and cares about art. Whether such a trip to Leningrad is worthwhile for such people can be determined by these people by a visit to the Museum. ‘It’s worthwhile fishing the upper Mainistee’ is in exactly the same category, though the criteria for worthwhileness are not the same. Such statements are most assuredly perfectly intelligible; and no adequate grounds have been given to give us reason to think that we should philosophically tinker with the ordinary criteria of ‘good art museum’ or ‘good trout fishing’. And why should we deny that these and other things are really worthwhile? To say ‘Nothing is worthwhile since all

pales and worse still, all is vain because man must die' is to mistakenly assume that because an eternity of even the best trout fishing would be not just a bore but a real chore, that trout fishing is therefore not worthwhile. Death and the fact (if it is a fact) that there is nothing new under the sun need not make all vanity. That something must come to an end can make it all the more precious: to know that love is an old tale does not take the bloom from your beloved's cheek.

Yet some crave a more general answer to 'Is anything worthwhile?' This some would say, is what they are after when they ask about the meaning of life.

As I indicated, the criteria for what is worthwhile are surely in large measure context-dependent, but let us see what more we can say about this need for a more general answer.

In asking 'Why is anything worthwhile?' if the 'why' is a request for *causes*, a more general answer can be given. The answer is that people have preferences, enjoy, admire and approve of certain things and they can and sometimes do reflect. Because of this they find some things worthwhile. This, of course, is not what 'being worthwhile' *means*, but if people did not have these capacities they would not find anything worthwhile. But *reasons* why certain things are worthwhile are dependent on the thing in question.

If people find x worthwhile they generally prefer x, approve of x, enjoy x, or admire x on reflection. If people did not prefer, approve of, enjoy or admire things then nothing would be found to be worthwhile. If they did not have these feelings the notion of 'being worthwhile' would have no role to play in human life; but it does have a role to play and, as in morality, justification of what is worthwhile must finally come to an end with the reflective choices we make.

Moral principles, indeed, have a special onerousness about them. If something is a moral obligation, it is something we ought to do through and through. It for most people at least and from a moral point of view for everyone overrides (but does not exhaust) all non-moral considerations about what is worthwhile. If we are moral agents and we are faced with the necessity of choosing either A or B, where A, though very worthwhile, is a non-moral one, we must choose B. The force of the 'must' here is logical. From a moral point of view there is no alternative but to choose B. Yet we do not escape the necessity of decision for we still must *agree* to *adopt* a moral point of view, to *try* to act as moral agents. Here, too, we must finally make a decision of principle.¹⁰ There are good Hobbesian reasons for adopting the moral point

10. I have discussed the central issues involved here at length in my 'Why Should I Be Moral?' *Methods*, 15, 1963.

of view but if one finally would really prefer 'a state of nature' in which all were turned against all, rather than a life in which there was a freedom from this and at least a minimum of cooperation between human beings, then these reasons for adopting the moral point of view would not be compelling to such a person. There is, in the last analysis, no escape from making a choice.

In asking 'What is the meaning of Life?' we have seen how this question is in reality a question concerning human conduct. It asks either 'What should we seek?' or 'What ends (if any) are really worthwhile?' I have tried to show in what general ways such questions are answerable. We can give reasons for our moral judgments and moral principles and the whole activity of morality can be seen to have a point, but not all questions concerning what is worthwhile are moral questions. Where moral questions do not enter we must make a decision about what, on reflection, we are going to seek. We must ascertain what – all things considered – really answers to our interests or, where there is no question of anything answering to our interests or failing to answer to our interests, we should decide what on reflection we prefer. What do we really want, wish to approve of, or admire? To ask 'Is anything worthwhile?' involves our asking 'Is there nothing that we, on reflection, upon knowledge of ourselves and others, want, approve of, or admire?' When we say 'So-and-so is worthwhile' we are making a normative judgment that cannot be derived from determining what we desire, admire or approve of. That is to say, these statements do not entail statements to the effect that so and so is worthwhile. But in determining what is worthwhile this is finally all we have to go on. In saying something is worthwhile, we (1) *express* our preference, admiration or approval; (2) in some sense imply that we are prepared to defend our choice with *reasons*; and (3) in effect, indicate our belief that others like us in the relevant respects and similarly placed, will find it worthwhile too. And the answer to our question is that, of course, there are things we humans desire, prefer, approve of, or admire. This being so, our question is not unanswerable. Again we need not fly to a metaphysical enchanter.

As I said, 'Is anything really worthwhile, really worth seeking?' makes us gape. And 'atomistic analyses', like the one I have just given, often leave us with a vague but persistent feeling of dissatisfaction, even when we cannot clearly articulate the grounds of our dissatisfaction. 'The real question', we want to say, 'has slipped away from us amidst the host of distinctions and analogies. We've not touched the deep heart of the matter at all'.

Surely, I have not exhausted the question for, literally speaking, it is not one question but a cluster of loosely related questions all concerning 'the human condition' – how man is to act and how he is to live his life even in

the face of the bitterest trials and disappointments. Questions here are diverse, and a philosopher, or anyone else, becomes merely pretentious and silly when he tries to come up with some formula that will solve, resolve or dissolve the perplexities of human living. But I have indicated in skeletal fashion how we can approach general questions about 'What (if anything) is worth seeking?' And I have tried to show how such questions are neither meaningless nor questions calling for esoteric answers.

V

We are not out of the woods yet. Suppose someone were to say: 'Okay, you've convinced me. Some things are worthwhile and there is a more or less distinct mode of reasoning called moral reasoning and there are canons of validity distinctive of this *sui generis* type reasoning. People do reason in the ways that you have described, but it still remains the case that here one's attitudes and final choices are relevant in a way that it isn't necessarily the case in science or an argument over plain matters of fact. But when I ask: 'How ought men act?' 'What is the meaning of life?' and 'What is the meaning of *my* life?, how should I live and die?' I want an answer that is logically independent of any human choice or any proattitude toward any course of action or any state of affairs. Only if I can have that kind of warrant for my moral judgments and ways-of-life will I be satisfied'.

If a man demands this and continues to demand this after dialectical examination we must finally leave him unsatisfied. As linguistic philosophers there is nothing further we can say to him. In dialectical examination we can again point out to him that he is asking for the logically impossible, but if he recognizes this and persists in asking for that which is impossible there are no further rational arguments that we can use to establish our point. But, prior to this last-ditch stand, there are still some things that we can say. We can, in detail and with care, point out to him, describe fully for him, the rationale of the moral distinctions we do make and the functions of moral discourse. A full description here will usually break this kind of obsessive perplexity. Furthermore, we can make the move Stephen Toulmin makes in the last part of his *The Place of Reason in Ethics*. We can describe for him another use of 'Why' that Toulmin has well described as a 'limiting question'.¹¹

Let me briefly explain what this is and how it could be relevant. When we

11. Stephen Toulmin, *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1950).

ask a ‘limiting question’ we are not really asking a question at all. We are in a kind of ‘land of shadows’ where there are no clear-cut uses of discourse. If we just look at their grammatical form, ‘limiting questions’ do not appear to be extra-rational in form, but in their depth grammar – their actual function – they clearly are. ‘What holds the universe up?’ looks very much like ‘What holds the Christmas tree up?’ but the former, in common sense contexts at least, is a limiting question while the latter usually admits of a perfectly obvious answer. As Toulmin himself puts it, limiting questions are ‘questions expressed in a form borrowed from a familiar mode of reasoning, but not doing the job which they normally do within that mode of reasoning’.¹² A direct answer to a limiting question never satisfies the questioners. Attempted ‘answers’ only regenerate the question, though often a small change in the questions themselves or their context will make them straightforward questions. Furthermore, there is no standard interpretation for limiting questions sanctioned in our language. And limiting questions do not present us with any genuine alternatives from which to choose.

Now ‘limiting questions’ get used in two main contexts. Sometimes, they merely express what Ryle, rather misleadingly, called a ‘category mistake’. Thus someone who was learning English might ask: ‘How hot is blue?’ or ‘Where is anywhere?’ And, even a native speaker of English might ask as a *moral agent*, ‘Why ought I to do what is right?’ We ‘answer’ such questions by pointing out that blue cannot be hot, anywhere is not a particular place, and that if something is indeed right, this entails that it ought to be done. Our remarks here are grammatical remarks, though our speaking in the material mode may hide this. And if the questioner’s ‘limiting question’ merely signifies that a category mistake has been made, when this is pointed out to the questioner, there is an end to the matter. But more typically and more interestingly, limiting questions do not *just* or at all indicate category mistakes but express, as well or independently, a *personal predicament*. Limiting questions may express anxiety, fear, hysterical apprehensiveness about the future, hope, despair, and any number of attitudes. Toulmin beautifully illustrates from the writings of Dostoevsky an actual, on-the-spot use, of limiting questions:

He was driving somewhere in the steppes ... Not far off was a village, he could see the black huts, and half the huts were burnt down, there were only the charred beams sticking out. As they drove in, there were peasant women drawn up along the road ...

‘Why are they crying? Why are they crying?’ Mitya [Dmitri] asked, as they dashed gaily by.
‘It’s the babe’, answered the driver, ‘the babe is weeping’.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

And Mitya was struck by his saying, in his peasant way, 'the babe', and he liked the peasant's calling it a 'babe'. There seemed more pity in it.

'But why is it weeping?' Mitya persisted stupidly. 'Why are its little arms bare? Why don't they wrap it up?'

'The babe's cold, its little clothes are frozen and don't warm it'.

'But why is it? Why?' foolish Mitya still persisted.

'Why, they're poor people, burnt out. They've no bread. They're begging because they've been burnt out'.

'No, no', Mitya, as it were still did not understand. 'Tell me why it is those poor mothers stand there? Why are people poor? Why is the babe poor? Why is the steppe barren? Why don't they hug each other and kiss? Why don't they sing songs of joy? Why are they so dark from black misery? Why don't they feed the babe?'

And he felt that, though his questions were unreasonable, and senseless, yet he wanted to ask just that, and he had to ask it just in that way. And he felt that a passion of pity, such as he had never known before, was rising in his heart, that he wanted to cry, that he wanted to do something for them all, so that the babe should weep no more, so that the dark-faced, dried-up mother should not weep, that no one should shed tears again from that moment ...

'I've had a good dream, gentlemen', he said in a strange voice, with a new light, as of joy, in his face.¹³

It is clear that we need not, may not, from the point of view of analysis, condemn these uses of language as illicit. We can point out that it is a muddle to confuse such questions with literal questions, and that such questions have no fixed *literal* meaning, and that as a result there are and can be no fixed literal ways of answering them, but they are indeed, genuine uses of language, and not the harum-scarum dreams of undisciplined metaphysics. When existentialist philosophers and theologians state them as profound questions about an alleged ontological realm there is room for complaint, but as we see them operating in the passage I quoted from *The Brothers Karamazov*, they seem to be not only linguistically proper but also an extremely important form of discourse. It is a shame and a fraud when philosophers 'sing songs' as a substitute for the hard work of philosophizing, but only a damn fool would exclude song-singing, literal or metaphorical, from the life of reason, or look down on it as a somehow inferior activity. Non-literal 'answers' to these non-literal, figurative questions, when they actually express personal predicaments or indeed more general human predicaments may, in a motivational sense, *goad* people to do one thing or another that they *know* they ought to do or they may comfort them or give them hope in time of turmoil and anxiety. I am not saying this is their only use or that they have no other respectable rationale. I do not at all think that; but I am saying that here is a rationale that even the most hard nosed positivist should acknowledge.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

The man who demands ‘a more objective answer’ to his question, ‘How ought men to live?’ or ‘What is the meaning of Life?’ may not be just muddled. If he is *just* making a ‘category mistake’ and this is pointed out to him, he will desist, but if he persists, his limiting question probably expresses some anxiety. In demanding an answer to an evaluative question that can be answered independently of any attitudes he might have or choices he might make, he may be unconsciously expressing his fear of making decisions, his insecurity and confusion about what he really wants, and his desperate desire to have a Father who would make all these decisions for him. And it is well in such a context to bring Weston LaBarre’s astute psychological observation to mind. ‘Values’, LaBarre said, ‘must from emotional necessity be viewed as absolute by those who use values as compulsive defenses against reality, rather than properly as tools for the exploration of reality’.¹⁴ This remark, coming from a Freudian anthropologist, has unfortunately a rather metaphysical ring, but it can be easily enough de-mythologized. The point is, that someone who persists in these questions, persists in a demand for a totally different and ‘deeper’ justification or answer to the question ‘What is the meaning of Life?’ than the answer that such a question admits of, may be just expressing his own insecurity. The heart of rationalism is often irrational. At such a point the only reasoning that will be effective with him, if indeed any reasoning will be effective with him, may be psychoanalytic reasoning. And by then, of course you have left the philosopher and indeed all questions of justification far behind. But again the philosopher can describe the kinds of questions we can ask and the point of these questions. Without advocating anything at all he can make clearer to us the structure of ‘the life of reason’ and the goals we human beings do prize.

VI

There is another move that might be made in asking about this haunting question: ‘What is the meaning of Life?’ Suppose someone were to say: ‘Yes I see about these ‘limiting questions’ and I see that moral reasoning and reasoning about human conduct generally are limited modes of reasoning with distinctive criteria of their own. If I am willing to be guided by reason and I can be reasonable there are some answers I can find to the question: ‘What is the meaning of Life?’ I’m aware that they are not cut and dried and that they are not simple and that they are not even by any means altogether the

14. Weston LaBarre, *The Human Animal*, University of Chicago, 1954.

same for all men, but there are some reasonable answers and touchstones all the same. You and I are in perfect accord on that. But there is one thing I don't see at all, 'Why ought I to be guided by reason anyway?' and if you cannot answer this for me I don't see why I should think that your answer – or rather your schema for an answer – about the meaning of Life is, after all, really any good. It all depends on how you *feel*, finally. There are really no answers here'.

But again we have a muddle; let me very briefly indicate why. If someone asks: 'Why ought I to be guided by reason anyway?' or 'Is it really good to be reasonable?' one is tempted to take such a question as a paradigm case of a 'limiting question', and a very silly one at that. But as some people like to remind us – without any very clear sense of what they are reminding us of – reason has been challenged. It is something we should return to, be wary of, realize the limits of, or avoid, as the case may be. It will hardly do to take such a short way with the question and rack it up as a category mistake.

In some particular contexts, with some particular people, it is (to be paradoxical, for a moment) reasonable to question whether we ought to follow reason. Thus, if I am a stubborn, penny-pinching old compulsive and I finally take my wife to the 'big-city' for a holiday, it might be well to say to me: 'Go on, forget how much the damn tickets cost, buy them anyway. Go on, take a cab even if you can't afford it'. But to give or heed such advice clearly is not, in any fundamental sense, to fly in the face of reason, for on a deeper level – the facts of human living being what they are – we are being guided by reason.

It also makes sense to ask, as people like D. H. Lawrence press us to ask, if it really pays to be reasonable. Is the reasonable, clear-thinking clear-visioned, intellectual animal really the happiest, in the long run? And can his life be as rich, as intense, as creative as the life of Lawrence's sort of man? From Socrates to Freud it has been assumed, for the most part, that self-knowledge, knowledge of our world, and rationality will bring happiness, if anything will. But is this really so? The whole Socratic tradition may be wrong at this point. Nor is it obviously true that the reasonable man, the man who sees life clearly and without evasion, will be able to live the richest, the most intense or the most creative life. I hope these things are compatible but they may not be. A too clear understanding may dull emotional involvement. Clear-sightedness may work against the kind of creative intensity that we find in a Lawrence, a Wolfe or a Dylan Thomas.

But to ask such questions is not in a large sense to refuse to be guided by reason. Theoretically, further knowledge could give us at least some vague answers to such unsettling questions; and, depending on what we learned and

what decisions we would be willing to make, we would then know what to do. But clearly, we are not yet flying in the face of reason, refusing to be guided by reason at all. We are still playing the game according to the ground rules of reasons.

What is this question, 'Why should I be guided by reason?' or 'Why be reasonable?' if it isn't any of these questions we have just discussed? If we ask this question and take it in a very general way, the question is a limiting one and it does involve a category mistake. What could be *meant* by asking: 'Why ought we *ever* use reason at all?' That to ask this question is to commit a logical blunder, is well brought out by Paul Taylor when he says:

... it is a question which would never be asked by anyone who thought about what he was saying, since the question, to speak loosely, answers itself. It is admitted that no amount of arguing in the world can make a person who does not want to be reasonable want to be. For to argue would be to give reasons, and to give reasons already assumes that the person to whom you give them is *seeking* reasons. That is it assumes he is reasonable. A person who did not want to be reasonable in any sense would never ask the question, 'Why be reasonable?' For in asking the question, Why? he is seeking reasons, that is, he is being reasonable in asking the question. The question calls for the use of reason to justify *any* use of reason, including the use of reason to answer the question.¹⁵

In other words, to ask the question, as well as answer it, commits one to the use of reason. To ask: 'Why be guided by reason at all?' is to ask 'Why be reasonable, ever?' As Taylor puts it, 'The questioner is thus seeking good reasons for seeking good reasons', and this surely is an absurdity. Anything that would be a satisfactory answer would be a 'tautology to the effect that it is reasonable to be reasonable. A negative answer to the question, Is it reasonable to be reasonable? would express a self-contradiction'.

If all this is pointed out to someone and he still persists in asking the question in this logically senseless way there is nothing a philosopher *qua* philosopher can do for him, though a recognition of the use of limiting questions in discourse may make this behavior less surprising to the philosopher himself. He might give him all five volumes of *The Life of Reason* or *Vanity Fair* and say, 'Here, read this, maybe you will come to see things differently'. The philosopher himself might even sing a little song in praise of reason, but there would be nothing further that he could say to him, philosophically: but by now we have come a very long way.

15. Paul Taylor, 'Four Types of Relativism', *Philosophical Review*, 1956.

VII

Ronald Hepburn is perceptive in speaking of the conceptual ‘darkness around the meaning-of-life questions’.⁶ We have already seen some of the reasons for this; most generally, we should remark here that people are not always asking the same question and are not always satisfied by answers of the same scope when they wrestle with meaning-of-life questions. And often, of course, the questioner has no tolerably clear idea of what he is trying to ask. He may have a strong gut reaction about the quality and character of his own life and the life around him without the understanding or ability to conceptualize why he feels the way he does. Faced with this situation, I have tried to chart some of the contexts in which ‘What is the meaning of Life?’ is a coherent question and some of the contexts in which it is not. But there are some further contexts in which ‘meaning-of-life questions get asked which I have not examined.

There are philosophers who will agree with me that in a world of people with needs and wants already formed, it can be shown that life in a certain ‘subjective sense’ has meaning, but they will retort that this is not really the central consideration. What is of crucial importance is whether we can show that the universe is better with human life than without it. If this cannot be established then we cannot have good reason to believe that life really has meaning, though in the subjective senses we have discussed, we can still continue to say it has meaning.¹⁷

If we try to answer this question, we are indeed brought up short, for we are utterly at a loss about what it would be like to ascertain whether it is better for the universe to have human life than no life at all. We may have certain attitudes here but no idea of what it would be like to know or have any reason at all to believe that ‘It is better that there is life’ is either true or false or reasonably asserted or denied. It is quite unlike ‘It is better to be dead than to live with a tumor’. Concerning this last example, people may disagree about its correctness, but they have some idea of what considerations are relevant to settling the dispute. But with ‘It is better that there be life’ we are at a loss.

We will naturally be led into believing that ‘What is the meaning of Life?’ is an unanswerable question reflecting ‘the mystery of existence’, if we believe that to answer that question satisfactorily we will have to be able to establish that it is better that there is life on earth than no life at all. What needs to

16. Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Questions About the Meaning of Life’.

17. See in this context Hans Reiner, *Der Sinn unseres Daseins*, Tübingen: 1960. This view has been effectively criticized by Paul Edwards, ‘Meaning and Value of Life’, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards (ed.), Macmillan, 1967, Vol. 4, pp. 474–476.

be resisted is the very acceptance of that way of posing the problem. We do not need to establish that it is better that the universe contains human life than not in order to establish that there is a meaning to life. A life without purpose, a life devoid of satisfaction and an alienated life in which people are not being true to themselves is a meaningless life. The opposite sort of life is a meaningful or significant life. We have some idea of the conditions which must obtain for this to be so, i.e. for a man's life to have significance. We are not lost in an imponderable mystery here and we do not have to answer the question of whether it is better that there be human life at all to answer that question. Moreover, this standard non-metaphysical reading of 'What is the meaning of Life?' is no less objective than the metaphysical reading we have been considering. There are no good grounds at all for claiming that this metaphysical 'question' is the real and objective consideration in 'What is the meaning of Life?' and that the more terrestrial interpretations I have been considering are more subjective. This transcendental metaphysical way of stating the problem utilizes unwittingly and without justification arbitrary *persuasive* definitions of 'subjective' and 'objective'. And no other grounds have been given for *not* sticking with the terrestrial readings.

A deeper criticism of the account I have given of purpose and the meaning of life is given by Ronald Hepburn.¹⁸ It is indeed true that life cannot be meaningful without being purposeful in the quite terrestrial sense I have set out, but, as Hepburn shows, it can be purposeful and still be meaningless.

One may fill one's days with honest, useful and charitable deeds, not doubting them to be of value, but without feeling that these give one's life meaning or purpose. It may be profoundly boring. To seek meaning is not just a matter of seeking justification for one's policies, but of trying to discover how to organise one's vital resources and energies around these policies. To find meaning is not a matter of judging these to be worthy, but of seeing their pursuit as in some sense a fulfillment, as involving self-realisation as opposed to self-violation, and as no less opposed to the performance of a dreary task.¹⁹

A person's life can have significance even when he does not realize it and even when it is an almost intolerable drudge to him, though for human life generally to have significance this could not almost invariably be true for the human animal. But one's own life could not have significance *for oneself* if it were such a burden to one. To be meaningful to one, one's life must be purposive *and* it must be a life that the liver of that life finds satisfactory in the living of it. These conditions sometimes obtain and when it is also true that

18. Hepburn's criticisms are directed toward an earlier version of this essay, 'Linguistic Philosophy and 'The Meaning of Life'', *Cross-Currents*, 14, Summer 1964.

19. *Ibid.*

some reasonable measure of an individual's purposive activity adds to the enhancement of human life, we can say that his life is not only meaningful to him but meaningful *sans phrase*.²⁰

This is still not the end of the matter in the struggle to gain a sense of the meaning of life, for, as Hepburn also points out, some will not be satisfied with a purely terrestrial and non-metaphysical account of the type I have given of 'the meaning of Life'.²¹ They will claim 'that life could be thought of as having meaning only so long as that meaning was believed to be a matter for discovery, not for creation and value-decision'.²² They will go on to claim that 'to be meaningful, life would have to be *comprehensively* meaningful and its meaning invulnerable to assault. Worthwhile objectives must be ultimately realisable despite appearances'.²³

However, even if they are not satisfied with my more piecemeal and terrestrial facing of questions concerning the meaning of life, it does not follow that life can only have meaning if it has meaning in the more comprehensive and less contingent way they seek. It may be true that life will only have meaning *for them* if these conditions are met, but this does not establish that life will thus lack meaning unless these conditions are met. That is to say, it may be found significant by the vast majority of people, including most non-evasive and reflective people, when such conditions are met and it may be the case that everyone *should* find life meaningful under such conditions.

It is not the case that there is some general formula in virtue of which we can say what the meaning of life is, but it still remains true that men can through their purposive activity give their lives meaning and indeed find meaning in life in the living of it. The man with a metaphysical or theological craving will seek 'higher standards' than the terrestrial standards I have utilized.

Is it rational to assent to that craving, to demand such 'higher standards', if life is really to be meaningful? I want to say both 'Yes' and 'No'.

On the one hand, the answer should be 'No', if the claim remains that for life to be meaningful at all it must be comprehensively meaningful. Even without such a comprehensive conception of things there can be joy in life, morally, aesthetically and technically worthwhile activity and a sense of

20. *Ibid.*

21. 'Questions About the Meaning of Life'. For arguments of this type see F. C. Copleston, 'Man and Metaphysics I', *The Heythrop Journal*, I, 2, January 1960, p. 16. See in addition his continuation of this article in successive issues of *The Heythrop Review* and his *Positivism and Metaphysics*, Lisbon: 1965.

22. 'Questions About the Meaning of Life'.

23. *Ibid.*

human purpose and community. This is sufficient to give meaning to life. And as Ayer perceptively argues and as I argued earlier in the essay, and as Hepburn argues himself, the man with a metaphysical craving of the transcendental sort will not be able to succeed in finding justification or rationale for claims concerning the significance of life that is any more *authoritative* and any more certain or invulnerable to assault than the non-metaphysical type rationale I have adumbrated. In actuality, as we have seen, such a comprehensive account, committed, as it must be, to problematic transcendental metaphysical and/or theological conceptions, is more vulnerable than my purely humanistic reading of this conception.

On the other hand, the answer should be ‘Yes’ if the claim is reduced to one asserting that to try to articulate a comprehensive picture of human life is a desirable thing. However, it should be noted that this is quite a reduction in claim. In attempting to make such an articulation, the most crucial thing is not to wrestle with theological considerations about the contingency of the world or eternal life, but to articulate a comprehensive normative social and political philosophy in accordance with which we could set forth at least some of the conditions of a non-alienated life not simply for a privileged few but for mankind generally. We need to show in some general manner what such a life would look like and we need to attempt again, and with a reference to contemporary conditions, what Marx so profoundly attempted, namely, to set out the conditions that could transform our inegalitarian, unjust, vulgar and – as in countries such as South Africa and the United States – brutal capitalist societies into truly human societies.²⁴ Linguistic philosophers and bourgeois philosophers generally have been of little help here, though the clarity they have inculcated into philosophical work and into political and moral argument will be a vital tool in this crucial and yet to be done task.²⁵ When this task is done, if it is done, then we will have the appropriate comprehensive picture we need, and it is something to be done without any involvement with theology, speculative cosmology or transcendental metaphysics at all.²⁶

24. For a contemporary Marxist account see Adam Schaff, *A Philosophy of Man* London: 1963. But also note the criticism of Schaff’s views by Christopher Hollis in ‘What is the Purpose of Life?’, *The Listener*, 70, 1961, pp. 133–136.
25. The strength and limitations here of linguistic analysis as it has been practiced are well exhibited in Ayer’s little essay ‘Philosophy and Politics’.
26. If what I have argued above is so, many of the esoteric issues raised by Milton Munitz in his *The Mystery of Existence* and in his contribution to *Language, Belief, and Metaphysics*, Kiefer and Munitz (eds.), New York: 1970, can be bypassed.