

The Meaning of Life

JOHN KEKES

I

Most of our lives are spent in routine activities. We sleep, wash, dress, eat; go to work, work, shop, relax; balance the checkbook, clean house, do the laundry, have the car serviced; chat, pay bills, worry about this or that, take small pleasure in small things. We do all this in the intervals between familiar milestones: we are born, mature, age, and die; we have children and lose our parents; we graduate, find a job, get married, divorce, fall in and out of love, set up house; succeed at some things, fail at others; make friends and have fights; move house, change jobs, get fired or promoted, fall ill and recover, save for retirement and retire. So life goes for me, you, and just about everyone, allowing for small individual and cultural variations that affect the form but not the fact of routine. These activities constitute everyday life. Everyday life is what life mostly is. Keeping it going, however, involves constant struggle. From a birth we did not choose to a death we rarely desire, we have to cope with endless problems. If we fail, we suffer. And what do we gain from success? No more than some pleasure, a brief sense of triumph, perhaps a little peace of mind. But these are only interludes of well-being, because our difficulties do not cease. It is natural to ask then why we should continue on this treadmill. After all, we could stop.

The tough-minded answer is that the question falsely suggests that we need reasons for continuing to live. The truth is that our nature impels us to carry on. We have wants and the capacity to satisfy them, and instinct and training dictate that we do so. We live as long as we can, as well as we can, and we do so because we are the kind of organisms we are. It is our nature to struggle. To look for reasons beyond this is to misuse the respite we occasionally enjoy from the difficult business of living.

This bleak view correctly depicts the past and present condition of the majority of humanity. People struggle because they are hungry, cold, and threatened, and they want comfort. One should have compassion for the multitudes living in this way. The

fact is, however, that many of us, living in civilized societies, no longer face such unrelenting adversity. For us, fortunate ones, the primitive struggle is over. We enjoy the comforts for which the less favored billions yearn. The point of the struggle in primitive conditions is to overcome obstacles to living. But what should we live for once the obstacles are overcome? What should we do with our comfortable lives? Having a comfortable life does not mean that the struggle is over, only that it takes less deadly forms. The threat is to income, prestige, status, self-esteem; the dangers are social and psychological. Nonetheless, these we also want to avoid. Why should we not say then that in primitive conditions our aim is to attain comfort, whereas in civilized conditions it is to protect and enhance the comfort we already have? We struggle to win such prizes as our society affords and to avoid being adversely judged by the prevailing standards.

This is a superficial view. No doubt, in civilized societies many are motivated in this way, but we also have some freedom and opportunity to stand back and reflect. Much of this reflection needs to be concentrated on the strategy and tactics of the daily struggle. Yet we often have some time and energy left to ponder life and our own lives, to ask why we should live in whatever happens to be the socially accredited ways. We know the standards by which success is judged and the rewards and costs of failure. If we are honest, we admit that we care about success and want to avoid failure, at least in the projects that matter to us. Reflection, however, may prompt us to ask whether they should matter. It may seem to us that the whole business we are caught up in is bogus. We see that children are indoctrinated, adolescents are goaded and guided, and adults are rewarded by the vast, impersonal, ubiquitous molds into which civilized societies press their members. And we may ask why we should put up with it. Why should we care about the emblems of success and the stigma of failure? What does it really matter to us in the dark hours of a sleepless night what our neighbors, acquaintances, or colleagues think about us? They employ standards and judge according to them, but we have come to question the standards. Life will seem hollow if we reflect in this way and we shall rightly ask what meaning it has.

Maybe it has none. Maybe evolution has brought it about that we have a capacity to ask questions about our condition, and in civilized societies some even have the opportunity to employ their capacity. But it is folly to suppose that just because we can ask a question there is going to be an answer to it that we like. There are plenty of useless things in nature, and perhaps this capacity is one of them. Maybe life just is, as black holes, electrons, and hurricanes are. Each has an explanation in terms of the laws of nature and antecedent conditions, but there is no meaning beyond that.

One may meet this answer with despair or cynicism. Both are injurious. They poison the enjoyment there is in life by corrupting the innocent connection between a want and its satisfaction. There intrudes the gnawing question about the point of it all. Despair and cynicism cleave us into a natural self and a preying, harping, jeering, or self-pitying reflective self. We are thus turned against ourselves. Reflection sabotages our own projects. If this is the truth, then the human prospect is dim. Maybe a capacity has evolved in us, and it will undo us.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many people of sturdy common sense simply ignore the question. They go on with the business of living, do as well as they can, enjoy the comforts they may, and prudently keep out of deep waters. This evasion,

however, is likely to be possible only for those who are succeeding in navigating life's treacherous waters. The young who are about to start tend to ask why they should follow their elders' mode of life. The old who look back may wonder about whether it was worth it. And the sick, poor, unlucky, and untalented may well ask, with various degrees of resentment, about the point of the enterprise in which they have not done well. It is not possible to ignore the question because it is persistently asked.

Nor is it reasonable to avoid putting the question to ourselves, quite independently of external challenges. It is demeaning to participate in all manner of activities, expending great effort, giving and getting hard knocks, obeying rules we have not made, chasing goals said by others to be rewarding, without asking why we should do all this. Is it not the very opposite of prudence and common sense to invest our lives in projects whose value we have not ascertained? Furthermore, there are exceptionally few lives uninterrupted by serious crises. Grief, ill health, social cataclysms, injustice, setbacks, lack of merited appreciation, being in the power of those who abuse it, and many similar adversities are likely to interfere with even the most prudently lived lives. The questions such adversities raise in us can be answered, if at all, only by reminding ourselves of the point of facing them. Doing that, however, requires having thought about the meaning of our lives.

II

In chapter 5 of his *Autobiography*,¹ John Stuart Mill makes wonderfully concrete what it is like for one's life to have meaning and then to lack it. He writes:

I had what might truly be called an object in life: to be a reformer of the world. My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object. The personal sympathies I wished for were those of my fellow labourers in this enterprise. . . . [A]s a serious and permanent personal satisfaction . . . my whole reliance was placed on this; and I was accustomed to felicitate myself on the certainty of a happy life which I enjoyed, through placing my happiness in something durable and distant, in which some progress might always be making, while it could never be exhausted by complete attainment. This did very well for several years, during which the general improvement going on in the world and the idea of myself as engaged with others in struggling to promote it, seemed enough to fill up an interesting and animated existence.

Mill lived in this manner until "the time came when I was awakened from this as from a dream. . . . [I]t occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: 'Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?' And an irrepressible self-consciousness answered: 'No!' At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. . . . The end has ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for."

Reflecting on what has gone wrong, Mill offers the following diagnosis:

All those to whom I looked up, were of the opinion that the pleasure of sympathy with human beings, and the feelings which made the good of others . . . the objects of existence, were the greatest and surest sources of happiness. Of the truth of this I was convinced, but to know that a feeling would make me happy if I had it, did not give me the feeling. My education, I thought, had failed to create these feelings in sufficient strength to resist the dissolving influence of analysis, while the whole course of my intellectual cultivation had made . . . analysis the inveterate habit of my mind. I was thus left stranded . . . without any desire for the ends which I had been so carefully fitted out to work for: no delight in virtue, or the general good, but also as little in anything else.

Mill's explanation of what has deprived his life of meaning is convincing, but we can go beyond it. He became indifferent to his projects and ceased to care about the goals he used to pursue because he became disengaged from them. The circumstances of his disengagement and the nature of his projects are peculiar to Mill, and so is the extraordinary education that was partly responsible for both his achievements and his life's lost meaning. But we can abstract from these peculiarities and recognize Mill's case as typical of many lives whose meaning has been lost. The precipitating experience is that we awaken, as if from a dream, and realize that what mattered before no longer does. Loss of religious faith, the death of a deeply loved person, the recognition that our decisive choices were based on self-deception, the realization that we have devoted our lives to pursuing a hollow goal, the discovery that our passionate commitment is to an irremediably tainted cause are such experiences. The result is disillusion, and life becomes a tedious burden.

These experiences may bring us to regard our activities as worthless. We see ourselves as engaged in the endless drudgery of some soul-destroying job. We do what we do, not to attain some positive good, but to avoid poverty or starvation. Yet some intrinsically worthless activities may have a point if they lead to goals we value. If, however, chores lacking in either intrinsic or instrumental value dominate in our lives, such as tightening screws day in, day out, as in Chaplin's *Modern Times*, then we can rightly judge them meaningless because they are pointless. In other cases, the activities that dominate our lives may have a point, and yet our lives may still be meaningless, because our goals are destructive, like having enough drugs to support an addiction. Lives of this sort are misdirected. Other lives are meaningless because their goals are trivial, like keeping our childhood toys in working order. There are also lives directed at goals impossible even of approximation, like communicating with the dead. These lives are futile.

It will deepen our understanding of what it would be like for our lives to have meaning if we see that it is not enough to avoid these defects. Mill reasonably judged his life meaningless, yet it had worth, for it was dedicated to a good cause; it aimed at the important goal of bettering the condition of humanity, thus it was not pointless, misdirected, destructive, or trivial; and it was not futile either, for the amelioration of misery and the increase of general happiness are feasible goals. Mill recognized that

his project in life had these meaning-conferring attributes, yet they were insufficient to give it meaning.

One element that Mill's life lacked was his wanting to continue to be engaged in his project. Before his crisis, he identified himself with it, he actively wanted to pursue it; after it, he did not. There appeared a break between Mill and the worthwhile, purposeful, well-directed, important, and possible project of improving the condition of humanity. The connecting link is Mill's identification with his project, and that is what has come to an end. Mill's case shows that it is a mistake to suppose that there are some types of lives in which meaning is inherent, so that if we live them, we cannot fail to find them meaningful. Meaningful lives must have the features just described, but we must also identify with them, we must want to engage in them. Our motivation is as essential as the intrinsic features of the lives.

The fact is, however, that the combination of the intrinsic features and our motivation is still not sufficient for meaning. We may come to think that reflection excludes the possibility of meaning because it brings home to us the absurdity of even the most reasonable projects. Thomas Nagel gives an account of the philosophical sense of absurdity that "must arise from the perception of something universal—some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for all of us."² What is this clash? "Two inevitable standpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd." One is that we "cannot live lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. . . . Think of how an ordinary individual sweats over his appearance, his health, his sex life, his emotional honesty, his social utility, his self-knowledge, the quality of his ties with family, colleagues, and friends, how well he does his job, whether he understands the world and what is going on in it." The other viewpoint is that "humans have the capacity to stand back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand. Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis*. . . . Yet when we take this view . . . it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded."³

This is a perceptive analysis of the philosophical sense of absurdity, but it does not help to understand the kind of meaninglessness that overtook Mill. It is true that we have a capacity to view ourselves from an impersonal cosmic perspective, but the fact is that few of us do so and those who do are by no means uniformly assailed by a sense of meaninglessness. Plato, Spinoza, and Kant among philosophers, Sophocles and Wordsworth among poets, Einstein among scientists come to mind as combining a cosmic view with an intense concern with human welfare. The truths that in the long run we shall all be dead and that from Alpha Centauri we seem like ants lead many reflective people to a heightened appreciation of the importance of human concerns. Nor do people find their lives meaningless, as Mill did, because of a philosophical sense of absurdity. Mill's trouble was not that from a cosmic perspective it appeared absurd to care about his project. What bothered him was that he lost the capacity to "sweat over his appearance, his health, his sex life . . . whether he

understands the world and what is going on in it." His life became desultory because he stopped caring, not because his caring appeared to be absurd from a nonhuman point of view.

The experience we need to understand is the break that sometimes occurs in everyday life between us and our projects. The projects used to matter, but they no longer do. This may happen because our projects are worthless, pointless, mis-directed, trivial, destructive, or futile. Or it may happen because although our projects have none of these defects, they may still lack meaning because of our attitude toward them. Our attitudes may sometimes be sapped by a sense of absurdity, but they are more often sapped by a disengagement of our will and emotions that has nothing to do with absurdity. It must also be allowed that people may find their lives meaningless because they are meaningless. But not all lives are. The question is: what is it that engages our will and emotions, gives meaning to our lives, given that our projects are not defective and we do not suffer from a sense of absurdity? There are two types of answers: the religious and the moral, and we shall examine them in turn.

III

The religious approach to the question is pithily expressed by Wittgenstein: "The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists. . . . If there is any value . . . it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case."⁴ The world is the natural world, and it is a world of facts, not of values. If anything in the natural world has meaning or value, it must come from the outside of it. And it is on the outside that the religious answer concentrates. As Wittgenstein puts it, "Ethics is transcendental,"⁵ and he means that "Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or . . . into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living."⁶

We know then the direction in which to look for the religious answer, but before we can look an obstacle needs to be overcome. Religious answers vary greatly in scope, ranging from the very general to the quite specific. Specific religious answers are given by Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and so forth. The general religious answer is based on the belief that there is a cosmic order that is the ultimate source of meaning. Specific religious answers, then, are interpretations of this supposed cosmic order in terms of revelation, religious experience, miracles, sacred books, the deliverances of prophets, sages, mystics, and various gnostics. In trying to understand the religious answer, it is best to begin with the general one, leaving aside the respective merits of different specific interpretations of it.

Part of the general answer is then that there is a cosmic order in reality. The natural world in which we live is a part of reality and it reflects that order. Through science we may discover some aspects of this order, but there are large and deep questions to which there can be no scientific answers. Why is there a natural world? How did it come into being? Why does it have the order it has? Why is it that of the countless alternative possibilities in the natural world it is self-conscious human beings that have been realized? What is the human significance of the cosmic order?

Scientific theories about the big bang and evolution do not even begin to answer these questions because the questions can easily accommodate the scientific answers and go beyond them. What was there before the big bang? Why was there one? Why were there natural entities that could evolve? Why were the conditions that shaped the direction of evolution as they were? Science asks and answers questions internal to the natural world. Religion, if it is reasonable, accepts these answers, asks questions external to the natural world, and endeavors to answer them. That some specific religious answers are myths tells no more against the general religious answer than alchemy, astrology, and phrenology tell against science.

Let us suppose for a moment that there is a cosmic order and that the natural world that science aims to understand is but a part of it. Why, if that were so, would it have anything to do with the meaning of life? A Stoic parable will help here. Take a dog tied to a cart drawn by a horse. The dog's position is unenviable, but it can still be made better or worse depending on what the dog does. It can understand its position and act accordingly: move when the cart moves, rest when the cart does. Or, it can try to resist, in which case it will be dragged, and the going will be much rougher than it needs to be. And so it is for us. We can try to understand and live according to the cosmic order, or we can ignorantly or unreasonably pit ourselves against it. The meaning of human lives is given by our place in the cosmic order, and our lives will go well or badly, depending on how well we understand and conform to it.

The Stoics did not think that human beings have a special place in the cosmic order, or that if we live reasonably, then we shall somehow free ourselves from the necessity it imposes on us. They thought that the only freedom we can have is to understand the necessity to which we are subject. Platonists, Jews, Christians, and a host of philosophers and theologians go beyond this and take the more optimistic view that the cosmic order is not just necessary, but also good. If our lives are governed by understanding it, then we shall not only avoid unnecessary suffering, but enjoy positive benefits. This is called salvation, and the hope that its possibility creates is the dominant tradition in religious thought. Ethics is transcendental because whatever has meaning in the natural world has it as a result of being in harmony with the good cosmic order. Meaning is not made, but found, and it is found outside of the natural world. The key to meaningful lives thus is to cultivate our understanding of the necessary and good cosmic order and to bring our projects in harmony with what we have thus understood.

One problem with the religious answer becomes apparent if we reflect on the mythical fate of Sisyphus, as Albert Camus did in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.⁷ Sisyphus revealed divine secrets to humanity, and for this he was condemned by the gods to roll a heavy rock uphill to the crest of a mountain until it rolls down, then to roll it up again and again after it rolls down, and to do this for all eternity. Sisyphus's life is the epitome of meaninglessness. Camus's suggestion is that our time-bound lives are like Sisyphus's, albeit on a less heroic scale. The religious answer needs to show that this is not true.

Richard Taylor offers an interesting suggestion that bears on this.⁸ He says:

Let us suppose that the gods, while condemning Sisyphus . . . at the same time, as an afterthought, waxed perversely merciful by implanting in him . . . a

compulsive impulse to roll stones. . . . I call this perverse, because from our point of view there is clearly no reason why anyone should have a persistent and insatiable desire to do something as pointless as that. Nevertheless, suppose that is Sisyphus' condition. He has but one obsession, which is to roll stones. . . . Now it can be seen why this little afterthought of the gods . . . was . . . merciful. For they have by this device managed to give Sisyphus precisely what he wants—by making him want precisely what they inflict on him. . . . Sisyphus' . . . life is now filled with mission and meaning, and he seems to himself to have been given an entry to heaven.⁹

Taylor's suggestion provokes a doubt. Sisyphus's belief that his life has meaning is false. He believes that his meaningless life has meaning only because the gods have manipulated him. We may wonder, however, whether meaning can be based on false beliefs. But let us set this doubt aside for the moment and observe that, whatever we may think of Taylor's suggestion, it is not the religious one. Taylor suggests that the meaning of life comes from living the way we want to live, whereas the religious answer is that meaning comes from living according to the cosmic order. A further twist to the myth of Sisyphus, however, will show how it might give rise to the religious answer.

Suppose that Sisyphus's fate remains as before, but when he reaches the crest, the rocks are incorporated into a gigantic monument glorifying the gods. Sisyphus's life then is no longer pointless or futile. He is part of a larger scheme, and his activities, difficult as they are, have a purpose. It may be further supposed that Sisyphus understands this purpose because the gods have explained it to him. This, of course, is the religious answer to the question about the meaning of our own lives as we face the endless struggles our various projects involve. The cosmic order is God's self-designed monument, and the ultimate purpose of all reasonable projects is to enact the small role assigned to us in this monumental scheme. We know that there is such a scheme, and we know that it is good, even if its details remain obscure to our limited intellects, because it has been revealed to us by a sacred book, by prophets, or by our own interpretations of our experiences.

IV

The religious answer is unpersuasive. In the first place, it is impossible to adduce any evidence in its favor because all evidence available to human beings comes from the natural world. There can thus be no evidence of what may be the case beyond the reach of evidence. Sacred texts and prophets, of course, make various claims about what there is beyond the natural world, but there can be no reason to believe their claims because the authors of the texts and the prophets are human beings who, like us, have access only to the natural world. There undoubtedly are events and experiences that have, at least at present, no natural explanation. But to call the events miracles or the experiences religious is once again to go beyond what the evidence permits. To acknowledge that there are events and experiences in the natural world that we cannot explain lends no support whatsoever for explaining them in terms of a cosmic order. If there is a cosmic order, we cannot know anything about it: not *that* it

exists, and even less *what* form it takes. The questions that religion asks about what there is external to the natural world have no rationally defensible answers. This does not make the questions uninteresting or illegitimate, but it does make all answers to them arbitrary. Arbitrary answers can be accepted on faith, but that does not make them less arbitrary. If the meaning of life depends on understanding and being motivated to live according to a cosmic order, then life has no meaning because we cannot understand the cosmic order and consequently cannot be motivated by it.

Assume, however, that these doubts about the religious answer are misplaced. Assume that the natural world points toward a cosmic order. That would still be insufficient to give life meaning. To know that there is a cosmic order is not to know what it is. But assume further that we can extrapolate from features of the natural world and form some views about what the cosmic order is because the natural world reflects the cosmic order. Knowing some things about the cosmic order, however, is still not enough for meaning, as the last twist to the myth of Sisyphus makes it obvious. Why would it make Sisyphus's life meaningful if he knew that the rocks he is rolling help to construct a monument for the glory of the gods? He knows that he is part of a plan, that his endless drudgery has a purpose, but neither the plan nor the purpose is his own. He is, in effect, enslaved by the gods. Having a part in monument building gives no more meaning to Sisyphus's life than having had a part in pyramid building gave to the slaves of the Egyptians. Of course, neither Sisyphus nor the real slaves had a choice in the matter; they both had to do what they had to do—just like the dog tied to the cart. They may resign themselves to it; they may accept the inevitable; but why would that make their lives meaningful? Meaningful lives require more than understanding the uselessness of opposing the immense force that coerces us to do its bidding.

What would have to be added to the cosmic order to make our lives meaningful is that it is not merely necessary, but also good. If we understood this about it, it would motivate us to live according to it. We would then see its necessity as the key to living a good life, and this, of course, is just what the dominant tradition in Western religious thought claims. But is this a reasonable claim? Why should we think that the cosmic order is good? Perhaps it is indifferent; perhaps it is not good, but bad; or perhaps it is a mixture of good, bad, and indifferent. What reason is there for accepting one of these possibilities, rather than the others?

In trying to answer this question, we need to remember the assumption we have accepted for the sake of argument: that it is reasonable to derive inferences from the natural world about the cosmic order. What features of the natural world, then, imply that the cosmic order is good? These features, it might be said, are that the natural world sustains life and the human form of life; that many human beings live happy and beneficial lives; that there are many acts of honor, decency, and self-sacrifice; and that people often strive to be kind and just. In general, we can read back our moral successes into the cosmic order.

This approach, however, is fundamentally flawed. For any form of life that the natural world sustains, there are numerous others that have perished in the struggle for survival. Alongside happy and beneficial human lives there are at least as many that are unhappy and destructive, and, probably more than either, lives that sometimes go one way and sometimes the other. Selfishness, cruelty, greed, aggression,

envy, and malice also motivate people and often lead them to cause serious unjustified harm to others. If we extrapolate from how things are in the natural world to what the cosmic order must be like, then we cannot just concentrate on the good and ignore what is bad and indifferent. If the natural world reflects a cosmic order, then there is much that is bad and indifferent in the cosmic order, in addition to what may be good.

If the cosmic order has to be good in order to endow our lives with meaning, then we have no reason to believe that our lives have meaning. For understanding the cosmic order will not then motivate us to try to live according to it, but to try to avoid its malignity or indifference. If Sisyphus had remained reasonable in the midst of what the gods forced him to endure, he would not have concluded that the monument the gods were building to glorify themselves was good or that his enforced contribution to it gave meaning to his drudgery.

There is then no reason to accept the religious answer to the question of whether our lives have meaning, because we have no reason to believe that there is a cosmic order; because if there is one, we have no reason to believe anything about what it is; and because if we hold beliefs about what it is on the basis of what the natural world implies, then reason prompts the belief that the cosmic order is a mixture of good, bad, and indifferent elements.

V

Let us, then, turn from the religious to the moral approach to the meaning of life. The distinction between the two approaches has been broached by Plato in *Euthyphro*.¹⁰ The subject there is piety or holiness, but it has become customary to pose the question Socrates puts to Euthyphro in more general terms to be about the source of the good. Assuming that there is a God, what is the relation between God and the good? Does God make the good good or does God's will reflect the good that exists independently of it? The religious answer is the first, the moral answer is the second. Because morality is about the good, regardless of whether there is a God whose will could or would reflect the good, the concern of morality is not with God, but with what God's will might reflect.

According to the moral approach, Wittgenstein was wrong to think that "[e]thics is transcendental."¹¹ It is revealing, however, to bear in mind Wittgenstein's reason for thinking as he did. Commenting on Schlick's view about "two conceptions of the essence of the Good," Wittgenstein says that "according to the superficial interpretation, the Good is good because God wills it; according to the deeper interpretation, God wills the Good because it is good." Wittgenstein, then, goes on: "I think that the first conception is the deeper one: Good is what God orders. For this cuts off the path to any and every explanation of 'why' it is good, while the second conception is precisely the superficial, the rationalistic one, which proceeds as if what is good could still be given some foundation."¹² The moral approach to the meaning of life assumes, for reasons given in the preceding section, the failure of what Wittgenstein thinks of as the deeper conception. Wittgenstein is wrong to regard the moral approach as "the superficial, the rationalistic one," precisely because it recognizes the obligation that Wittgenstein spurns of giving reasons for

claims about what the good is, if its pursuit is to endow life with meaning. It is a further feature of the moral approach that it looks for these reasons within the natural world, rather than outside of it.

Before we can address the question of where in the natural world these reasons could be found, clarity requires distinguishing between a wide and a narrow sense of morality. In the narrow sense, the concern of morality is with what is right. In this sense, morality is about the formulation of impersonal, impartial, disinterested rules that ought to govern human interactions. In the wide sense, the concern of morality is not merely with what is right, but also with what is good. In this sense, morality is not only about rules, actions, and obligations, but also about ideals, virtues, conceptions of a good life, personal aspirations, intimate relationships, private projects, supererogation, and so forth. The moral approach to the meaning of life is moral in the wide sense: what gives meaning to life is the pursuit of good projects. Doing what is right is an important part of that, but it is only a part. Right actions are impersonal conditions of a moral life, whereas the meaningfulness of moral lives derives from the personal sphere in which there are great individual variations. (A technical expression of this point is that the meaning of life is to be found in the aretaic/eudaimonist, rather than in the deontological, aspect of morality.)

We can once again begin by returning to the earlier suggestion of Richard Taylor about where in the wide sense of morality (or in the aretaic/eudaimonist aspect of it) the source of meaning may be found. Taylor thought that Sisyphus's life would have meaning if he wanted to pursue the project to which the gods have doomed him. According to Taylor, the crux is the wanting, not the nature of the projects or how we came to have them. Meaning thus comes from us, not from our projects. We confer meaning on them. On this view, meaning is subjective.

The distinction between "subjective" and "objective" can be drawn in a number of different ways, and there is much confusion about the whole question. It is important, therefore, to make it clear that what is meant by the meaning of life being subjective is that its meaning depends wholly on how the agents regard their lives. According to this view, a life has meaning if the agent sincerely thinks so, and it lacks meaning if the agent sincerely denies it. The objective view, then, is that the agents' thinking that their lives have meaning is the necessary and sufficient condition for their lives having meaning. The objective view, by contrast, grants that the agents' attribution of meaning to their lives is necessary for their lives' having meaning, but it denies that it is sufficient. According to the objective view, lives may lack meaning even if their agents think otherwise, for they may be mistaken.

There are three reasons for rejecting the subjective view and accepting the objective one. The first emerges if we recall the doubt we ignored earlier. We may want to pursue a project only because we have been manipulated, just as Sisyphus was by the gods in the last twist to the myth. It seems clear, however, that there is a difference between wanting to pursue a project because of indoctrination or artificial stimulation of the cortex and wanting to pursue it as a result of having reflected and discovered that it makes our lives meaningful. If meaning were subjective, if it were created merely by our wants and beliefs, it would make no difference to meaning whether our wanting to pursue a project is genuine or manipulated. And it would be inexplicable how the discovery of manipulation could lead us to regard as

meaningless a project that we regarded as meaningful before the discovery. Wanting to pursue a project is certainly connected with the meaning of life, but there is more to meaningful lives than that we want to pursue some project.

The second reason grows out of the first. Suppose that we genuinely want to pursue a project, so that we have not been manipulated. Suppose that Sisyphus just found himself wanting to roll rocks. That this is not sufficient for meaning is shown by the fact that the bare having of a want is not enough to move us to try satisfy it. The satisfaction of a want has to matter to us. And its mattering depends on its fitting into the overall causal nexus that connects that want to our other wants, and to our hopes, plans, goals, ambitions, and memories. If we all of a sudden discovered in ourselves an urge to roll rocks, we would not automatically act on it. We would ask ourselves why we want to do that and how it would affect our lives and projects if we did it. There is an explanation that we would want to give ourselves, especially since the want in question is assumed not to be trivial, like scratching one's nose, but a meaning-conferring one, like deciding to make rock rolling one's project in life.

It might be thought, however, that excluding manipulation and having an explanation of why the satisfaction of a want is important to us are requirements that the subjective view can meet. But this is not so. To ascertain whether we have been manipulated, or to explain why something is important to us, inevitably involves reference to objective considerations that exist independently of what we think. Manipulation is interference from the outside by people, the media, the gods, or whatever. To exclude it requires having reasons to believe that we have not been unduly influenced in these ways. And the explanation of why something matters to us must have to do with the influence on us of our upbringing, education, family, society, and so forth. The nature and strength of these influences are independent of what we think about them.

The third reason against the subjective view emerges from the recognition that we want to pursue a project because we believe that it would make our lives better than other available alternatives. But whether this is true depends on whether its pursuit would actually make our lives better. After all, we may pursue a project because we mistakenly believe that it would make our lives better, we may discover that we are mistaken, and we may change our minds about the meaningfulness of the project. If the mere belief that a project is better than the alternatives were sufficient to make the project meaningful, this change of mind could not occur.

It may be said in defense of the subjective view—that the sincere belief that our lives have meaning is necessary and sufficient for our lives' having meaning—that what these three objections show is that the truth of our beliefs may affect how good our projects are, but it will not affect our sense that our lives are meaningful, if we believe them to be so. This is partly right and partly wrong. It is right that we may find our projects meaningful even if, unbeknownst to us, our wants are manipulated and our beliefs in the importance and goodness of our projects are false. But it is wrong to conclude from this that the subjective view that meaning depends merely on our beliefs is correct. The very recognition that meaning requires both that we should fail to know that our wants are being manipulated and that we should fail to realize that our beliefs are false implies the relevance of objective considerations. For the knowledge that our wants are manipulated and beliefs false would destroy our belief

in the meaningfulness of our projects. That we may be ignorant of the objective conditions of our projects' having meaning does not show that those conditions are irrelevant to their meaning. It shows that we may be mistaken in believing that our projects have meaning. If we realize that we are mistaken, that our wants are manipulated, or that our beliefs in the importance or goodness of our projects are false, then we would be the first to think that the projects we regarded as meaningful were in fact meaningless. This is just what would happen to Sisyphus if he knew the facts.

We are justified in concluding, therefore, that, in addition to the relevant wants and beliefs, there are objective conditions that must be met by meaningful lives. One of these conditions is that the wants must be genuine; and the other is that the beliefs must be true. Consequently, meaning depends on both subjective and objective conditions. To think otherwise, as Taylor does, is not to suppose that meaning depends on what God wills, as the religious approach claims, but that it depends on what the agent wills. As the religious approach relativizes meaning to God's will, so the subjective moral approach relativizes it to the agent's will. Both leave it unexplained how the subjective state of willing, whether it be God's or human agents', could be sufficient to establish what it is that makes lives meaningful.

The strongest case for the moral approach to the meaning of life will therefore recognize that meaning depends on both the subjective and the objective conditions. The subjective condition requires us to be in the appropriate psychological states of wanting and believing. The objective condition requires that our projects actually make our lives better. Meaning then depends on the coincidence of these two conditions: on our psychological states' being successfully directed toward the appropriate objects. As David Wiggins puts it: "psychological states and their objects [are] equal and reciprocal partners. . . . It can be true both that we desire *x* because we think *x* good, and that *x* is good because we desire *x*. . . . The quality by which the thing qualifies as good and the desire *for* the thing are equals and 'made for one another.'"¹³

It need not be supposed that this presupposes commitment to a cosmic order. It is not surprising that in the course of evolution there has emerged something like a correlation between what we want and what is good for us. We would be extinct if it were otherwise. Yet the correlation is less than perfect. Objective conditions both shape and constrain our wants, but within the limits they impose on our projects, there is much scope for experiments in living. Evolutionary success has not freed us from necessity, but it has opened numerous possibilities that we may pursue within the limits of necessity.

We may conclude, then, that according to the moral approach our lives have meaning if the following conditions are met: first, they are not worthless, pointless, misdirected, trivial, or futile; second, we have not succumbed to the view that all human projects are absurd; third, we have identified with projects that we genuinely want to pursue; and fourth, our belief that successful engagement in our projects will make our lives good or better is true.

VI

The problems of the moral answer begin to emerge if we recognize that the fourth condition of meaningful lives is ambiguous. It may mean that successful engagement

in our projects will make our lives *morally* better or that it will make them better in *nonmoral* ways. This ambiguity derives from the ambiguity of the “good” in good lives. Our lives may be good because they conform to the requirements of morality, or they may be good because we find them satisfying. Satisfaction in this context should not be identified either with pleasure or with the feeling that results from having met one’s own physiological or psychological needs. To be sure, meeting them is an example of satisfaction, but satisfaction may also be derived from doing our duty at considerable cost to ourselves, imposing hard discipline on ourselves, beholding the success of others that does not reflect on us at all, or seeing that justice is done even though we do not benefit from it. These two constituents of good lives may coincide, or they may not. Morally good lives may not be satisfying, and satisfying lives may not be morally good. It is a moral ideal dating back at least to Socrates that our satisfactions should derive from living in conformity to the requirements of morality. If the ideal holds, the ambiguity of the “good” will disappear. The projects we pursue then will be morally good, and our lives will be at once good and meaningful because we will find our engagement in our morally good projects satisfying. This is the ideal that motivates the moral answer to the meaning of life. The ideal, however, is flawed, and the moral answer fails.

There are two different lines of argument that lead to this conclusion. The first is that morally good projects need not be satisfying. What happened to Mill makes this point obvious. Morally good projects may be tedious or painful; they may involve doing our duty at the cost of self-sacrifice, self-denial, the frustration of our desires, and going against our strong feelings. The modicum of satisfaction we may take in doing what we feel we ought to do is often greatly outweighed by the dissatisfactions that are the by-products of having to act contrary to our nonmoral projects.

The second line of argument that leads to the failure of the moral answer is that even if it were true that morally good projects are satisfying, it would not follow that *only* morally good projects are satisfying. There may be satisfying immoral and nonmoral projects, and successful engagement in them may give meaning to our lives. That immoral lives may be meaningful is shown by the countless dedicated Nazi and Communist mass murderers, by those many sincerely committed terrorists who aim to destabilize one society or another through committing outrageous crimes against innocent civilians, and by people whose rage, resentment, greed, ambition, selfishness, sense of superiority or inferiority give purpose to their lives and lead them to inflict grievous unjustified harm on others. Such people may be successfully engaged in their projects, derive great satisfaction from them, and find their lives as scourges of their literal or metaphorical gods very meaningful.

The moral answer, however, is vitiated not only by moral monsters, but also by lives dedicated to the pursuit of nonmoral projects, which may be athletic, aesthetic, horticultural, erotic, or scholarly, or may involve collecting, learning languages, travel, connoisseurship, the invention of ingenious gadgets, and so forth. The lives of many people are given meaning by projects that are neither morally good nor immoral, but morally indifferent. People engaged in them may by and large conform to morality. The meaning of their lives, however, derives from their engagement in nonmoral projects and not from living in conformity with the requirements of

morality. It follows from the possibility that immoral and nonmoral projects may give meaning to lives that the moral answer is mistaken in regarding successful engagement in morally good projects as a necessary condition of meaningful lives.

In sum, the moral answer that meaning derives from living good lives founders because of the ambiguity of the “good.” If the “good” is taken to be “morally good,” then the claim is false because morally good lives may not be meaningful and meaningful lives may not be morally good. If, on the other hand, the “good” is interpreted as “nonmoral good,” then the answer ceases to be moral, since it allows that meaningful lives may be immoral or nonmoral. The moral answer, therefore, turns out to be either false or not moral. Its defenders, of course, normally intend it to be interpreted in the moral sense, so the likely charge they have to contend with is that their answer is false.

VII

There are, then, strong and independent reasons that show that neither religion nor morality provides a satisfactory approach to the meaning of life. But there is yet another and deeper reason why they both fail: they seek a general answer. Their basic assumption is that finding meaning depends on finding something that applies equally to all lives. The religious approach looks for that something to a cosmic order; the moral approach seeks it in morality. They recognize individual differences, but they treat them as mere variations on the same basic theme. Individual differences matter to them only because they compel us to do different things to conform to the same general meaning-conferring requirement. Given our characters and circumstances, we may have to serve the will of God in different ways, you as an artist, I as a soldier, or we may have to apply the categorical imperative in different situations or pursue the common good by means of different actions. But they both assume that, for all of us, meaning is derived from the same source, be it the will of God or some moral principle. It is this assumption that makes it impossible for both approaches to recognize the possibility that different individuals may derive meaning for their lives from radically different sources. This is the assumption that prevents them from acknowledging that individual differences have a fundamental influence not only on what we must do to pursue a meaning-conferring project, but also on which of many meaning-conferring projects we should aim to pursue. It is the assumption that all meaning-conferring projects must ultimately be variations of some one or few patterns that is responsible for the mistaken view that the phrase “the meaning of life is . . .” can be completed by some general formula that will make the resulting sentence hold true of all lives.

The problem is that if we give up the assumption that there is a general answer to the question of what gives meaning to life, then we seem to be led back to the subjective view that we had three good reasons to reject earlier. But these reasons continue to hold even if no general answer provides the additional necessary and sufficient condition that must be added to the subjective condition. The wants whose satisfaction we seek may be manipulated, self-destructive, trivial, inconsistent, or otherwise detrimental and thus fail to make our lives meaningful. And the beliefs we hold about the kind of life that would be meaningful may be false. Conformity to the

subjective condition is necessary, but insufficient, for meaningful lives, and conformity to the objective by searching for a general answer exacts the unacceptable cost of denying that different lives may be made meaningful by conformity to different meaning-conferring requirements.

It is in this way that answering the question: Does life have a meaning? has become a perennial philosophical problem. The problem originates in a disruption of everyday life. Because we are unsuccessful, bored, poor, tired, unlucky, sick, grief-stricken, victims of injustice, or readers of subversive books, we start reflecting on the point of the routine activities we endlessly perform. Once we embark on this reflection, it is hard to stop. Reflection puts an end to the unreflective innocence with which we have unquestioningly lived in accordance to the prevailing conventions. As we question, so we feel the need for answers, and we turn to religion or morality. But the religious answer fails because no reason can be given for thinking that there is a cosmic order that would confer meaning on lives lived in conformity to it. And the moral answer fails because meaningful lives may be immoral or nonmoral and moral lives may not be meaningful. Defenders of the religious answer insist that the problems of morality can be met only by appealing to a cosmic order that would guarantee the identity of good and meaningful lives. Defenders of the moral answer insist that there must be moral reasons for regarding the cosmic order as good and that these reasons are either unavailable, or, if available, cannot themselves be transcendental. The religious and moral answers to this perennial problem agree in seeking a general answer, but they disagree whether it is to be found in the transcendental or in the natural world.

VIII

The way out of this impasse is to give up the search for a general answer. That brings us to an approach to the meaning of life that is free of the defects of the religious and moral answers. Let us call this approach “pluralistic.” Its description is now a simple matter, because it involves no more than assembling the conclusions that have been reached by the preceding arguments. These conclusions may be formulated as conditions of meaningful lives. According to the pluralistic approach, then, lives have meaning if they meet the following conditions:

1. They are not dominated by worthless, pointless, misdirected, trivial, or futile activities.
2. They are not vitiated by the belief that all human projects are absurd.
3. They involve the pursuit of projects with which the agents have genuinely identified; they thus exclude all forms of manipulation.
4. Their agents’ genuine identification with their projects is based on their true belief that successful engagement in them will make their lives better by providing the satisfactions they seek; they thus exclude all projects in which the agents’ subjective identification is not correlated with objective conditions.
5. Their objective conditions are located in the natural world, not outside of it; they thus exclude the religious answer.

6. Their agents' subjective identifications are based on the pursuit of projects that yield either morally good, or immoral, or nonmoral satisfactions; they thus exclude the moral answer.
7. Their agents' subjective identifications with their projects reflect individual differences; they thus exclude all general answers.

These conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient to make lives meaningful. The main purpose of all the preceding arguments has been to attempt to explain and justify them.

The argument has been meant also to make it evident that the proposed approach is pluralistic, not in the trivial sense that there are many conditions that meaningful lives must meet, but in the important sense that meaningful lives may take a wide plurality of forms. The plurality of meaningful lives reflects, in addition to individual differences in our characters and circumstances, also individual differences in the type of projects that we pursue. These projects may be religious or moral, but they may also be scientific, aesthetic, athletic, scholarly, horticultural, military, commercial, political, poetic, and so on. The pluralistic approach recognizes that any project may contribute to making a life meaningful, provided it meets the conditions listed above. Meeting these conditions excludes many possibilities, but for present purposes, the most important among them is the possibility of a general answer to the question of what project or what type of project would make all lives meaningful. The basic difference between the pluralistic approach, on the one hand, and the religious and moral modes of reflection, on the other, is that the first denies and the second assert that there is a general answer.

It remains to point out that this difference constitutes a radical break between the pluralistic approach and traditional philosophical and religious thinking about the meaning of life. For one central claim of the pluralistic approach is that individuals must make their lives meaningful by genuinely identifying themselves with their projects and that doing so must reflect the differences of their capacities, interests, and preferences. It is because of these differences that there can be no acceptable general answers to questions about the meaning of life. A general answer must apply to all human lives, but if meaningful lives must reflect individual differences, then general answers, by their very nature, are doomed.

Part of the reason why the pluralistic approach constitutes a radical break with traditional philosophical and religious ways of thinking about the meaning of life is that all these ways aim to provide a general answer. This is what all the major religions, metaphysical systems, and moral theories aim to do. For Jews, it is the Covenant; for Christians, it is the life of Christ; for Buddhists, it is the Karma; for Moslems, it is the law as laid down in the Koran; for Platonists, it is the Form of the Good; for Stoics, it is natural necessity; for Hegelians, it is the dialectic; for utilitarians, it is the maximization of general happiness; and so on. If the pluralistic approach is right, then all these, and other, general answers are fundamentally misguided because they are essentially committed to denying individual differences in what lives can be meaningful. The pluralistic approach is an attempt to proceed in a different way.

Another central claim of the pluralistic approach is that meaningful lives may not be morally good and morally good lives may not be meaningful. The fundamental reason for this is that meaningful lives often depend on engagement in nonmoral projects. Such projects may be crucial to making lives meaningful, but engagement in them may violate or be indifferent to the requirements of morality. This claim is also contrary to the traditional ways of thinking about meaningful lives because the traditional assumption is that only morally good projects could make lives meaningful.

The assumption that underlies this tradition is that the scheme of things is such that ultimately only morally good lives will be satisfying and immoral or nonmoral lives cannot be. The pluralistic approach rejects this assumption as groundless. Immoral or nonmoral lives could have sufficient satisfactions to make them meaningful. This is hard to accept because it outrages our moral sensibility, which is deeply influenced by this tradition. Accepting it, however, has the virtue of doing justice to the plain fact that many evil and morally unconcerned people live meaningful lives. It also explains what this tradition has great difficulty with explaining, namely, why so many people live lives in which immoral and nonmoral satisfactions dominate moral ones. The explanation is that such satisfactions may make their lives meaningful. It is thus a consequence of the pluralistic approach that the questions of what makes lives meaningful and what makes them morally good are distinct and should not be conflated as it is traditionally done.

NOTES

This paper has been much improved by the criticisms and suggestions of Graeme Hunter, Joel Kupperman, Jonathan Mandle, Wallace Matson, and especially Rachel Cohon. Their help is gratefully acknowledged.

1. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924).
2. Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd" in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 11–23; quoted passage on p. 13.
3. Nagel, "The Absurd," pp. 14–15.
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961), 6.41.
5. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.421.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," *Philosophical Review*, 74 (1965), pp. 3–12; quoted passage on p. 5.
7. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955).
8. Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).
9. Taylor, *Good and Evil*, p. 259.
10. Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. Lane Cooper, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).
11. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.421.
12. Friedrich Waismann, "Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein," *Philosophical Review*, 74 (1965), pp. 15–16; quoted passage on p. 15.
13. David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 62 (1976), pp. 331–378; quoted passage on pp. 348–49.

