



The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love

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CHAPTER

6 The Meanings of Lives

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Abstract

This chapter draws a distinction between the question of the Meaning of Life and the question of what, if anything, makes a life (more or less) meaningful. By looking at paradigms of arguably meaningless lives, the chapter builds up a characterization of a meaningful life as a life that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in projects of positive value. The chapter argues that positive value is not restricted to moral value, but that what counts as having positive value is not a wholly subjective matter. Because living a meaningful rather than a meaningless life harmonizes with an acknowledgment that we are specks in a vast value-filled universe, living a meaningful life avoids practical solipsism. Even if human life as such has no meaning, it is argued, that is no bar to people's ability to live meaningful lives.

Keywords: [Meaning of Life](#), [meaningless lives](#), [meaningfulness](#), [practical solipsism](#), [positive value](#)

Subject: [Moral Philosophy](#)

THE QUESTION “What is the meaning of life?” was once taken to be a paradigm of philosophical inquiry. Perhaps, outside of the academy, it still is. In philosophy classrooms and academic journals, however, the question has nearly disappeared, and when the question is brought up, by a naive student, for example, or a prospective donor to the cause of a liberal arts education, it is apt to be greeted with uncomfortable embarrassment.

What is so wrong with the question? One answer is that it is extremely obscure, if not downright unintelligible. It is unclear what exactly the question is supposed to be asking. Talk of meaning in other contexts does not offer ready analogies for understanding the phrase “the meaning of life.” When we ask the meaning of a word, for example, we want to know what the word stands for, what it represents. But life is not part of a language, or of any other sort of symbolic system. It is not clear how it could “stand for” anything, nor to whom. We sometimes use “meaning” in nonlinguistic contexts: “Those dots mean measles.” “Those footprints mean that someone was here since it rained.” In these cases, talk of meaning seems to be equivalent to talk of evidence, but the contexts in which such claims are made tend to specify what hypotheses are in question within relatively fixed bounds. To ask what life means without a similarly specified context leaves us at sea.

Still, when people do ask about the meaning of life, they are evidently expressing some concern or other, and it would be disingenuous to insist that the rest of us haven't the faintest idea what that is. The question at least gestures toward a certain set of concerns with which most of us are at least somewhat familiar.

p. 90 Rather than dismiss a question with which many people have been passionately occupied as pure and simple nonsense, it seems more appropriate to try to interpret it and reformulate it in a way that can be more clearly and unambiguously understood. Though there may well be many things going on when people ask "What is the meaning of life?" the most central among them seems to be a search to find a purpose or a point to human existence. It is a request to find out why we are here (that is, why we exist at all), with the hope that an answer to this question will also tell us something about what we should be doing with our lives.

If understanding the question in this way, however, makes the question intelligible, it might not give reason to reopen it as a live philosophical problem. Indeed, if some of professional philosophy's discomfort with discussion of the meaning of life comes from a desire to banish ambiguity and obscurity from the field, as much comes, I think, from the thought that the question, when made clearer, has already been answered, and that the answer is depressing. Specifically, if the question of the Meaning of Life is to be identified with the question of the purpose of life, then the standard view, at least among professional philosophers, would seem to be that it all depends on the existence of God. In other words the going opinion seems to be that if there is a God, then there is at least a chance that there is a purpose, and so a meaning to life. God may have created us for a reason, with a plan in mind. But to go any further along this branch of thinking is not in the purview of secular philosophers.¹ If, on the other hand, there is no God, then there can be no meaning, in the sense of a point or a purpose to our existence. We are simply a product of physical processes—there are no reasons for our existence, just causes.

At the same time that talk of Life having a Meaning is banished from philosophy, however, the talk of lives being more or less *meaningful* seems to be on the rise. Newspapers, magazines, self-help manuals² are filled with essays on how to find meaning in your life; sermons and therapies are built on the truism that happiness is not just a matter of material comfort, or sensual pleasure, but also of a deeper kind of fulfillment. Though philosophers to date have had relatively little to say about what gives meaning to individual lives, passing references can be found throughout the literature; it is generally acknowledged as an intelligible and appropriate thing to want in one's life. Indeed, it would be crass to think otherwise. 4

p. 91 But how can individual lives have meaning if life as a whole has none? Are those of us who suspect there is no meaning to life deluding ourselves in continuing to talk about the possibility of finding meaning *in* life? Are we being short-sighted, failing to see the implications of one part of our thought on another? Alternatively, are these expressions mere homonyms, with no conceptual or logical connections between them? Are there simply two wholly unconnected topics here?

This essay is not intended to revive the question of whether there is a meaning to life. I am inclined to accept the standard view that there is no plausible interpretation of that question that offers a positive answer in the absence of a fairly specific religious metaphysics. An understanding of meaningfulness *in* life, however, does seem to me to merit more philosophical attention than it has so far received, and I will have some things to say about it here. Here, too, I am inclined to accept the standard view—or a part of the standard view—viz., that meaningfulness is an intelligible feature to be sought in a life, and that it is at least sometimes attainable but not everywhere assured. But what that feature is—what we are looking for—is controversial and unclear, and so the task of analyzing or interpreting that feature will take up a large portion of my remarks here. With an analysis proposed, I shall return to the question of how a positive view about the possibility of meaning in lives can fit with a negative or agnostic view about the meaning of life. The topics are not, I think, as unconnected as might at first seem necessary for their respectively optimistic and pessimistic answers to coexist. Though my discussion will offer nothing new in the way of an answer to

the question of the meaning of life, therefore, it may offer a somewhat different perspective on that question's significance.

Let us begin, however, with the other question, that of understanding what it is to seek meaning in life. What do we want when we want a meaningful life? What is it that makes some lives meaningful, others less so?

If we focus on the agent's, or the subject's, perspective—on a person wanting meaning in her life, her feeling the need for more meaning—we might incline toward a subjective interpretation of the feature being sought. When a person self-consciously looks for something to give her life meaning, it signals a kind of unhappiness. One imagines, for example, the alienated housewife, whose life seems to her to be an endless series of chores. What she wants, it might appear, is something that she can find more subjectively rewarding.

This impression is reinforced if we consider references to “meaningful experiences.” (The phrase might be applied, for example, to a certain kind of wedding or funeral.) The most salient feature of an event that is described as meaningful seems to be its “meaning a lot” to the participants. To say that a ceremony, or, for that matter, a job, is meaningful seems at the very least to include the idea that it is emotionally satisfying. An absence of meaning is usually marked by a feeling of emptiness and dissatisfaction; in contrast, a meaningful life, or meaningful part of life, is necessarily at least somewhat rewarding or fulfilling. It is noteworthy, however, that meaningful experiences are not necessarily particularly happy. A trip to one's birthplace may well be meaningful; a visit to an amusement park is unlikely to be so.

If we step back, however, and ask ourselves, as observers, what lives strike us as especially meaningful, if we ask what sorts of lives exemplify meaningfulness, subjective criteria do not seem to be in the forefront. Who comes to mind? Perhaps Gandhi or Albert Schweitzer or Mother Teresa; perhaps Einstein or Jonas Salk. Cezanne or Manet, Beethoven or Charlie Parker. Tolstoy is an interesting case to which I shall return. Alternatively, we can look to our neighbors, our colleagues, our relatives some of whom, it seems to me, live more meaningful lives than others. Some, indeed, of my acquaintance seem to me to live lives that are paradigms of meaning right up there with the famous names on the earlier lists; while others (perhaps despite their modicum of fame) would score quite low on the meaningfulness scale. If those in the latter category feel a lack of meaning in their lives—well, they are right to feel it, and it is a step in the right direction that they notice that there is something about their lives that they should try to change.

What is it to live a meaningful life, then? What does meaningfulness in life amount to? It may be easier to make progress by focusing on what we want to avoid. In that spirit, let me offer some paradigms, not of meaningful but of meaningless lives.

For me, the idea of a meaningless life is most clearly and effectively embodied in the image of a person who spends day after day, or night after night, in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching situation comedies. Not that I have anything against television or beer. Still the image, understood as an image of a person whose life is lived in hazy passivity, a life lived at a not unpleasant level of consciousness, but unconnected to anyone or anything, going nowhere, achieving nothing—is, I submit, as strong an image of a meaningless life as there can be. Call this case *The Blob*.

If any life, any human life, is meaningless, the *Blob's* life is. But this doesn't mean that any meaningless life must be, in all important respects, like the *Blob's*. There are other paradigms that highlight by their absences other elements of meaningfulness.

In contrast to the *Blob's* passivity, for example, we may imagine a life full of activity, but silly or decadent or useless activity. (And again, I have nothing against silly activity, but only against a life that is wholly occupied with it.) We may imagine, for example, one of the idle rich who flits about, fighting off boredom,

moving from one amusement to another. She shops, she travels, she eats at expensive restaurants, she works out with her personal trainer. ♪

Curiously, one might also take a very un-idle rich person to epitomize a meaningless life in a slightly different way. Consider, for example, the corporate executive who works twelve-hour, seven-day weeks, suffering great stress, for the sole purpose of the accumulation of personal wealth. Related to this perhaps is David Wiggins's example of the pig farmer who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs.³

These last three cases of the idle rich, the corporate executive, and the pig farmer are in some ways very different, but they all share at least this feature: They can all be characterized as lives whose dominant activities seem pointless, useless, or empty. Classify these cases under the heading Useless.

A somewhat different and I think more controversial sort of case to consider involves someone who is engaged, even dedicated, to a project that is ultimately revealed as bankrupt, not because the person's values are shallow or misguided, but because the project fails. The person may go literally bankrupt: For example, a man may devote his life to creating and building up a company to hand over to his children, but the item his company manufactures is rendered obsolete by technology shortly before his planned retirement. Or consider a scientist whose life's work is rendered useless by the announcement of a medical breakthrough just weeks before his own research would have yielded the same results. Perhaps more poignantly, imagine a woman whose life is centered around a relationship that turns out to be a fraud. Cases that fit this mold we may categorize under the heading Bankrupt.

The classification of this third sort of case as an exemplification of meaninglessness may meet more resistance than the classification of the earlier two. Perhaps these lives should not be considered meaningless after all. Nonetheless, these are cases in which it is not surprising that an argument of some sort is needed—it is not unnatural or silly that the subjects of these lives should entertain the thought that their lives have been meaningless. Even if they are wrong, the fact that their thoughts are not, so to speak, out of order, is a useful datum. So, of course, would be the sort of thing one would say to convince them, or ourselves, that these thoughts are ultimately mistaken.

If the cases I have sketched capture our images of meaninglessness more or less accurately, they provide clues to what a positive case of a meaningful life must contain. In contrast to the Blob's passivity, a person who lives a meaningful life must be actively engaged. But, as the Useless cases teach us, it will not do to be engaged in just anything, for any reason or with any goal—one must be engaged in a project ♪ or projects that have some positive value, and in some way that is nonaccidentally related to what gives them value. Finally, in order to avoid Bankruptcy, it seems necessary that one's activities be at least to some degree successful (though it may not be easy to determine what counts as the right kind or degree of success). Putting these criteria together, we get a proposal for what it is to live a meaningful life: A meaningful life is one that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value.

Several remarks are needed to qualify and refine this proposal. First, the use of the word "project" is not ideal: It is too suggestive of a finite, determinate task, something one takes on and, if all goes well, completes. Among the things that come to mind as projects are certain kinds of hobbies or careers, or rather, specific tasks that fall within the sphere of such hobbies or careers: things that can be seen as accomplishments, like the producing of a proof or a poem or a pudding, the organizing of a union or a high school band. Although such activities are among the things that seem intuitively to contribute to the meaningfulness of people's lives, there are other forms of meaningfulness that are less directed, and less oriented to demonstrable achievement, and we should not let the use of the word "project" distort or deny the potential of these things to give meaningfulness to life. Relationships, in particular, seem at best awkwardly described as projects. Rarely does one deliberately take them on and, in some cases, one doesn't

even have to work at them—one may just have them and live, as it were, within them. Moreover, many of the activities that are naturally described as projects—coaching a school soccer team, planning a surprise party, reviewing an article for a journal—have the meaning they do for us only because of their place in the nonprojectlike relationships in which we are enmeshed and with which we identify. In proposing that a meaningful life is a life actively engaged in projects, then, I mean to use “projects” in an unusually broad sense, to encompass not only goal-directed tasks but other sorts of ongoing activities and involvements as well.

Second, the suggestion that a meaningful life should be “actively engaged” in projects should be understood in a way that recognizes and embraces the connotations of “engagement.” Although the idea that a meaningful life requires activity was introduced by contrast to the life of the ultra-passive Blob, we should note that meaning involves more than mere, literal activity. The alienated housewife, presumably, is active all the time—she buys groceries and fixes meals, cleans the house, does the laundry, chauffeurs the children from school to soccer to ballet, arranges doctors’ appointments and babysitters. What makes her life insufficiently meaningful is that her heart, so to speak, isn’t in these activities. She does not identify with what she is doing—she does not embrace her roles as wife, mother, and homemaker as expressive of who she is and wants to be. We may capture her alienated condition ↵ by saying that though she is active, she is not actively engaged. (She is, one might say, just going through the motions.) In characterizing a meaningful life, then, it is worth stressing that living such a life is not just a matter of having projects (broadly construed) and actively and somewhat successfully getting through them. The projects must engage the person whose life it is. Ideally, she would proudly and happily embrace them, as constituting at least part of what her life is about.⁴

Finally, we must say more about the proposal’s most blatantly problematic condition—viz., that the projects engagement with which can contribute to a meaningful life must be projects “of positive value.” The claim is that meaningful lives must be engaged in projects of positive value—but who is to decide which projects have positive value, or even to guarantee that there is such a thing?

I would urge that we leave the phrase as unspecific as possible in all but one respect. We do not want to build a theory of positive value into our conception of meaningfulness. As a proposal that aims to capture what most people mean by a meaningful life, what we want is a concept that “tracks” whatever we think of as having positive value. This allows us to explain at least some divergent intuitions about meaningfulness in terms of divergent intuitions or beliefs about what has positive value, with the implication that if one is wrong about what has positive value, one will also be wrong about what contributes to a meaningful life. (Thus, a person who finds little to admire in sports—who finds ridiculous, for example, the sight of grown men trying to knock a little ball into a hole with a club, will find relatively little potential for meaning in the life of an avid golfer; a person who places little stock in esoteric intellectual pursuits will be puzzled by someone who strains to write, much less read, a lot of books on supervenience.)

The exception I would make to this otherwise maximally tolerant interpretation of the idea of positive value is that we exclude merely subjective value as a suitable interpretation of the phrase.

It will not do to allow that a meaningful life is a life involved in projects that seem to have positive value from the perspective of the one who lives it. Allowing this would have the effect of erasing the distinctiveness of our interest in meaningfulness; it would blur or remove the difference between an interest in living a ↵ meaningful life and an interest in living a life that feels or seems meaningful. That these interests are distinct, and that the former is not merely instrumental to the latter can be seen by reflecting on a certain way the wish or the need for meaning in one’s life may make itself felt. What I have in mind is the possibility of a kind of epiphany, in which one wakes up—literally or figuratively—to the recognition that one’s life to date has been meaningless. Such an experience would be nearly unintelligible if a lack of meaning were to be understood as a lack of a certain kind of subjective impression. One can hardly

understand the idea of waking up to the thought that one's life to date has *seemed* meaningless. To the contrary, it may be precisely because one did not realize the emptiness of one's projects or the shallowness of one's values until that moment that the experience I am imagining has the poignancy it does. It is the sort of experience that one might describe in terms of scales falling from one's eyes. And the yearning for meaningfulness, the impulse to do something about it, will not be satisfied (though it may be eliminated) by putting the scales back on, so to speak. If one suspects that the life one has been living is meaningless, one will not bring meaning to it by getting therapy or taking a pill that, without changing one's life in any other way, makes one believe that one's life has meaning.

To care that one's life is meaningful, then, is, according to my proposal, to care that one's life is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in projects (understanding this term broadly) that not just seem to have positive value, but that really do have it. To care that one's life be meaningful, in other words, is in part to care that what one does with one's life is, to pardon the expression, at least somewhat objectively good. We should be careful, however, not to equate objective goodness with moral goodness, at least not if we understand moral value as essentially involving benefiting or honoring humanity. The concern for meaning in one's life does not seem to be the same as the concern for moral worth, nor do our judgments about what sorts of lives are meaningful seem to track judgments of moral character or accomplishment.

To be sure, some of the paradigms of meaningful lives are lives of great moral virtue or accomplishment—I mentioned Gandhi and Mother Teresa, for example. Others, however, are not. Consider Gauguin, Wittgenstein, Tchaikovsky—morally unsavory figures all, whose lives nonetheless seem chock full of meaning. If one thinks that even they deserve moral credit, for their achievements made the world a better place, consider instead Olympic athletes and world chess champions, whose accomplishments leave nothing behind but their world records. Even more important, consider the artists, scholars, musicians, athletes of our more ordinary sort. For us, too, the activity of artistic creation and research, the development of our skills ↵ and our understanding of the world give meaning to our lives—but they do not give moral value to them.

It seems then that meaning in life may not be especially moral, and that indeed lives can be richly meaningful even if they are, on the whole, judged to be immoral. Conversely, that one's life is at least moderately moral, that it is lived, as it were, above reproach, is no assurance of its being moderately meaningful. The alienated housewife, for example, may be in no way subject to moral criticism. (And it is debatable whether even the Blob deserves specifically moral censure.)

That people do want meaning in their lives, I take it, is an observable, empirical fact. We have already noted the evidence of self-help manuals and therapy groups. What I have offered so far is an analysis of what that desire or concern amounts to. I want now to turn to the question of whether the desire is one that it is good that people have, whether, that is, there is some positive reason why they *should* want this.

At a minimum, we may acknowledge that it is at least not bad to want meaning in one's life. There is, after all, no harm in it. Since people do want this, and since there are no moral objections to it, we should recognize the concern for meaning as a legitimate concern, at least in the weak sense that people should be allowed to pursue it. Indeed, insofar as meaningfulness in one's life is a significant factor in a life's overall well-being, we should do more than merely allow its pursuit: We should positively try to increase opportunities for people to live lives of meaning.

Most of us, however, seem to have a stronger positive attitude toward the value of meaningfulness than this minimum concession admits. We do not think it is merely all right for people to want meaning in their lives—as it is all right for people to like country music, or to take an interest in figure skating. We think people positively ought to care that their lives be meaningful. It is disturbing, or at least regrettable, to find

someone who doesn't care about this. Yet this positive assessment ought to strike us, at least initially, as somewhat mysterious. What is the good, after all, of living a meaningful life, and to whom?

Since a meaningful life is not necessarily a *morally* better life than a meaningless one (the Olympic athlete may do no more good nor harm than the idly rich socialite), it is not necessarily better *for the world* that people try to live or even succeed in living meaningful lives. Neither is a meaningful life assured of being an especially happy one, however. Many of the things that give meaning to our lives (relationships to loved ones, aspirations to achieve) make us vulnerable to pain, disappointment, and stress. From the inside, the Blob's hazy passivity may be preferable to the experience of the tortured artist or political crusader. By conventional standards, therefore, it is not clear that caring about or even succeeding in living a meaningful life is better *for the person herself*. ↵

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Yet, as I have already mentioned, those of us who do care that our lives be meaningful tend to think that it is a positively good thing that we do. We not only want to live meaningful lives, we want to want this—we approve of this desire, and think it is better for others if they have this desire, too. If, for example, you see a person you care about conducting her life in a way that you find devoid of worth—she is addicted to drugs, perhaps, or just to television, or she is overly enthusiastic in her career as a corporate lawyer—you are apt to encourage her to change, or at least hope that she will find a new direction on her own. Your most prominent worry may well be that she is heading for a fall. You fear that at some point she will wake up to the fact that she has been wasting or misdirecting her life, a point that may come too late for easy remedy and will, in any case, involve a lot of pain and self-criticism. But the fear that she will wake up to the fact that she has been wasting her life (and have difficulty turning her life around) may not be as terrible as the fear that she won't wake up to it. If you came to feel secure that no painful moment of awakening would ever come because your friend (or sister or daughter) simply does not care whether her life is meaningful, you might well think that this situation is not better but worse. We seem to think there is something regrettable about a person living a meaningless life, even if the person herself does not mind that she is. We seem to think she *should* want meaning in her life, even if she doesn't realize it.

What, though, is the status of this “should,” the nature or source of the regret? The mystery that I earlier suggested we should feel about our value in meaningfulness is reflected in the uneasy location of this judgment. If my own reaction to the woman who doesn't care whether her life is meaningful is typical, the thought that she should, or ought to, care is closer to a prudential judgment than it is to a moral one. (If there is a moral objection to a person who lives a meaningless life and is content with that, it is not, in my opinion, a very strong one. The Blob, after all, is not hurting anyone, nor is the idle rich jet-setter. She may, for example, give money to environmental causes to offset the damage she is doing in her SUV, and write generous checks to Oxfam and UNICEF on a regular basis.) The thought that it is too bad if a person does not live a meaningful life (even if she doesn't mind) seems rather to be the thought that it is too bad *for her*.

The closest analogue to this thought in the history of ethics of which I am aware is Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*. His conception of the virtuous life as the happiest life is offered as a conclusion of an enlightened self-interest. According to standard conceptions of self-interest, however (either hedonistic or preference-based), it is not obvious why this should be so, and, unfortunately, Aristotle himself does not address the question explicitly. Rather, he seems to think that if you do not just see that the virtuous life, in which one aims for and achieves what is “fine,” is a better, ↵ more desirable life for yourself, that just shows that you were not well brought up, and in that case, there is no point trying to educate you.

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Our question, the question of whether and what kind of reason there is for a person to strive for a meaningful life, is not quite the same as the question of whether and what kind of reason there is to aspire to virtue—though, when one is careful to interpret “virtue” in the broad and not specifically moral way that Aristotle uses the term, it is closer than it might seem. Still, as I say, Aristotle does not really address the

question, and so, though I take my line of thought to be Aristotelian in spirit, a scholarly study of Aristotle's texts is not likely to be an efficient way of finding an answer to the question ourselves.

What reason is there, then, if any, for a person to want to live a meaningful life? I have said that we seem to think it would be better for her, that it is, at least roughly, in her self-interest. At the same time, the thought that she should care about meaning seems to depend on claims from outside herself. Even if there are no desires latent in her psychology which meaningfulness would satisfy, we seem to think, there is reason why she should have such desires. She seems to be making some kind of mistake.

If my analysis of what is involved in living a meaningful life is right, then the question of why one should care about living a meaningful life is equivalent to the question of why one should care that one's life be actively and somewhat successfully engaged in projects of positive value. The source of perplexity seems, in particular, to be about the reason to care that one's projects be positively valuable. As long as you are engaged by your activities, and they make you happy, why should one care that one's activities be objectively worthwhile?

The answer, I believe, is that to devote one's life entirely to activities whose value is merely subjective, to devote oneself to activities whose sole justification is that it is good for you, is, in a sense I shall try to explain, practically solipsistic. It flies in the face of one's status as, if you will, a tiny speck in a vast universe, a universe with countless perspectives of equal status with one's own, from which one's life might be assessed. Living a life that is engaged with and so at least partially focussed on projects whose value has a nonsubjective source is a way of acknowledging one's nonprivileged position. It harmonizes, in a way that a purely egocentric life does not, with the fact that one is not the center of the universe.

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The basic idea is this: The recognition of one's place in the universe, of one's smallness, one might say, or one's insignificance, and of the independent existence of the universe of which one is a part involves, among other things, the recognition of "the mereness" of one's subjective point of view. To think of one's place in the universe is to recognize the possibility of a perspective, of infinitely many perspectives, really, from which one's life is merely gratuitous; it is to recognize the possibility of a perspective, or rather of infinitely many perspectives, that are indifferent to whether one exists at all, and so to whether one is happy or sad, satisfied or unsatisfied, fulfilled or unfulfilled.

In the face of this recognition, a life that is directed solely to its subject's own fulfillment or to its mere survival or toward the pursuit of goals that are grounded in nothing but the subject's own psychology appears either solipsistic or silly.

A person who lives a largely egocentric life—who devotes, in other words, lots of energy and attention and care toward himself, who occupies himself more specifically with satisfying and gratifying himself, expresses and reveals a belief that his happiness matters. Even if it doesn't express the view that his happiness matters objectively, it at least expresses the idea that it matters to him. To be solely devoted to his own gratification, then, would express and reveal the fact that his happiness is *all* that matters, at least all that matters to him. If, however, one accepts a framework that recognizes distinctions in nonsubjective value (and if one believes, as seems only reasonable, that what has nonsubjective value has no special concentration in or connection to oneself), this attitude seems hard to justify.

To accept that framework is, after all, to accept the view that some things are better than others. To me, it makes sense partially to understand this literally: Some *things*, it seems to me, are better than others. People, for example, are better than rocks or mosquitoes, and a Vermeer painting is better than the scraps on my compost heap.⁵ What is essential, though, is that accepting a framework that recognizes distinctions in nonsubjective value involves seeing the world as value-filled, as containing within it distinctions of better and worse; of more and less worthwhile, if not of better and worse objects per se, then of better and worse features of the world, or activities, or opportunities to be realized. Against this background, a life

solely devoted to one's own gratification or to the satisfaction of one's whims seems gratuitous and hard to defend. For, as I have said, to live such a life expresses the view that one's happiness is all that matters, at least to oneself. But why should this be the only thing that matters, when there is so much else worth caring about?

p. 101 Those familiar with Thomas Nagel's book *The Possibility of Altruism* may have recognized an allusion to it in my suggestion that a life indifferent to meaning was practically solipsistic. The allusion is significant, for the argument I am making here, though it is directed to a different conclusion, bears a strong resemblance to the argument of that book. Nagel's argument invites us to see a person who, while evidently trying to avoid or minimize pain to himself, shows total indifference to the pain of others, as a practical solipsist in the sense that he fails, in his practical outlook, to recognize and appreciate that he is one person among others, equally real. Roughly, the suggestion seems to be that if you appreciate the reality of others, then you realize that their pains are just as painful as yours. If the painfulness of your pain is a reason to take steps to avoid it, then the painfulness of their pain should provide reasons, too. To be totally indifferent to the pain of others, then, bespeaks a failure to recognize their pain (to recognize it, that is, as *really* painful, in the same way that yours is painful to you).

This is not the occasion to discuss the plausibility of Nagel's interpretation of the pure egoist as a practical solipsist, nor even to describe Nagel's complex and subtle position in enough detail to be able evaluate it fairly. What I want to call attention to has to do not with the substance of the argument but with the type of argument it is: Specifically, Nagel's argument suggests that appreciation of a certain fact—in this case, the fact that you are just one person among others, equally real—is a source of practical reason—in this case, it gives you reason to take the pains of others to constitute reasons for action. If Nagel is right, we have reason to care about the pain of others that is grounded, not in our own psychologies (and more specifically, not in any of our own desires), but in a fact about the world. His suggestion is that a person who fails to see the pain of others as a source of reason acts “as if” the pain of others is not real, or not painful. But of course the pain of others is real and is painful. Such a person thus exhibits a failure not just of morality or sympathy, but of practical reason, in the sense that his practical stance fails to accord with a very significant fact about the world.

My suggestion that we have reason to care about and to try to live meaningful rather than meaningless lives resembles Nagel's in form. Like him, I am suggesting that we can have a reason to do something or to care about something that is grounded not in our own psychologies, nor specifically in our own desires, but in a fact about the world. The fact in question in this case is the fact that we are, each of us, specks in a vast and value-filled universe, and that as such we have no privileged position as a source of or possessor of objective value. To devote oneself wholly to one's own satisfaction seems to me to fly in the face of this truth, to act “as if” one is the only thing that matters, or perhaps, more, that one's own psychology is the only source of (determining) what matters. By focusing one's attention and one's energies at least in part on things, activities, aspects of the world that have value independent of you, you implicitly acknowledge your place and your status in the world. Your behavior, and your practical stance, is thus more in accord with the facts.

p. 102 Admittedly, this is not the sort of reason that one must accept on pain of inconsistency or any other failure of logic. Just as a person may simply not care whether her life is meaningful, so she may also simply not care whether her life is in accord with, or harmonizes with the facts. (It is one thing to say we should live in accord with the facts of physics, geography, and the other sciences. Living in accordance with these facts has evident instrumental value—it helps us get around in the world. But living in a way that practically acknowledges, or harmonizes with the fact that we are tiny specks in a value-filled world will not make our lives go better that way.) Such a person cannot be accused in any strict sense of irrationality. Like noninstrumental reasons to be moral, the reason to care about living a worthwhile life is not one that narrow rationality requires one to accept. At the same time, it seems appropriate to characterize my suggestion (and Nagel's) as one that appeals to reason in a broader sense. For my suggestion is that an

interest in living a meaningful life is an appropriate response to a fundamental truth, and that failure to have such a concern constitutes a failure to acknowledge that truth.

As we have already seen, the truth to which I am proposing a meaningful life provides a response is the truth that we are, each of us, tiny specks in a vast and value-filled universe. Like the truth that we are, each of us, one person among others, equally real, it opposes what children and many adults may have a tendency to assume—namely, that they are the center of the universe, either the possessor or the source of all value. It is because both Nagel's truth and mine are opposites of that assumption that both might plausibly be understood as alternatives to practical solipsism. Unlike Nagel's truth, mine is not specifically addressed to our relation to other people. A person may, therefore, appreciate and practically express one of these truths and not the other. Whereas an appropriate response to the equal reality of other people may be, if Nagel is right, an embrace of morality or something relating to morality, my proposal is that an appropriate response to our status as specks in a vast universe is a concern and aspiration to have one's life wrapped up with projects of positive value.

Perhaps, however, I have not made it clear why this is an appropriate response. The question may seem especially pressing because the thought that we are tiny specks in a vast universe, and the sense that it calls for or demands a response has, in the past, tended to move philosophers in a different direction. Specifically, the thought that we are tiny specks in a vast universe was in the past closely associated with that murky and ponderous question to which I referred at the beginning of this essay—the question of the Meaning of Life. The thought that we are tiny specks in a vast universe has indeed often evoked that question, and, to those who either do not believe in or do not want to rest their answers in the existence of a benevolent God, it has more or less immediately seemed also to indicate an answer. Considering their answer to the question of the Meaning of Life and contrasting it with my response to the fact of our smallness, may clarify the substance of my proposal.

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The train of thought I have in mind is one that has, with variations, been expressed by many distinguished philosophers, including Camus, Tolstoy, Richard L. Taylor, and, curiously, Nagel himself. For them, the recognition of our place in the universe—our smallness, or our speckness, if you will—seems to warrant the conclusion not only that there is no meaning to life as such but also that each individual life is necessarily absurd.

On the view of these philosophers, a life can be meaningful only if it can mean something to someone, and not just to *someone*, but to someone other than oneself and indeed someone of more intrinsic or ultimate value than oneself. Of course, anyone can live in such a way as to make her life meaningful to *someone* other than herself. She can maintain her relationship with parents and siblings, establish friendships with neighbors and colleagues. She can fall in love. If all else fails, she can have a child who will love her, or two children, or six. She can open up an entire clinic. But if a life that is devoted solely to yourself, a life that is good to no one other than yourself, lacks meaning, these philosophers not implausibly think, so will a life that is devoted to any other poor creature, for he or she will have no more objective importance than you have, and so will be no more fit a stopping place on which to ground the claim of meaningfulness than you. Nor, according to this train of thought, will it help to expand your circle, to be of use or to have an effect on a larger segment of humankind. If each life is individually lacking in meaning, then the collective is meaningless as well. If each life has but an infinitesimal amount of value, then although one's meaning will increase in proportion to one's effect, the total quantity of meaning relative to the cosmos will remain so small as to make the effort pathetic.

From the perspective of these philosophers, if there is no God, then human life, each human life, must be objectively meaningless, because if there is no God, there is no appropriate being *for whom* we could have meaning.

From this perspective, my suggestion that the living of a worthwhile life constitutes a response to a recognition of our place in the universe might seem ridiculously nearsighted, as if, having acknowledged the mereness of my own subjectivity, I then failed to acknowledge the equal mereness of the subjectivity of others. But I think this misunderstands the point in my proposal of living a life that realizes nonsubjective value, a misunderstanding that derives from too narrow a view about what an appropriate and satisfactory response to the fact of our place in the universe must be.

p. 104 The philosophers I have been speaking about—we can call them the pessimists—take the fundamental lesson to be learned from the contemplation of our place in the universe to be that we are cosmically insignificant, a fact that clashes with our desire to be very significant indeed. If God existed, such philosophers might note, we would have a chance at being significant. For God himself is presumably very significant and so we could be significant by being or by making ourselves significant ↵ to Him. In the absence of a God, however, it appears that we can only be significant to each other, to beings, that is, as pathetically small as ourselves. We want to be important, but we cannot be important, and so our lives are absurd.

The pessimists are right about the futility of trying to make ourselves important. Insofar as contemplation of the cosmos makes us aware of our smallness, whether as individuals or as a species, we simply must accept it and come to terms with it. Some people do undoubtedly get very upset, even despondent when they start to think about their cosmic insignificance. They want to be important, to have an impact on the world, to make a mark that will last forever. When they realize that they cannot achieve this, they are very disappointed. The only advice one can give to such people is: Get Over It.

Rather than fight the fact of our insignificance, however, and of the mereness of our subjectivity, my proposal is that we live in a way that acknowledges the fact, or, at any rate, that harmonizes with it. Living in a way that is significantly focused on, engaged with, and concerned to promote or realize value whose source comes from outside of oneself, does seem to harmonize with this, whereas living purely egocentrically does not. Living lives that attain or realize some nonsubjective value may not make us meaningful, much less important, to anyone other than ourselves, but it will give us something to say, to think, in response to the recognition of perspectives that we ourselves imaginatively adopt that are indifferent to our existence and to our well-being.

At the beginning of this essay, I raised the question of how the Meaning of Life—or the absence of such meaning—was related to the meaningfulness of particular lives. As I might have put it, does it really make sense to think that there can be meaningful lives in a meaningless world? In light of this discussion, we can see how the answer to that question might be “yes” while still holding on to the idea that the similar wording of the two phrases is not merely coincidental.

If I am right about what is involved in living a meaningful life—if, that is, living a meaningful life is a matter of an at least partly successful engagement in projects of positive value—then the possibility of living meaningful lives despite the absence of an overall meaning to life can be seen to depend on the fact that distinctions of value (that is, of objective value) do not rely on the existence of God or of any overarching purpose to the human race as a whole. Whether or not God exists, the fact remains that some objects, activities, and ideas are better than others. Whether or not God exists, some ways of living are more worthwhile than others. Some activities are a waste of time.

p. 105 People are sometimes tempted to think that if God doesn’t exist, then nothing matters. They are tempted to think that if we will all die, and eventually all traces of our existence will fade from all consciousness, there is no point to doing ↵ anything; nothing makes any difference. Tolstoy evidently thought this sometimes, and gave eloquent voice to that view. But the reasoning is ridiculous. If one activity is worthwhile and another is a waste, then one has reason to prefer the former, even if there is no God to look down on us and

approve. More generally, we seem to have reason to engage ourselves with projects of value whether God exists and gives life a purpose or not.

Putting things this way, however, fails to explain why we use the language of meaning to describe lives engaged in activities of worth. Putting things this way there seems to be no connection at all between the question of whether there is a meaning to life and the question of whether individual lives can be meaningful. I believe, however, that there is a connection, that shows itself, or perhaps that consists in the fact that the wish for both kinds of meaning are evoked by the same thought, and that, perhaps, either kind of meaning would be an appropriate and satisfying response to that thought. The thought in question is the thought (the true thought) that we are tiny specks in a vast universe. It is a thought that is apt to be upsetting when it first hits you—at least in part because, looking back from that position, it may seem that one had until then lived “as if” something opposite were true. One had lived perhaps until then as if one were the center of the universe, the sole possessor or source of all value. One had all along assumed one had a special and very important place in the world, and now one’s assumption is undermined. One can see how, in this context, one might wish for a meaning to life. For if there were a meaning—a purpose, that is, to human existence that can be presumed to be of great importance, then, by playing a role, by contributing to that purpose, one can recover some of the significance one thought one’s life had. Like the pessimistic philosophers I talked about a few minutes ago, I doubt that that path is open to us. But there seems another way one can respond to the thought, or to the recognition of our relatively insignificant place in the universe, that is more promising, and that can, and sometimes does, provide a different kind of comfort. If one lived one’s life, prior to the recognition of our smallness, as if one was the center of the universe, the appropriate response to that recognition is simply *to stop living that way*. If one turns one’s attention to other parts of the universe—even to other specks like oneself—in a way that appreciates and engages with the values or valuable objects that come from outside oneself, then one corrects one’s practical stance. If, in addition, one is partly successful in producing, preserving, or promoting value—if one does some good, or realizes value, then one has something to say, or to think in response to the worry that one’s life has no point.

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Only if some suggestion like mine is right can we make sense of the intuitions about meaningfulness to which I called attention in the earlier part of this essay. According to those intuitions the difference between a meaningful and a meaningless life is not a difference between a life that does a lot of good and a life that does a little. (Nor is it a difference between a life that makes a big splash and one that, so to speak, sprays only a few drops.) It is rather a difference between a life that does good or is good or realizes value and a life that is essentially a waste. According to these intuitions, there is as sharp a contrast between the Blob and a life devoted to the care of a single needy individual as there is between the Blob and someone who manages to change the world for the better on a grand scale. Indeed, there may be an equally sharp contrast between the Blob and the monk of a contemplative order whose existence confers no benefit or change on anyone else’s life at all. Ironically, along this dimension, Tolstoy fares exceptionally well.

Thus it seems to me that even if there is no meaning to life, even if, that is, life as a whole has no purpose, no direction, no point, that is no reason to doubt the possibility of finding and making meaning in life—that is no reason, in other words, to doubt the possibility of people living meaningful lives. In coming to terms with our place and our status in the universe, it is natural and appropriate that people should want to explore the possibility of both types of meaning. Even if philosophers have nothing new or encouraging to say about the possibility of meaning of the first sort, there may be some point to elaborating the different meanings of the idea of finding meaning in life, and in pointing out the different forms that coming to terms with the human condition can take.

Notes

- 1 Thomas Nagel has what might be thought to be an even more pessimistic view—viz., that even if there is a God, there is no reason God’s purpose should be our purpose, no reason, therefore, to think that God’s existence could give meaning, in the right sense, to our lives.
- 2 For example, the day I sat down to begin notes on this essay, a review of a book by Monique Greenwood, *Having What Matters: The Black Woman’s Guide to Creating the Life You Really Want* was in the paper (*Baltimore Sun*, January 16, 2002). The book is offered as a guide to replace Helen Gurley Brown’s 1980s manifesto about having it all. Instead of “she who has the most toys wins,” Greenwood says “she who has the most joy wins.” She is focused on how to “achieve a life with value and meaning.”
- 3 David Wiggins, “Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* LXII (1976).
- 4 It seems to me there is a further condition or qualification on what constitutes a meaningful life, though it does not fit gracefully into the definition I have proposed, and is somewhat peripheral to the focus of this essay: Namely, the projects that contribute to a meaningful life must be of significant duration, and contribute to the unity of the life or of a significant stage of it. A person who is always engaged in some valuable project or other, but whose projects don’t express any underlying core of interest and value is not, at least, a paradigm of someone whose *life* is meaningful. Here perhaps there is something illuminating in making analogies to other uses of “meaning,” for what is at issue here has to do with there being a basis for “making sense” of the life, of being able to see it as a narrative.
- 5 *Pace* the creepy scene in the movie *American Beauty* of the garbage bag blowing in the wind.