

Chapter 5

Philosophy and the Meaning of Life

Robert Nozick

Robert Nozick's engaging philosophical reflections on the meaning of life start with a joke, which he analyzes. He then presents and discusses eight different modes of meaning. The problem of a life's meaning arises, he says, because of a life's limitations. These include the fact that one dies. Meaning, he argues, consists in transcending limits, in connecting with other things. He discusses whether leaving traces of one's life or being part of God's plan could make our lives meaningful.



The question of what meaning our life has, or can have, is of utmost importance to us. So heavily is it laden with our emotion and aspiration that we camouflage our vulnerability with jokes about seeking for the meaning or purpose of life: A person travels for many days to the Himalayas to seek the word of an Indian holy man meditating in an isolated cave. Tired from his journey, but eager and expectant that his quest is about to reach fulfillment, he asks the sage, "What is the meaning of life?" After a long pause, the sage opens his eyes and says, "Life is a fountain." "What do you mean, life is a fountain?" barks the questioner. "I have just traveled thousands of miles to hear your words, and all you have to tell me is that? That's ridiculous." The sage then looks up from the floor of the cave and says, "You mean it's not a fountain?" In a variant of the story, he replies, "So it's not a fountain."

The story is reassuring. The supposed sages are frauds who speak nonsense, nonsense they either never thought to question ("You mean it's not a fountain?") or do not care very much about ("So it's not a fountain"). Surely, then, we have nothing to learn from these ridiculous people; we need not seek their ludicrous "wisdom."

But why was it necessary for the joke to continue on after the sage said "life is a fountain," why was it necessary for the story to include the seeker's objection and the sage's reply? Well, perhaps the sage did mean something by "life is a fountain," something profound which we did not understand. The challenge and his reply show his words were empty, that he can give no deep and illuminating interpretation to his remark. Only then are we in a secure position to laugh, in relief.

However, if we couldn't know immediately that his answer "life is a fountain" was ridiculous, if we needed further words from him to exclude the lingering possibility of a deeper meaning to his apparently preposterous first reply, then how can we be sure that his second answer also does not have a deeper meaning which we don't understand? He says "You mean it's not a fountain?"; but who are *you* to mean? If you know so much about it, then why have you gone seeking him; do you even know enough to recognize an appropriate answer when you hear it?

The questioner apparently came in humility, seeking the truth, yet he assumed he knew enough to challenge the answer he heard. When he objects and the sage replies, "so it's not a fountain," was it to gain this victory in discussion that the questioner traveled so far? (The story is told that Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of kabbalism, as a young man sought out practitioners of kabbalah in Jerusalem, and was told he could study with them on the condition that he not ask any questions for two years. Scholem, who has a powerful, critical, and luminous intelligence, refused.)

When he set out on his trip, did the questioner hope for an intellectual formula presenting the meaning of life? He wanted to know how he should live in order to achieve a life with meaning. What did he expect to hear from this meditating man in a cave high in the mountains? "Go back to the posh suburb and continue your present life, but shift to a less pressured job and be more accessible to your children"? Presumably, the

man in the cave is following what he takes to be the path to a meaningful life; what else can he answer except “follow my path, be like me”? “Are you crazy; do you think I am going to throw everything over to become a scruffy person sitting in a cave?” But does the seeker know enough to exclude that life as the most (or only) meaningful one, the seeker who traveled to see *him*?

Could *any* formula answer the question satisfactorily? “The meaning of life is to seek union with God”—oh yeah, that one. “A meaningful life is a full and productive life”—sure. “The purpose of life is to pursue the task of giving meaning to life”—thanks a lot. “The meaning of life is love”—yawn. “The meaning of life is spiritual perfection”—the upward and onward trip. “The meaning of life is getting off the wheel of life and becoming annihilated”—no thanks. No one undertakes the trip to the sage who hasn’t already encountered all the known formulas and found them wanting. Does the seeker think the sage has some *other* words to tell him, words which somehow have not reached print? Or is there a secret formula, an esoteric doctrine that, once heard, will clarify his life and point to meaning? If there were such a secret, does he think the wise man will tell it to *him*, fresh from Los Angeles with two days of travel by llama and foot? Faced with such a questioner, one might as well tell him that life is a fountain, perhaps hoping to shock him into reconsidering what he is doing right then. (Since he will not understand anything, he might as well be told the truth as best he can understand it—the joke would be that life *is* a fountain. Better yet would be for that to get embodied in a joke.)

If it is not words the questioner needs—certainly no short formula will help—perhaps what he needs is to encounter the person of the sage, to be in his presence. If so, questions will just get in the way; the visitor will want to observe the sage over time, opening himself to what he may receive. Perhaps he will come eventually to find profundity and point in the stale formulas he earlier had found wanting.

Now, let us hear another story. A man goes to India, consults a sage in a cave, and asks him the meaning of life. In three sentences the sage tells him, the man thanks him and leaves. There are several variants of this story also: In the first, the man lives meaningfully ever after; in the second he makes the sentences public so that everyone then knows the meaning of life; in the third, he sets the sentences to rock music, making his fortune and enabling everyone to whistle the meaning of life; and in the fourth variant, his plane crashes as he is flying off from his meeting with the sage. In the fifth version, the person listening to me tell this story eagerly asks what sentences the sage spoke.

And in the sixth version, I tell him.

MODES OF MEANING(FULNESS)

As briskly as we can, let us distinguish different senses and kinds of meaning, in order to assess their relevance to our concern.

- I. *Meaning as external causal relationship*: as causal consequences (“this means war”), causal antecedents or causal concomitants that serve as a basis of inference (“those spots mean measles, smoke means fire, red sky at night means fair weather”).
- II. *Meaning as external referential or semantic relation*: synonymy (“brother” means male sibling), reference (“the man in the corner” means him), standing for a fact (a white flag means they surrender) or symbolizing (the meaning of Yeats’s “rough beast”).
- III. *Meaning as intention or purpose*: intending an action (“he meant well,” “what is the meaning of this outburst?” “did you mean to do that?”), purpose (“this play is meant to catch the conscience of the king”), or (Gricean) intending to convey or indicate something via another’s recognizing this intention (“by that gesture he meant to insult us”).
- IV. *Meaning as lesson*: “The Nazi period means that even a most civilized nation can commit great atrocities,” “Gandhi’s success means that non-violent techniques sometimes can win over force.”
- V. *Meaning as personal significance, importance, value, mattering*: “You mean a lot to me,” “the repeal of that legislation means a lot to them.” Under this rubric is a completely subjective notion, covering what a person thinks is important to him, and one somewhat less so, covering what affects something subjectively important to him, even if he does not realize this.

These first five notions are not intractable; one might hope they could provide at least some elements for explaining the next two, which are more obscure.

- VI. *Meaning as objective meaningfulness*: importance, significance, meaning.
- VII. *Meaning as intrinsic meaningfulness*: objective meaning (VI) in itself, apart from any connections to anything else.
- VIII. *Meaning as total resultant meaning*: the sum total and web of something's meanings I–VII.

Using these distinctions, let us consider the question about the meaning of our life or of our existence. A life easily can have meaning as external causal relationships, for example (ignoring adultery, artificial insemination, parthenogenesis, and virgin birth) your life means that your parents had sexual relations at least once, your existence means there will be less room on earth for all the others. On this reading, every life has (multiple) meaning, and if these causally connected things need not be inferable, a life will mean all of its causal antecedents and consequents and concomitants, and perhaps all of theirs as well, in ever widening circles. The meaning of a life, then, would be the whole causal nexus and flow of events; the causal nexus is meant by the life's place in it. Thereby is gotten the result that a life certainly means something big and impressive; importance might be attributed to the life due to its role in this impressive web—see how much has prepared the way for it, and how much will flow from it, by the same processes which govern everything. However, this may involve a diminution in relative importance: everything thus connected in the web of events becomes equally important.

It is even easier to establish very impressive semantic meaning to our lives, at least for one sort of semantic meaning. Stipulative definitions can give a word new or altered semantic meaning. For example, I can say that by a *smink* I shall mean a ridiculous example introduced to illustrate a point. To my knowledge, no one else ever has used this word, or used any other word with this meaning. I have just given it this meaning. By stipulation, I have tied the word smink to this meaning; all I need do is use it consistently with this meaning hereafter.

There is no reason of principle why only words or gestures can have semantic meaning. It certainly is convenient that these be the vehicles of meaning—being producible at will, they are easily used for communication. However, some physical objects also are producible at will, while certain words might not be, due to difficulty in pronunciation. So we might stipulate that an event or object (for example, the particular copy of this book you now are reading) will have a specific meaning. And if we can stipulate meanings for objects, we similarly can stipulate meaning for your life or for you, and make this meaning be as exalted as you please. Let your life (be stipulated to) mean the triumph of justice or goodness in the universe. Presto, your life has meaning.

Clearly, this is ridiculous; no such arbitrary connections between a person's life and what it is stipulated to mean can give it the requisite sort of meaning. But we should not leave the topic of semantic meaning without seeing whether there is some nonarbitrary way that a person's life can semantically refer to or mean something. Let us say, following Nelson Goodman, that something exemplifies a property, characteristic, pattern, trait, or attribute, if it both has that property and also refers to it.¹ A life, then, would exemplify those properties it both refers to and has.

It is easy to see how a person's life can have properties. To tell us how a life can refer semantically to these properties we should bring in the third sense of meaning, meaning as intention or purpose. A person can mean something by what he does, or have a certain purpose for what he makes. Similarly, by external design people could have been created as semantic objects, for example, by God to refer to himself. If God's purpose in creating people was to have them refer to himself, and he gave them some properties ("in the image of God") to facilitate this referring, then everyone would be something like a name of God. (Would this be sufficient meaning for us? Is the universe a token through which God reflexively self refers?)

Let us leave theological speculations aside and ask whether a person's life can refer semantically in virtue of his intending or meaning his own life to have certain properties. The topic of intention is an intricate one; any adequate theory will have to incorporate the directed, focused quality of intention. I intend to bring about only some aspects of what I do, even of what I know will occur when I act. Intending is something like intending to make a particular description true. I can intend to eat vanilla ice cream, and know that if I do so my life will include an incident of vanilla ice cream eating, without thereby intending my life to be that of a

sometime vanilla ice cream eater; I need have no such grand intention about my whole life. My intention need not focus upon that aspect of my action.

To intend that my life be a certain way, I must have an intention or desire or goal or plan that focuses upon my life as a whole, or at least upon a significant portion of it. The statement of my intention, its focus, must include some reference to my life. The strongest sort of intention about one's life is a *life plan*,² an individual's set of coherent, systematic purposes and intentions for his life. These need not be specified fully, they will leave much open for further detailing, they can be revised, and so on. A life plan specifies the intentional focus of a person's life, his major goals (perhaps partially ordering them), his conception of himself, his purposes, what if anything he dedicates or devotes himself to, and so forth. Unlike the example of intending to eat vanilla ice cream (which would be included as a specific part only in a very strange life plan), a life plan focuses on a person's whole life or a significant chunk of it as a life.

Using this notion of a life plan, we can say that a person's life refers to a property if its having that property is a (weighty) part of the life plan he is engaged in putting into effect. His life exemplifies a property if it both has it and refers to it.

A life plan can have and refer to a property without showing or communicating this. The life of a furtive criminal, in this sense, might mean: steal as much as you can, undetected. In contrast to this, a person's life goals can shine forth. Let us say that a person lives transparently to the extent that the structure and content of what he exemplifies is clear; his life plan (its arrangement and hierarchy of goals, and so forth) is evident to those who take the trouble to notice what he does and says. The surface of his life, its public face, does not hide or cover his life plan. His life is not a mystery, his fundamental motivations and goals are not undetectable. He has made his life an open book.

However, just as empirical data underdetermine a scientific theory, so actions do not uniquely fix the life plan from which they flow. Different life plans are compatible with and might yield the same actions. So, people also state or explain why they act as they do, especially when other prevalent life plans that differ importantly would lead to that same behavior. Some take pains to perform the very actions wherein their life plans and goals significantly diverge from others—they delineate themselves. It is a puzzle how so many people, including intellectuals and academics, devote enormous energy to work in which nothing of themselves or their important goals shines forth, not even in the way their work is presented. If they were struck down, their children upon growing up and examining their work would never know why they had done it, would never know *who* it was that did it. They work that way and sometimes live that way, too.

The next notion of meaning on our list, meaning as lesson to be learned from, can build upon this previous one. People do not want their lives to provide negative lessons ("the lesson of his life is: do not live as he does"); although even here, they may take comfort if they think that lesson is important enough, and that others will act on the moral of their sad story. We hope the lessons to be learned from our lives will be connected more positively with the way we try to live, that the lesson will be based upon a positive evaluation of transparent features of our life plan.

This is recognizable as what some have meant by a meaningful life: (1) a life organized according to a plan and hierarchy of goals that integrates and directs the life, (2) having certain features of structure, pattern, and detail that the person intends his life to have (3) and show forth; he lives transparently so others can see the life plan his life is based upon (4) and thereby learn a lesson from his life, (5) a lesson involving a positive evaluation of these weighty and intended features in the life plan he transparently lives. In sum, the pattern he transparently exemplifies provides a positive lesson.

Furthermore, the person himself may intend that others learn a lesson from his exemplification, intending also that they learn from it in virtue of recognizing his (Gricean) intention that they do so. In this way, he uses his life (partly) to communicate a lesson to others, a lesson about living. This, I suppose, is what is meant by a *teacher*. (Philosophy had one such, Socrates—for how long shall we be able to continue to live off his momentum?) The life of such a person (semantically and nonarbitrarily) means the lesson it exemplifies; it has at least that meaning.

Even of such a shining and exemplary life, however, we can ask what it all amounts to. We can ask whether the lesson itself has any significance or meaning. We can distance ourselves from the life, see it as the particular thing it was, notice its limits, and wonder whether really it has any meaning. We can stand outside it and see it as a thing, as a nonvibrant and meaningless thing, soon to end in death, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

DEATH

It is often assumed that there is a problem about the meaning of life because of our mortality. Why does the fact that all people die create a special problem? (If life were to go on forever, would there then be no problem about its meaning?) One opposite view has been proposed that welcomes the fact of death and makes a virtue of its apparently grim necessity. Victor Frankl writes that “death itself is what makes life meaningful,” arguing for this startling view as follows. “What would our lives be like if they were not finite in time, but infinite? If we were immortal, we could legitimately postpone every action forever. It would be of no consequence whether or not we did a thing now; every act might just as well be done tomorrow or the day after or a year from now or ten years hence. But in the face of death as absolute *finis* to our future and boundary to our possibilities, we are under the imperative of utilizing our lifetimes to the utmost, not letting the singular opportunities—whose ‘finite’ sum constitutes the whole of life—pass by unused.”³ It would appear, then, that persons who were or could become immortal should choose to set a temporal limit to their lives in order to escape meaninglessness; scientists who discovered some way to avoid natural death should suppress their discoveries.⁴

Frankl assumes our only desire is to have done certain things, to put certain things somewhere on our record. Because we shall die, if we are to have done these things by the end of our lives, we had better get on with them. However, we may desire to do things; our desire need not be merely to have done them.⁵ Moreover, if we had an infinite life, we might view it as a whole, as something to organize, shape, and do something with. (Will this require us to be tolerant of very long gaps?) Persons who are immortal need not be limited to the desires and designs of mortals; they might well think up new plans that, in Parkinsonian fashion, expand to fill the available time. Despite his clear sympathy for religious thought, Frankl seems never to wonder or worry whether unlimited existence presents a problem of meaningfulness for God.

Whatever appeal Frankl’s view has depends upon the more general assumption that certain limits, certain preexisting structures into which things can be poured, are necessary for meaningful organization. Similar things often are said in discussions of particular art forms, such as the sonnet and the sonata.⁶ Even were this general assumption true, though, death constitutes only one kind of structural limitation: finiteness in time. Other kinds are possible too, and we well might welcome these others somewhat more. The dual assumption that some limitation is necessary for meaning, and limitation in time is the only one that can serve, is surely too ill established to convince anyone that mortality is good for him—unless he is willing to grasp at any straw. If we are going to grasp at things, let them not be straws.⁷

Granting that our life ending in death is in tension, at least, with our existence having meaning, we have not yet isolated why this is so. We can pursue this issue by considering a puzzle raised by Lucretius, which runs as follows. No one is disturbed by there being a time before which they did not exist, before their birth or conception, although if the past is infinite, there was an infinite amount of time before you were born when you didn’t exist. So why should you be disturbed by the fact that after you are dead, there also will be an infinite amount of time when you will not exist? What creates the asymmetry between the time before we were born and the time after we die, leading us to different attitudes toward these two periods?⁸

Is it that death is bad because it makes our lives finite in duration? We can sharpen this issue with an extreme supposition. Imagine that the past is infinite and that you have existed throughout all of it, having forgotten most. If death, even in this case, would disturb you, this is not because it makes you merely finite, since you are not, we are supposing, merely finite in the past direction. What then is so especially distressing about a finite future? Is it that an extended future gives you a chance for further improvement and growth, the opportunity to build from what you are now, whereas an infinite past that culminates only in what you now are might seem puny indeed? We can test whether this accounts for any difference in our attitudes toward infinite future and infinite past by imagining two cases that are mirror images. The infinite future of one is the mirror image of the other’s infinite past; each has heights to match the heights of the other. If we had existed infinitely long until now, done all and seen all (though now the memory is dim), would we be disturbed at dying? Perhaps not, perhaps then the asymmetry between past and future would disappear. Nevertheless, this view does not explain why there is an asymmetry between the past and future for finite beings. Why don’t we bemoan our late (relative to the infinite past) birth, just as we bemoan our early death?

Is the answer that we take the past as given and fixed already, and since, at the present juncture, it is what will happen that settles our fate, we therefore focus upon this?

In the mirror image situation, however, if we were satisfied with the life whose future was finite, that need not be simply because it contained an infinite past existence. That past existence must be specified as one in which we had done all, seen all, known all, been all. An infinite but monotonous past would not make death welcome, except perhaps as a deserved closing. Is the crucial fact about death not that it makes us finite or limits our future, but that it limits the possibilities (of those we would choose) that we can realize? On this view, death's sting lies not in its destroying or obliterating our personality, but in thwarting it. Nonetheless, underneath many phenomena there seems to lurk not simply the desire to realize other possibilities, but the desire and the hope to endure beyond death, perhaps forever.

TRACES

Death wipes you out. Dead, you are no longer around—around *here* at any rate—and if there is nowhere else where you'll be (heaven, hell, with the white light) then all that will be left of you is your effects, leavings, traces. People do seem to think it important to continue to be around somehow. The root notion seems to be this one: it shouldn't *ever* be as if you had never existed at all. A significant life leaves its mark on the world. A significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world—it leaves traces. To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the meaning of one's life. Endurance, however, even if a necessary condition for a meaningful life, is certainly not sufficient. We shall have to ask what kind of trace is important, and why that kind is not important even when very evanescent. First, though, let us explore some of the ramifications of the notion that it shouldn't ever be as if one had never lived or existed at all.

People sometimes speak of achieving immortality through their children. (Will this include achieving immortality through a child, himself childless, who achieves it in some other way? Did Kant's parents do so by siring Kant?) It is puzzling that people speak of achieving immortality by leaving descendants, since they do not believe that their chain of descendants, although perhaps very extended, is going to be infinite. So how do descendants bring immortality rather than a somewhat extended mortality? Perhaps the situation is this: while infinite continuation is best, any continuation is better than none. When a ninety-year-old's only child dies childless at the age of sixty-eight, we feel sad for this parent who now will not be leaving behind that (expected) trace.

There are many manifestations of the desire not to sink completely into oblivion. Artists often strive to leave behind permanent masterpieces, thereby achieving what is called immortality—a goal rejected by the dadaists in their temporary “art-for-a-day.” People erect tombstones for others, and some make that provision for themselves. Tombstones are continuing marks upon the world; through them people know where your remains are, and remember you—hence, they are called *memorials*.

When funeral orators say, “he will live in our hearts,” the assumption is not that the listeners will live forever, thereby immortalizing the dead person. Nor is it assumed that “living on in the hearts of” is a transitive relation, so that the dead person will continue to live on in the further hearts where the listeners themselves will live on. Permanent survival is not involved here, but neither is it sufficient merely to continue on somewhat, however little. Imagine that the funeral orator had said, “he will continue on in our minds until we leave this building whereupon we all promptly will forget him.”

Another phrase sometimes heard is: “as long as people survive, this man will not be forgotten, his achievements and memory will live on.” Presumably, one would want to add the proviso that people *will* live on for a long time. This, perhaps, is as close to immortality as a person can get. Some people are disturbed by the thought that life will go on for others, yet without themselves in any way. They are forgotten, and left out; those who follow later will live as if you never had. Here, permanent survival is not the goal, only survival as long as life goes on. More modest reference groups than all of humanity might be picked; you can hope to be remembered as long as your relations, friends, and acquaintances survive. In these cases it is not temporal enduringness that is crucial, but rather a certain sort of enduringness as shown in relationships to others.

When people desire to leave a trace behind, they want to leave a certain kind of trace. We all do leave traces, causal effects reverberate down: our voices move molecules which have their effects, we feed the

worms, and so on. The kind of trace one wishes to leave is one that people know of in particular and that they know is due to you,⁹ one due (people know) to some action, choice, plan of yours, that expresses something you take to be important about the kind of person you are, such that people respect or positively evaluate both the trace and that aspect of yourself. We want somehow to live on, but not as an object lesson for others. Notice also that wanting to live on by leaving appropriate traces need not involve wanting continuous existence; you want there to be some time after which you continue to leave a mark, but this time needn't be precisely at your death. Artists as well as those who anticipate resurrection are quite willing to contemplate and tolerate a gap.

Why are traces important? There are several possibilities. First, the importance of traces might lie not in themselves but (only) in what they indicate. Traces indicate that a person's life had a certain meaning or importance, but they are not infallible signs of this—there may be traces without meaning, or meaning without traces. For instance, to “live on” in the memory of others indicates one's effect on these others. It is the effect that matters; even if each of them happened to die first, there still would have been that effect. On this first view, it is a mistake to scrutinize traces in an attempt to understand how life has or can have meaning, for at best traces are a symptom of a life's meaning. Second, traces might be an expression of something important about a life, but it might be important and valuable in addition that this be expressed.

Third, it might be thought that the leaving of traces is intrinsically important. A philosophical tradition going back to Plato holds that the permanent and unchanging is more valuable by virtue of being permanent and unchanging. For Plato, the changing objects of our ordinary everyday world were less valuable and less real than the unchanging permanent Forms or Ideas. These latter not only served an explanatory purpose, they were to be valued, respected, and even venerated. Therefore, when Socrates is asked whether distinct Forms correspond to “such things as hair, mud, dirt, or anything else which is vile and paltry,” he is unwilling to say they do.¹⁰ Forms of such things do not seem very exalted, valuable, or important, in contrast to the Forms of the Good, the Just, and the Beautiful. Some mathematicians have this attitude toward the permanent and unchanging mathematical objects and structures they study, investigate, and explore. (Other mathematicians, in contrast, think they have created this realm, or are engaged merely in the combinatorial manipulation of meaningless marks on paper or blackboard.)

Despite the pedigree of the tradition, it is difficult to discover why the more permanent is the more valuable or meaningful, why permanence or long-lastingness, why duration in itself, should be important. Consider those things people speak of as permanent or eternal. These include (apart from God) numbers, sets, abstract ideas, space-time itself. Would it be better to be one of these things? The question is bizarre; how could a concrete person become an abstract object? Still, would anyone wish they *could* become the number 14, or the Form of Justice, or the null set? Is anyone pining to lead a setly existence?

Yet, it cannot be denied that some are gripped by the notion of traces continuing forever. Hence, we find some people disturbed over thermodynamics, worrying that millions of years from now the universe will run down into a state of maximum entropy, with no trace remaining of us or of what we have done. In their view, this eventuality makes human existence absurd; the eventual obliteration of all our traces also obliterates or undermines the meaningfulness of our existence. An account or theory of the meaning of life should find a place for this feeling, showing what facet of meaning it gets a grip upon; an adequate theory should explain the force of this feeling, even if it does not endorse or justify it.¹¹

GOD'S PLAN

One prevalent view, less so today than previously, is that the meaning of life or people's existence is connected with God's will, with his design or plan for them. Put roughly, people's meaning is to be found and realized in fulfilling the role allotted to them by God. If a superior being designed and created people for a purpose, in accordance with a plan for them, the particular purpose he had for them would be what people are *for*. This is distinct from the view that finds meaning in the goal of merging with God, and also from the view which holds that if you do God's will you will be rewarded—sit at his right hand, and receive eternal bliss—and that the meaning and purpose of life is to achieve this reward which is intrinsically valuable (and also meaningful?).

Our concern now is not with the question of whether there is a God; or whether, if there is, he has a

purpose for us; or whether if there is and he has a purpose for us, there is any way to discover this purpose, whether God reveals his purpose to people. Rather, our question is how all this, even if true, would succeed in providing meaning for people's lives.

First, we should ask whether any and every role would provide meaning and purpose to human lives. If our role is to supply CO₂ to the plants, or to be the equivalent within God's plan of fixing a mildly annoying leaky faucet, would this suffice? Is it enough to be an absolutely trivial component within God's grand design? Clearly, what is desired is that we be important; having merely some role or other in God's plan does not suffice. The purpose God has for us must place us at or near the center of things, of his intentions and goals. Moreover, merely playing some role in a central purpose of God's is not sufficient—the role itself must be a central or important one. If we describe God's central purpose in analogy with making a painting, we do not want to play the role of the rag used to wipe off brushes, or the tin in which these rags are kept. If we are not the central focus of the painting, at least we want to be like the canvas or the brush or the paint.

Indeed, we want more than an important role in an important purpose; the role itself should be positive, perhaps even exalted. If the cosmic role of human beings was to provide a negative lesson to some others ("don't act like them") or to provide needed food for passing intergalactic travelers who *were* important, this would not suit our aspirations—not even if afterwards the intergalactic travelers smacked their lips and said that we tasted good. The role should focus on aspects of ourselves that we prize or are proud of, and it should use these in ways connected with the reasons why we prize them. (It would not suffice if the exercise of our morality or intelligence, which we prize, affects our brain so that the intergalactic travelers find it more *tasty* .)

Do all these conditions guarantee meaning? Suppose our ingenuity was to be used to aid these travelers on their way, but that their way was no more important than ours. There was no more reason why we were aiding them (and perishing afterwards) than the other way around—the plan just happened to go that way. Would this cruel hoax leave us any more content than if there were no plan or externally given role at all?

There are two ways we individually or collectively could be included in God's plan. First, our fulfilling our role might depend upon our acting in a certain way, upon our choices or cooperation; second, our role might not depend at all upon our actions or choices—willy-nilly we shall serve. (In parallel to the notion of originitive value, we can say that under the first our life can have originitive meaning.) About the first way we can ask why we should act to fulfill God's plan, and about both ways we can ask why fitting God's plan gives meaning to our existence.¹² That God is good (but also sometimes angry?) shows that it would be good to carry out his plan. (Even then, perhaps, it need not be good *for us*—mightn't the good overall plan involve sacrificing us for some greater good?) Yet how does doing what is good provide meaning? Those who doubt whether life has meaning, even if transparently clearheaded, need not have doubted that it is good to do certain things.

How can playing a role in God's plan give one's life meaning? What makes this a meaning-giving process? It is not merely that some being created us with a purpose in mind. If some extragalactic civilization created us with a purpose in mind, would that by itself provide meaning to our lives? Nor would things be changed if they created us so that we also had a feeling of indebtedness and a feeling that something was asked of us. It seems it is not enough that God have some purpose for us—his purpose itself must be meaningful. If it were sufficient merely to play some role in some external purpose, then you could give meaning to your life by fitting it to my plans or to your parents' purpose in having you. In these instances, however, one immediately questions the meaningfulness of the other people's purposes. How do God's purposes differ from ours so as to be guaranteed meaningfulness and importance? Let me sharpen this question by presenting a philosophical fable.¹³

TELEOLOGY

Once you come to feel your existence lacks purpose, there is little you can do. You can keep the feeling, and either continue a meaningless existence or end it. Or you can discover the purpose your existence already serves, the meaning it has, thereby eliminating the feeling. Or you can try to dispose of the feeling by giving a meaning and purpose to your existence.

The first dual option carries minimal appeal; the second, despite my most diligent efforts, proved impossible. That left the third alternative, where, too, there are limited possibilities. You can make your existence meaningful by fitting it into some larger purpose, making yourself part of something else that is independently and incontestably important and meaningful. However, a sign of really having been stricken is that no preexisting purpose will serve in this fashion—each purpose that in other moods appears sufficiently fructifying then seems merely arbitrary. Alternatively, one can seek meaning in activity that itself is important, in something self-sufficiently intrinsically valuable. Preeminent among such activities, if there are any such, is creative activity. So, as a possible route out of my despair, I decided to create something that itself would be marvelous. (No, I did not decide to write a story beginning “Once you come to feel your existence lacks purpose.” Why am I always suspected of gimmicks?)

The task required all of my knowledge, skill, intuitive powers, and craftsmanship. It seemed to me that my whole existence until then had been merely a preparation for this creative activity, so completely did it draw upon and focus all of my experience, abilities, and knowledge. I was excited by the task and fulfilled, and when it was completed I rested, untroubled by purposelessness.

But this contentment was, unfortunately, only temporary. For when I came to think about it, although it *had* taxed my ingenuity and energy to make the heavens, the earth, and the creatures upon it, what did it all amount to? I mean, the whole of it, when looked at starkly and coldly, was itself just an object, of no intrinsic importance, containing creatures in a condition as purposeless as the one I was trying to escape. Given the possibility that my talents and powers were those of a being whose existence might well be meaningless, how could their exercise endow my existence with purpose and meaning if it issued only in a worthless object?

At this point in my thoughts I came upon the solution to my problem. If I were to create a plan, a grand design into which my creation [would] fit, in which my creatures, by serving the pattern and purpose I had ordained for them, would find their purpose and goal, then this very activity of endowing their existence with meaning and purpose would be my purpose and would give my existence meaning and point. Also, giving their existence meaning would, retroactively, make meaningful my previous activity of creation, it having issued in something that turned out to be of value and worth.

The arrangement has served. Only occasionally, out of the corner of my mind, do I wonder whether my arbitrarily having picked a plan for them can really have succeeded in giving meaning to the lives of the role-fulfillers among them. (It was necessary, of course, that I pick some plan or other for them, but no special purpose was served by my picking the particular plan I did. How could it have been? For my sole purpose then was to give meaning to my existence, and this one purpose was insufficient to determine any particular plan into which to fit my creatures.) However, lacking any conception of a less defective route to meaningfulness, I refuse to examine whether such a symbiotic arrangement truly is possible, whether different beings can provide meaning and point to each other’s existence in a fashion so seemingly circular. Such questions press me toward the alternative I tremble to contemplate, yet to which I find my thoughts recurring. The option of ending it all, by now familiar, is less alien and terrifying than before. I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

To imagine God himself facing problems about the meaningfulness of his existence forces us to consider how meaning attaches to his purposes. Let us leave aside my fancy that since it is important that our lives be provided with meaning, God’s existence is made meaningful by his carrying out that task, so that—since his plans for us thereby become meaningful—our meaning is found in fitting those plans. For if it were possible for man and God to shore up each other’s meaningfulness in this fashion, why could not two people do this for each other as well? Moreover, a plan whose *only* purpose is to provide meaning for another’s life (or the planner’s) cannot succeed in doing the trick; the plan must have some independent purpose and meaning itself.

Nor will it help to escalate up a level, and say that if there is a God who has a plan for us, the meaning of our existence consists in finding out what this plan asks of us and has in store for us. To know the meaning of life, on this view, would consist in our knowing where we came from, why we are here, where we are going. But apart from the fact that many religions hold such knowledge of God’s purposes to be impossible (see, for example, *Ecclesiastes* and *Job*), and condemn various attempts to gain such knowledge (such as occult

techniques and necromancy), and apart even from the fact that this seems too much a metapurpose, no more satisfying than saying “the purpose of life is the quest for the purpose of life,” this view merely postpones the question of wherein God’s plan itself is meaningful.

What is it about God’s purposes that makes them meaningful? If our universe were created by a child from some other vast civilization in a parallel universe, if our universe were a toy it had constructed, perhaps out of prefabricated parts, it would not follow that the child’s purposes were meaningful. Being the creator of all we see is not sufficient to endow his purposes with meaningfulness. Granted, the purposes of God are the purposes of a powerful and important being (as compared to us). However, it is difficult to see why that suffices for those purposes to ground our existence in meaning. Could the purposes of scientists so give meaning to artificially created short-lived animal life they maintained in a controlled laboratory environment? The scientists, creators of the animals’ universe and life, would be as gods to them. Yet it would be unbearably poignant if the most intelligent animal, in a leap of intuition, did its equivalent of worshiping the absent scientist.

Various gnostic doctrines have held that our world (or universe) was created by a being who was not the supreme divine being, or who was not the only aspect of the divine being. These doctrines envisaged an even more supreme God above the creator of our universe. If some people were fulfilling (and were committed to fulfilling) the local Lord’s commands and plans, would it follow that their lives had meaning? How are things different if it is the plan of the top God (must there be a top to the levels?) which we are fulfilling, and how is it to be determined which lead to follow?

Such speculations about levels, perhaps hidden, beneath levels are bewildering, especially since we shall never be able to claim with the certainty of some religious doctrine or scientific theory that it has identified the “ground floor,” that there cannot be, underneath the fundamental processes or entities (E) it identifies, even more fundamental hidden ones of a very different character which give rise to the reality or appearance of E. In his novel *The Magus* John Fowles depicts this: each time the central character comes to a view of what is occurring, this is undercut by a new and different deeper view.¹⁴

I don’t say there is no ground floor (would it be better if there were not?), just that we wouldn’t know it if we reached it. Even infinite reflexiveness could have a level underlying it, giving rise to it. My purpose is not to emphasize our limits as knowers but to note the power of our imaginations. We can always imagine a deeper reality, deeper even than what turns out to be the deepest; if we cannot imagine its precise character, nevertheless, we can imagine that there is such a thing. There are or can be mysteries within and behind mysteries. To mention only religious views, the Hindus speak of parabrahman which is beyond even Brahman, and gnostic views posit a God beyond the creator of this universe. Once we are embarked there is no sure stopping; why not a God who created that God, and so forth?

Not only can we not be certain about the ground floor; *it*, if it is the sort of thing that is conscious, cannot be either. For perhaps underneath or apart from everything it knows, is something else that created or underlies it, having carefully covered its tracks. Philosophers have sometimes searched for indicators of a conscious Absolute, in the hopes of making us “at home” and unalienated in the universe, akin to its fundamental character, or somehow favored by it.¹⁵ If there were such an Absolute, it too must occasionally look over its shoulder for a glimpse of a yet deeper, and perhaps not fully friendly, reality. Even the Absolute is a little bit paranoid—so how alien from us can it be?

Yet “like us” does not mean it likes us and is supportive of us and our aspirations, as provided in the vision of a personal God who cares. Is the universe at its fundamental level friendly to our seeking of value; is there some cosmic undergirding so that values, in the phrase of William James, “throw the last stone”? Some have woven science-fiction fantasies of a level that is thus supportive—emissaries from intergalactic civilizations who watch over and guide our progress—and apparently find this comforting. This is not the “ground floor,” though. But how important is it anyway that there be a force for value at that level, if it is so distant as effectively to have nothing to do with us? It is not difficult to imagine structures about levels that undercut other levels of reality and their support (or non-support) of value. It is less important, though, whether the ground floor exerts a force for value, than whether we do.

There also might turn out to be fewer levels than appear. The gnostic theorists, for example, whatever their evidence for multiple deities, would have had no way to exclude the possibility that there was but one deity who was schizophrenic or possessed different personalities which he alternately showed. On this view, rather than taking sides in a cosmic clash, the task of man for which he was created (by which personality?) might

be to act as therapist to bring together the different personalities of God (unifying them or eliminating one?)—the task might be to heal God. This would certainly give man a central mission and purpose in the cosmic structure, but one might question the meaningfulness of harmonizing *that* structure. Another similar theory would see man not as therapist but as therapy, functioning as do patients' drawings in psychological treatment, produced with conflicting impulses to express its maker's nature.¹⁶ When such a deity's products come to think of their maker as psychotic and in need of help and integration, is that a sign of a breakthrough of insight in *it*? (This would provide an ironic version of Hegel's view that in his philosophy Geist comes to full self-awareness.)

These diverse possibilities about the intentional and purposeful creation of our universe—by a child in another dimension, by one of a hierarchy of gods, by a schizophrenic God—press home the question of how, or in virtue of what, a religious view can ground the meaning of our lives. Just as the direct experience of God might unavoidably provide one with a motive to carry out his wishes, so it might be that such an experience (of which type of creator?) always would resolve all doubts about meaning. To experience God might leave one with the absolute conviction that his existence was the fountain of meaning, watering your own existence. I do not want to discount testimony reporting this. But even if we accepted it fully, it leaves unanswered the question of how meaning is possible. What is it about God, as usually conceived, in virtue of which he can ground meaning? How *can* there be a ball of meaning? Even if we are willing to treat the testimony in the way we treat accurate perceptual reports, there still remains the problem of understanding how meaning can be encountered in experience, of how there can be a stopping place for questions about meaning. How in the world (or out of it) can there be something whose nature contains meaning, something which just glows meaning?

In pursuing the question of which aspects of God can provide meaning to our existence, we have presented examples of other more limited imaginable beings who do have those aspects (for example, creator of our universe) yet who obviously fail to give meaning. Perhaps it is in that very step to these examples that we lose the meaning. Perhaps the intrinsic meaningfulness of God's existence and his purposes lies in his being unlimited and infinite, in his being at the ground floor and not undercut or dwarfed or put in a smaller focus by any underlying level or being or perspective. No wonder, then, that the meaning disappeared as we considered other cases that purported to isolate the salient meaning-producing aspect of God. (Still, there would remain questions about why only certain ways of being linked—as creation, worshiper, role-fulfiller, or whatever—transmit meaning to people from God.) If the plausibility of seeing God as providing a stopping place for questions about meaning is grounded in his very infinitude and unlimitedness, in there being no deeper level or wider perspective, we can ask what this shows about the notion of meaning. How must the notion of meaning be structured, what must be its content, for (only) unlimitedness to provide a secure basis for meaning and a stopping place for questions about meaning?

TRANSCENDING LIMITS

Attempts to find meaning in life seek to transcend the limits of an individual life. The narrower the limits of a life, the less meaningful it is.

The narrowest life consists of separated and disparate moments, having neither connection nor unity; for example, the life of an amnesiac who is unable to plan over several days or even moments because he forgets each day (or moment) what came before. Even someone capable of integrating his life may still lead this narrowest life, if he moves to get whatever at any moment he happens to want—provided this is not an overarching policy he will stick to even when specific wants run counter to it.

Integration of a life comes in gradations. The next notable type of life along the dimension of narrowness is one that is well integrated by overarching plans, goals, and purposes. In this case, though, the long term goals do not extend to anything beyond the person, to anything other than his own narrow concerns; for instance, the sole overarching goal that integrates his life plan might be to maximize the sum total of his life's pleasures. Of such lives we ask, "but what does that life add up to, what meaning does it have?" For a life to have meaning, it must connect with other things, with some things or values beyond itself. Meaning, and not merely of lives, seems to lie in such connections. To ask something's meaning is to ask how it is connected, perhaps in specified ways, to other things. Tracking, either of facts or of value, is a mode of being so

connected, as is fitting an external purpose. The experience machine, though it may give you the experience of transcending limits, encloses you within the circle of just your own experiences. The phrase “the meaning you give to your life” refers to the ways you choose to transcend your limits, the particular package and pattern of external connections you successfully choose to exhibit.¹⁷

Mortality is a temporal limit and traces are a way of going or seeping beyond that limit. To be puzzled about why death seems to undercut meaning is to fail to see the temporal limit itself as a limit. The particular things or causes people find make their life feel meaningful all take them beyond their own narrow limits and connect them up with something else. Children, relationships with other persons, helping others, advancing justice, continuing and transmitting a tradition, pursuing truth, beauty, world betterment—these and the rest link you to something wider than yourself. The more intensely you are involved, the more you transcend your limits. World-historical causes link someone with wider concerns but may leave him equally limited along other more personal dimensions. Among personal relations, loving another brings us most outside our own limits and narrow concerns. In love between adults—their mutual openness and trust, the dismantling of the defenses and barriers people carefully have constructed to protect themselves against getting hurt, and the mutual recognition of this (mutual) nondefensiveness—some limits of the self are not merely breached but dissolved. This nondefensiveness is risky. Yet to be less than fully open to growth, because of this, makes the relationship itself a limit rather than a mode of transcending limits, while to preserve some armor, as insurance, constitutes yet another limit.

The problem of meaning is created by limits, by being just this, by being merely this. The young feel this less strongly. Although they would agree, if they thought about it, that they will realize only some of the (feasible) possibilities before them, none of these various possibilities is yet excluded in their minds. The young live in each of the futures open to them. The poignancy of growing older does not lie in one’s particular path being less satisfying or good than it promised earlier to be—the path may turn out to be all one thought. It lies in traveling only one (or two, or three) of those paths. Economists speak of the opportunity cost of something as the value of the best alternative forgone for it. For adults, strangely, the opportunity cost of our lives appears to us to be the value of all the forgone alternatives summed together, not merely of the best other *one*. When all the possibilities were yet still before us, it felt to us as if we would do them all.

Some writers have held that we achieve meaning by affirming our limits and living with purpose within them, or (this is Sartre’s view, as Arnold Davidson has reminded me) by defining ourselves in terms of what we exclude and reject, the possibilities we choose not to encompass. This living finely within limits may involve a surpassing of what one would have thought those limits entailed, or it may be that such living is valuable, forming a tight organic unity within those limits. Similarly, self-definition by what one chooses to exclude means that one includes and explicitly acts on that principle of rejection, thereby giving one’s life greater unified definition. Thus such exclusion is one means to value, not a mode of meaning.

We need not assume there is a complete ordering with respect to the transcending of limits. Our lives contain many dimensions along which it will be clear what is more and what less limited, but this need not be clear for any two arbitrary points in the space of the n dimensions along which one can be limited—the ordering might be only partial. Therefore, it would be difficult to formulate the total meaningfulness of a person’s life as a weighted sum or expected value, with the weights being his degree of intensity of involvement, ranging between zero and one, which are multiplied by an interval-scale measure of the meaningfulness of what the person is involved in or connected with, which measure varies inversely with limitedness. For that, we should be thankful.

However widely we connect and link, however far our web of meaningfulness extends, we can imagine drawing a boundary around all that, standing outside looking at the totality of it, and asking “but what is the meaning of that, what does that mean?” The more extensive the connections and linkages, the more imagination it may take to step outside and see the whole web for the particular thing it is. Yet it seems this always can be done. (Whether it will be done or not determines whether there will be a felt problem of meaning.) Consider the most exalted and far-reaching life or role imagined for man: being the messiah. Greater effect has been imagined for no other man. Yet still we can ask how important it is to bring whatever it is the messiah brings to the living beings of the third planet of a minor off-center star in the Milky Way galaxy, itself a galaxy of no special distinction within its particular metagalaxy, one of many in the universe. To see something’s limits, to see it as that limited particular thing or enterprise, is to question its meaning.¹⁸

The intellectual life seems to offer one route across all limits: there is nothing that cannot be thought of, theorized about, pondered. Knowledge of deeper truths, fundamental laws, seems more meaningful since it takes us more significantly beyond our limits. And is the reason for the inadequacy of connecting with possibilities by “living in an imaginary world,” that these possibilities don’t have sufficient ontological status, or connection to them doesn’t, for it to be a transcending of personal limits?

We often estimate the “meaningfulness” of work by the range of things that come within its purview, the range of different factors that have to be taken into account. The (hired) craftsman must take account of more than the assembly line worker, the entrepreneur must look out upon conditions in the wider world, and so forth. To be a technician is not merely to have a technique, but to be restricted to taking account of the narrow range of factors handled by the technique. Even if Socrates had a technique of thought, elenchus, still, as he cast his mind over the range of what was relevant to human concerns he was not a technician.

Via thought, we can be linked to anything and everything. Perhaps this, not professional chauvinism, explains why philosophers often have considered philosophical thought and contemplation the highest activity. Nothing escapes its purview. No assumption constitutes an unquestionable limit. In thought we do not thereby transcend all limits, however. Thought can link to everything, but that is merely one particular kind of link: thinking of. True, we can be connected with other kinds of linkages by thinking of them, too, and including them within our theory; yet this kind of connection with them still remains of one kind only. A unity of theory and practice is not established just by constructing a theory of practice.

In imagination, we stand outside a thing and all it is connected with, and we ask for the meaning of the totality. Connected with X is Y, and it is proposed that Y is the meaning of X. Standing outside, we ask for the meaning of Y itself, or for the meaning of X + Y together. Of each wider and less limited context or entity, we ask for its meaning, in turn. In two ways this can seem to undercut the meaning of the thing, X, with which we began. We can have reached a context Y so wide that X is no longer of any importance to it. The fact that Y has meaning is not placed in question, but the connection of the original X to Y is so attenuated, so insignificant from the perspective of Y, that X does not seem to have or gain any meaning in virtue of that connection. Furthermore, since meaning involves connection to wider context, it seems appropriate, demanded even, to take the widest context as that in which to consider something’s meaning. Thus, we find people asking “from the point of view of all of human history, what difference does my life or this contemporary event make?” or “Given the immensity of the universe and the billions upon billions of galaxies, probably teeming with life elsewhere, is all of human history itself of any significance?”

The second way the widening of the context can seem to undercut the meaning of our original concern is that we can reach a context Y that is so wide that it is not obvious what its meaning is—it just is. But if Y itself has no meaning of its own, then how can any X be provided with meaning by virtue of its connection with that Y? It seems impossible that meaning be based upon or flow from something that itself has no meaning. If meaning is to trickle down from Y to us, mustn’t there be some meaning there at the start?

Perhaps this natural picture is mistaken—perhaps the meaning of X can be Y, without Y itself or X + Y having meaning. Must what is the meaning of something itself have a meaning; cannot something’s meaning just *be* its meaning without *having* one too? This would be impossible on the picture of something’s meaning as had, like a liquid filling it, which we gain via our connection with it—the umbilical theory of meaning. However, if meaning itself is not a thing but a relationship then something can have meaning by standing in that relationship, even to something which itself does not stand further in that relationship. (Not every parent is a grandparent.) Consider the analogy of linguistic meaning. Some recent theories of language have come to see a word or sentence or utterance’s having meaning not as its being related to a metaphysically special entity, a meaning, but rather as its standing in some type of (functional) relationship.¹⁹ Is it not appropriate, similarly, to view the notion of meaning, applied to someone’s life, as relational, so that a life’s meaning need not itself have its own further meaning or be intrinsically meaningful?

This view of meaning as explicitly relational helps to loosen the grip of the picture that requires, for there to be any meaning, that something be (but how can it be?) intrinsically meaningful.²⁰ However, there is no simple mistake or fallacy committed by the person who asks about the meaning of Y, or of X + Y. When the concern is the meaning of our life or existence, when X is our life, we want meaning all the way down. Nothing less will do. This meaning is like importance; to be important for something which itself is unimportant is for these purposes to be unimportant. The person who regards the meaning of X as dissolved when it is shown that the Y that is supposed to be X’s meaning itself has no meaning of its own is not shown

to be confused simply because there are or might be legitimate relativized or relational notions of importance or meaning. For he is not using and will not be satisfied by such a relativized notion. And do not hasten to argue that there is no conceivable coherent unrelativized notion. For that, if true, is not the solution—it is the problem.

The problem of meaning is created by limits. We cope with this by, in little ways or big, transcending these limits. Yet whatever extent we thereby reach in a wider realm also has its own limits—the same problem surfaces again. This suggests that the problem can be avoided or transcended only by something without limits, only by something that cannot be stood outside of, even in imagination. Perhaps, the question about meaning is stopped and cannot get a grip only when there is nowhere else to stand.



QUESTIONS

1. If the problem of life's meaning arises from life's limitations and the solution lies in transcending those limits, is the requisite or desired sort of transcendence possible?
2. What answer would you give to Professor Nozick's question: "Must what is the meaning of something itself have a meaning; cannot something's meaning just *be* its meaning without *having* one too?"

NOTES

1. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), p. 52.
2. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), section 63.
3. *The Doctor and the Soul* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 73.
4. For a firm statement of the opposite view, see Alan Harrington, *The Immortalist* (New York: Random House, 1969). Frankl might avoid the consequences drawn in the text, by saying that though immortality would involve a sacrifice of meaningfulness, the other things gained might be even more important and so justify that sacrifice. Nevertheless, Frankl makes some parochial assumptions, and limits his vision of human possibilities. Even on his own terms, perhaps, you do best thinking you are mortal and very long-lived (having no good idea of approximately when the end would come, whether after two hundred or two thousand or twenty thousand years), while in fact being immortal.
5. Compare Frankl's discussion to Ludwig Von Mises's attempt to derive time preference from the essence of human action (*Human Action*, Chicago: Regnery, 1966, ch. 5), critically discussed in part IV of my essay "On Austrian Methodology," *Synthese*, Vol. 36, 1977, pp. 353–92.
6. A recent instance is E. H. Gombrich's critical argument about modern painting, "The Vogue of Abstract Art" in his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (London: Phaidon, 1963), pp. 143–50.
7. There seems to be no limit to the flimsiness of what philosophers will grasp at to disarm the fact of death. It has been argued that if death is bad, bad because it ends life, that can only be because what it ends is good. It cannot be that life, because it ends in death, is bad, for if it were bad then death, ending a bad thing, itself would be good and not bad. The argument concludes that the badness of death presupposes the goodness of the life that it ends. (See Paul Edwards, "Life, Meaning and Value of," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan, 1967, Vol. 4, pp. 469–70.)
Why think that the badness of death resides in and depends upon the goodness of what it ends rather than in the goodness of what it prevents? When an infant dies three minutes after delivery, is its death bad because of the goodness of those three minutes that it ends, or because of the goodness of the longer life which it prevents? Similarly, suppose that only an infinite life could be good; death then would be bad because it prevented this. It would not follow or be presupposed that the finite portion itself was good. I do not say here that only an infinite life can be good, merely that this argument, purporting to show that the badness of death presupposes the goodness of a finite life, fails.
Even stranger arguments about death have been produced. We find Epicurus saying, "Death is nothing to us . . . it does not concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more." Epicurus asks who death is bad for, and answers that it is not bad for anyone—not for anyone alive, for that person is not dead, and not for anyone dead, for dead people do not exist any more, and something can be bad only for someone who exists. Since there is no one for whom death is bad, Epicurus concludes, why should we fear it or even view it unfavorably? We shall not pause to unravel this argument, but note that it does have a limited point: if we believe death obliterates us, we should not fear it as if it were a bad *experience*.
8. Let us distinguish this question from others close by. We do have different attitudes toward our own past and future. Suppose you have gone into the hospital for a very painful operation. No anesthetic can be given for this operation,

though something can be given immediately afterwards causing you to forget the trauma. This puts you to sleep, and when you awake you will not remember what happened. Each night of the preliminary stay in the hospital, you are given a sedative to induce sleep; each morning you wake up and wonder whether the tremendously painful operation has happened already or is still to come. Are you indifferent as to which it is, counting pain in your life as the same, whenever it happens? No, you hope it has happened already and is behind you. If the nurse comes in and tells you the operation is over, you are relieved; if she says that today is the day, you are fearful. Although in any case it is three hours of agonizing pain that you undergo, you want it to be over and done. However, if another person is in this situation, with no danger involved, only pain, it does not matter to you whether he had it yesterday or will have it tomorrow. (I owe this example to Derek Parfit.)

Why is there an asymmetry between the future and past in the first-person case but none in the third-person case? It seems plausible to think that the key is fear, which is not to be understood merely as a negative evaluation of something—usually we are not afraid of something that is past even when we negatively evaluate it. Yet if fear is the explanation of the phenomenon in the hospital case, it cannot be the whole explanation of the asymmetry about existence. For not only do we not fear our past nonexistence, antiquarians aside, we do not even negatively evaluate it.

Also, we should avoid the answer that before you exist, in contrast to afterwards, you cannot even be referred to; in consequence, no one could have said earlier that *you* did not exist then, while after your death that can be said. First, why isn't it sadder that not only did you not exist earlier but you could not even be referred to then? (There could have been a list of everyone who existed earlier, and that list would not have included you.) Second, you can be referred to now, and so now we can say that you didn't exist then.

9. Here lurk complicated problems about what someone must know to identify you. To know merely that an effect is due to "the person who caused the effect" is not to know to whom it is due. Fortunately, these problems need not divert us here.

10. Plato, *Parmenides*, 130.

11. For another treatment of the subject of traces, see my "R.S.V.P.—a Story," *Commentary*, Vol. 53, No. 3, March 1972, pp. 66–68.

12. The question of why we should act to fulfill God's plan, in case it is up to us, may appear foolish. After all, this is God, the creator of the universe, omniscient and omnipotent. But what is it about God, in virtue of which we should carry out our part in his plan? Put aside the consideration that if we do not, he will punish us severely; this provides a prudential reason of the sort a slave has for obeying his more powerful master. Another reason holds that we should cooperate in fulfilling God's plan because we owe that to him. God created us, and we are indebted to him for existence. Fulfilling his purpose helps to pay off our debt of gratitude to him. (See Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1965, p. 108.) Even if we don't want to play that role, it not being the sort of activity we prize, nevertheless must we do it to repay the debt? We might think so on the following grounds. You were created for the role, and if not for God's desire that you fulfill the role, you wouldn't exist at all; furthermore, existing while performing that role is better than not existing at all, so you should be thankful you were created at all, even if only for that role. Therefore, you are obligated to carry it out.

However, we do not think this form of reasoning is cogent when it concerns parents and children. The purposes parents have when they plan to have children (provided only these stop short of making the child's life no better than nonexistence) do not fix the obligations of the child. Even if the parents' only purpose was to produce a slave, and a slave's life is better than nonexistence, the offspring does not owe to his parents acquiescence in being enslaved. He is under no obligation to cooperate, he is not owned by his parents even though they made him. Once the child exists, it has certain rights that must be respected (and other rights it can assert when able) even if the parents' very purpose was to produce something without these rights. Nor do children owe to their parents whatever they would have conceded in bargaining before conception (supposing this had been possible) in order to come into existence.

Since children don't owe their parents everything that leaves their lives still a net plus, why do people owe their ultimate creator and sustainer any more? Even if they owe God no more, still, don't children owe their parents something for having produced and sustained them, brought them to maturity and kept them alive? To the extent that this debt to parents arises from their trouble and labor, since we don't cost an omnipotent God anything, there's nothing to pay back to him and so no need to. However, it is implausible that a child's whole debt to his parents depends merely on the fact that he was trouble. (When a parent takes great delight in his child's growth, so that any inconveniences caused are counterbalanced by the pleasures of parenthood, doesn't this child still owe something to the parent?) Still, at best, these considerations can lead to a limited obligation to our creator and sustainer—there is no arriving at Abraham by this route. To speak of a limited obligation may sound ludicrous here: "we owe everything to him." Everything may come from him, but do we owe it all back?

Our discussion thus far might leave a believer uncomprehending: he might speak as follows. "Why should one do what is wanted by an omnipotent, omniscient creator of you who is wholly good, perfect, and so on? What better reason could there be than that such a being wants you to do it? Catching the merest glimpse of the majesty and greatness and love of such a being, you would want to serve him, you would be filled with an overwhelming desire to answer any call. There would be a surrender rather than a calculation. The question 'why do it?' would not arise to someone who knew

and felt what God was. The experience transforms people. You would do it out of awe and love.” I do not want to deny that the direct experience of God would or might well provide an overwhelming motive to serve him. However, there remains the second question: why and how does fitting God’s plan and carrying out his will provide meaning to our lives?

13. This first appeared in *Mosaic*, Vol. III, no. 1, Spring 1971 (published by the Harvard-Radcliffe Hillel Society), pp. 27–28, as one of the “Two Philosophical Fables,” and is reprinted here with only minor changes.

14. See also the Jorge Luis Borges story “The Circular Ruins” in his collection *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1964, pp. 45–50), in which a dreamer realizes that he himself also is dreamt; and note the tale of Chuang Tsu, who wonders if he dreamt the butterfly, or is dreamed by the butterfly. Each of these illustrates levels undercutting levels, or alternate levels whose ordering is unclear. (Contrast the structure of the traditional detective story, wherein the detective penetrates appearance to reach the underlying, ground-floor reality.) It is as if the universe is or might be constructed according to an unbreakable code via a trapdoor function; we see the encoded message and even if we knew the generating rule we still could not find the plain text. See Martin Hellman, “The Mathematics of Public Key Cryptography,” *Scientific American*, Vol. 241, August 1979, pp. 146–57.

15. Some carried out this task too enthusiastically. Fichte’s view rendered reality less alien to us, but only by making it so much our product that others (for example, Jean Paul, Madame de Staël) justifiably complained that it left us all alone. Would you join any country club that had you as its founder, sole member, and acreage?

16. Carl Jung pursued gnostic themes as revelatory of our psyche, seeing them not as metaphysically accurate but as the self’s projections. An alternative theory might view the isomorphism as due to man’s being created in the image of (a gnostic) God.

17. It may not be clear always whether there is a connection to something else. If to have the goal of advancing your own knowledge is to connect up with something beyond yourself, namely knowledge or truth, why doesn’t the goal of advancing your own pleasure connect you up with something beyond yourself, namely pleasure? Is it the intentionality of knowledge that takes it outside of itself? Would the focused intention to participate in the Platonic Form of Pleasure, rather than merely to have pleasurable experiences, suffice to connect one up with something else?

18. There is a story told that Martin Buber once spoke to a group of Christians saying something like the following: We Jews and you Christians hold many beliefs in common. Both of us believe the messiah will come. You Christians believe he has been here before, so that he will be coming for a second time, while we Jews believe he will be coming for the first time. For the foreseeable future, there is much we can cooperate together on—and when the messiah *does* come, *then* we can ask him whether he’s been here before.

There is only one thing to add to Buber’s remarks. I would like to advise the messiah, when he comes and is asked the question whether he’s been here before or not, to reply that he doesn’t remember.

19. See W. V. Quine, “Philosophical Progress in Language Theory,” *Meta-philosophy*, Vol. 1, 1970, pp. 2–19; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, and *The Blue and the Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958). In contrast, Jerrold Katz presents an explicitly Platonist interpretation of linguistics in *Languages and Other Abstract Objects* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1981). Whatever the merits of Katz’s proposal, it is illuminating to have that alternative presented and to see linguistics viewed under the classification of positions in the philosophy of mathematics, so that Chomsky’s program is conceptual-ist, and so on.

20. For illuminating discussions of the latter as the view of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and of the far-reaching consequences of the undermining in his *Philosophical Investigations* of the notion of an intrinsic terminus for meaning, see Bruce Goldbert, “The Correspondence Hypothesis,” *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 77, 1968, pp. 438–54, and “The Linguistic Expression of Feeling,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 8, 1971, pp. 86–92.

Footnote

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