The Meaning of Life

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Prologue

"The meaning of life", said Lester with a grin, "is *collecting airmiles*". Lester had just been released from hospital after successful quadruple-bypass surgery. His medical bills had been charged to his credit card, which was linked to his airmiles account, and for each thousand dollars worth of surgery his future life ballooned by a thousand miles. Even when he was closest to death, the airmiles he was racking up meant that he could still plan for the future. Lester had planned for the surgery, just as he was planning now for what would come later; already he was mapping out the rest of his life.

We shall try to prove in which follows that plans are at the heart of a meaningful life. But not just any plans will do. They have to be your own plans, plans for your own future, and you yourself will have to work hard to see that they are realized.

The meaning of life is therefore not something that already exists. You cannot seek the meaning of life as if it were some sort of Holy Grail waiting to be discovered. You must create the meaning in your own life, by imposing on it a pattern through your own planned actions – in the same way that a sculptor imposes a pattern on a lump of clay. Like the scultpor, you choose to do certain things and avoid others. This book is about such choices, and about how, in realizing them, you can create meaning in your life.

Some answers to the question of the meaning of life:

1. Happiness

2. Freedom

3. Living creatively

4.Collecting experiences

5.Consciousness

6.Doing good for others

7.Acquiring wisdom

8. Actualizing yourself

9.Having the courage to be yourself

10. Changing the world, and leaving something behind when you die

11. Transcending yourself and freeing yourself of all desires and passions

Chapter 1: Why Happiness Does Not Make a Life Worth Living

The Importance of Being Conscious

We think that all the readers of this book will agree that it is a good thing to go on living. But why? We can, after all, imagine situations in which we would not want to go on living—for example, being in a permanent coma, being kept alive by a life-support system that renders you permanently bedridden and full of drugs. We do not want to go on living under just any conditions, but only under conditions that enable us to have a certain sort of life—one worth living. But what sort of life *is* worth living? It is this question that this book seeks to answer.

Some have argued that what matters in survival turns on the life of the mind. What we desire in desiring to go on living is that our mental life should persist. A life is worth living only if it meets the condition that it is a life involving conscious experiences.

Certainly if you are like most people you do indeed desire that your present experiences, thoughts, beliefs, desires, memories, and feelings continue into the future. You desire that your experiences be followed by more experiences in a seamless flow. Your future does really matter to you. But we ask once again: Why? Why do your mental experiences matter to you? What is it about your mental life in virtue of which it matters?

Well, not just any mental life will do—not even if it is yours. Not just any continuation of your present experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and desires will make your mental experiences matter. You would not want to go on living (we think) if your life consisted in nothing more than staring at the same expanse of brown paint for millions and millions of years.

This means that it cannot be the sheer continuity, the *flow* of your mental life, that makes your life worth living. Perhaps what matters is that your mental life involves change, variety. But even variety will not quite do the trick. Would you want to lead a rich and varied life, full of change and excitement, if this were a matter of sheer, random change? We think not. You want your experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and desires to manifest a special sort of change. But what sort? The most tempting answer to this question is that you want your experiences in the future to involve the sort of change and variety that brings you happiness. Happiness, then, seems to be the key to leading a meaningful life.

Is Happiness What Makes a Life Worth Living?

But is it really happiness, pleasure, enjoyment that make it worthwhile to go on living from one day to the next, to survive into the future? Suppose you have fun, drink alcohol all day long, take drugs or happy pills (with no hangovers). You lead a life of continuous enjoyment. Would this be a life worth living? Suppose someone hypnotized you to be happy forever. Would *that* make your life worth living? Is happiness really enough?

Perhaps you will say that it is some *special sort* of happiness or enjoyment that makes your life worth living. But what sort? Well, perhaps the happiness and enjoyment that come with success—a life in which you obtain all the riches you could ever desire and in which you experience precisely the pleasure that success and fortune bring—this, surely, would be a life worth living.

The Offer

But would it really? Imagine that you are an unsuccessful and a somewhat bored and

lazy person. You are unhappy. A rich inventor makes you the following offer. He has created a machine that looks from the outside like a PET-scan device. He tells you that if you agree to enter his machine, he will recreate your life to be whatever you want it to be. The device is, he assures you, perfectly safe. It has been thoroughly tested by scientists from all over the world. Thousands of people are already using the machine, and none has suffered any ill effects. To enter the machine will cost you nothing. The inventor, a philanthropic genius, has built the machine to help as many people as possible enjoy the pleasures of success – so that they can live lives that are truly meaningful.

On the other hand he warns you that once you step into the machine you can never re-enter the world you left. But he re-assures you that this is no reason to worry. Once you have experienced life inside the machine, you would in any case never want to leave it.

This is because inside the machine you will find yourself enjoying every imaginable success. You will be rich, happy, healthy, and attractive; your wildest fantasies will be fulfilled. Stepping out of the machine after all this – back into your normal, grey reality – would be so traumatic that the machine's controllers have made it impossible. They have ensured also that all your memories of deciding to enter the machine will be erased, so that you will never have even the vaguest suspicion that the world you are experiencing inside the machine is anything other than the world you have always known. Your present experiences, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and traits of character will continue in a seamless flow. You will believe that your life is going on exactly as before. But it will be *better*. Immeasurably better.

So will you stay out here in the real, unhappy, unfriendly, scruffy world and continue in your accustomed ways? Or will you enter the machine and enjoy the happiness it will

bring? Will you say yes to the inventor's offer?

Reasons to Decline

It is certainly a pleasant and desirable prospect to be not only successful but liked by everybody and always happy. But still, a life inside a dream machine is probably not quite what you are seeking. If you are like most people, you will turn down the inventor's offer.

But why? Your mental states will, after all, flow on. They will be connected up to the mental states in your life so far in a way that ensures that your mental life will continue without any noticeable disturbance – you will never know that your life is a matter of computer-generated stimulations of your brain.

You might not want to enter the machine for fear of losing your connections with family and friends. But that can be fixed. The inventor can put them into machines alongside yours and wire you all up together. The machine's software will ensure that, as you enjoy success and happiness, so will those you love. You can share beautiful sunsets, have great sex, and go on vacations together, exactly as before—only better. And as a little something extra: you will always stay as beautiful as you are now or, if you are not satisfied with the way you or your partner look, the machine will fix that too.

You do not want to enter the machine, you say, because a successful life like the one described, with no sorrow, would not be a truly happy one. You do not want to be only rich and successful, because you feel a need for a sort of balance. It is only possible to be truly happy, you say, if you can also, at least occasionally, understand through a modicum of suffering what it is to be unhappy. But that too can be fixed. The inventor will calculate exactly the right combination of success and failure for a person just like

you. He will program the machine to give you the perfect mix of happy times and sad, packaged together to include just the right amount of randomness.

You might say that it is because you have no reason to trust the inventor that you reject his offer. You are suspicious. There is after all no way of knowing what the long-term consequences of being inside such a machine might be. But the inventor can prove to you that machines just like his have been in use for many decades. Their long-term effects have been thoroughly tested and their use has long been common practice. It has been shown that people lead much longer lives inside the machine than out here in the world. Inside the machine, after all, they are free of all the mental and bodily stresses of normal life. Given that you know all of this, how could you possibly maintain any qualms about accepting the inventor's offer?

Well, you might still argue that you have no way of knowing whether life in the machine is indeed so wonderful as the inventor claims, or that the world inside it truly is indistinguishable from the world outside. For after all, nobody has so far been allowed to come back out and tell us. But that, too, can be fixed. Just for you the inventor will offer a special deal: a try-out phase, after which you would be allowed to change your mind. There is, he explains, a drug with extremely rare ingredients that will immediately mitigate the mental trauma suffered by those who leave the machine after experiencing life in it. The drug is too costly to be made available to the general public – but the inventor has chosen you to offer it to, so you can enjoy the try-out phase with no psychological ramifications. He has no doubt that this try-out phase will convince you that everything is exactly as he told you. But then, the time will come when you have to enter the machine once and for all. When that time comes, you will not have the chance to change your mind. So let's suppose that you do try it out, and discover that everything

is exactly as promised. Would you step back in for good?

Your Mental Life and the World

You will probably still be disposed to say no. Entering the dream machine once and for all just does not seem to be the right thing to do. But why not? As far as happiness, consciousness, and experience are concerned, the machine is after all offering something so much better than what you have at the moment.

The reason you say no, we think, is this: once you enter the machine, you will lose control of your body. Someone—or something—else will be in charge. You decline because your body inside the machine will not have the right sort of relation to the world outside and to the people you know and love. The question remains, however, why this should matter to you if you will not even be aware of it. Why will you not allow yourself to lose control of your body, even if this loss of control results in incomparable happiness? Our answer: because it is not only our minds that make it worthwhile to go on living, but our bodies as well.

This because what matters is not just that our mental life should flow on, but that it should flow on for the right reason. It matters to us how our experiences are caused, and here a connection to the world beyond the mind becomes important—a connection through our bodies.

False Beliefs

There is something about the idea of the dream machine which makes our skin crawl, and this book is an attempt to pinpoint why. Human beings are physical creatures living in a physical world, and we shall show that a crucial part of what makes life worth living

involves physical, bodily interaction with this world.

This physical interaction must be one over which we have control, and this means that our beliefs, too, must enjoy the right sort of tight fit with the world around us. A belief is a state of mind in which we have an idea about the world, which we use as a basis for our interaction with the world. In the course of our lives each of us accumulates many beliefs, more or less at random. But it is not the quantity of beliefs that is important. Rather, what matters is that these beliefs be true. We want our understanding of the world and of ourselves in the world to be correct. We do not, in other words, want to live a lie.

If you believe that your daughter is hungry, then your belief is true if your daughter *is* hungry. If you believe that your boss is pleased with your work, then your belief is true if she truly is pleased with your work.

In the dream machine, you can enjoy fancy dinners, great sex, and beautiful scenery, but as far as your beliefs about the world are concerned, you can only ever have false ones. If you believe that your friends are impressed by your new shoes, then your belief is false because there are no shoes to be impressed by—just the machine and some patterns of electronic stimuli. Many of your beliefs about your mental life, too, are false. For example, since the machine will provide your body with all the nourishment it needs, you cannot truly be hungry. Any belief that you are hungry is false, created by the machine by stimulating those parts of your brain that give rise to psychological sensations of hunger. Your belief that you are enjoying sex with your girlfriend is also false. The machine is merely stimulating those parts of your brain that give rise to the psychological sensations that accompany sex.

What You Can and What You Cannot Do Inside the Machine

You can have desires in the dream machine, and experience the pleasure of anticipation. You can also experience the fear or anxiety that precedes the pleasure you feel in attaining your goal—fear or anxiety that may be part of the necessary suffering that will enable you to appreciate all the more the pleasure when it comes. You can desire to become a good mother. And because this is a dream world, tailored exactly for you, you will experience the fulfillment of your desire: the machine will always enable you to achieve exactly what you wanted. And in terms of pleasure and satisfaction, you do indeed reap the rewards of being a good mother, because you *believe* that you are a good mother, and you are happy.

But not so fast. What in fact happens is this: while you believe that your desires have been realized, in truth they have not. You, of course, cannot tell the difference between genuine realization and its dream machine substitute. As far as your mental life is concerned, real success and dream machine success are indistinguishable. But there is a distinction nonetheless, and it matters crucially to a correct account of why you want to go on living.

For one thing, your dream machine child will not in fact exist. It will be neither conceived nor born. It will not even be a virtual child; it will only be a figment of your mind. In thinking it exists, you will be wrong. And when you die, every figment of your mind, including the child, will be destroyed. It is not even as if your child will die with you: the child never existed.

If you are a painter in the dream machine, your pictures will enjoy every possible success. But they, too, will not exist. They will not even be virtual pictures. You will

believe that you have painted them and exhibited them, and that there are people who admire and buy them. But all of these beliefs will be false.

Suppose you desire to become a good football player. The best you can achieve in the dream machine is to play football on a dream machine team with a dream machine coach. You would win dream machine games against dream machine opponents. See how much this takes away from your achievement. Contrast this with what can happen in the real world. Suppose your game, your real game, gets better and better and your team gets better and better. Why would this improvement be something you value? Well, at least for this reason: it will mean that you can play, and win, against better and tougher opponents. And that means *real* opponents. You can make the opposing team suffer. And that means: *really* suffer.

We have here an important idea, which we might express in a crude way as follows: we need hurdles, opponents, difficulties to measure ourselves against. And these have to be real hurdles; the sorts of things that cannot be faked inside a dream machine. In order for life to be meaningful there have to be obstacles for us to face and overcome through our actions in the world, obstacles which can serve as a measure of our success and failure. You want your mind to interact with reality because you want to make real achievements and not just 'virtual' achievements in your own mental space. If you want to become a mother, then you want a real child – and not just the idea of a child, however vivid this idea may be.

Real Desires

We said that you can have something like desires in the dream machine. But let us examine this idea further. Desires are in some ways like beliefs: they are states of mind,

similar to the states that exist in the dream machine. By stimulating your brain with a complex series of electric signals the machine provides your mind/brain with a most wonderful collection of experiences. But a real desire, such as you have in the real world, must involve something more than just a state of mind: it must involve some willed movement of your body. For states of mind such as desires need to move in the direction of being realized in the world. Suppose that you constantly tell people that you desire to own a red sports car. But suppose you do absolutely nothing to realize this desire. Eventually all those around you will conclude that your desire is not real; that it is just a lot of talk. For a desire to exist, we can say, there must exist at least a tendency toward your bringing about changes in the world as a result of which your desire will be realized. It is of course possible to wish something without attempting to bring it into being, such as to have had a wild fling with Lauren Bacall in her heyday, but such wishes have an entirely different relation to reality than desires. Desires, but not wishes, need to be bound to a real tendency to be realized in fact. That is why desires cannot exist inside the dream machine. By definition they must be projected out into the world.

Desires Help Make Life Worth Living

But desires are precisely part of what makes life worth living. Suppose that you tell everyone that you desire to meet your perfect mate but that you do not make any sort of effort to make this come about. You sit passively at home, waiting, anticipating, relishing your future life. Your fantasies may give you lots of pleasure. But fantasies like this and the expectations and the longings they give rise to are not enough to make your life worth living. What it takes to make your life worth living is at least this: that you really do set out to realize your desires, that you set out to find your dream partner, your dream

job, or the success you really wanted.

To be real, desires must be tied to actions. They must be linked with the steps taken to realize them. And if you are stuck inside the dream machine then what you experience as your desires will never be connected to actions in this way.

You might, inside the machine, experience yourself as having the desire to eat a piece of cake. You might experience yourself as realizing this desire. But you could never in fact be in a position either to have the desire or to realize it. You would have, rather, desire substitutes, accompanied by a series of experiences of pseudo-fulfilment. You would feel that your life was rich in both desires and fulfillments; and all of this would appear to you to be exactly like the real thing—but it would not *be* the real thing.

Suppose you are inside the machine and that you have what you think of as desires and feelings toward what you think of as your daughter. These desires and feelings are worth nothing when compared to having real feelings toward a real flesh and blood child—and this so even though you cannot tell the difference between the two. This would be so even if your pseudo-daughter were to seem more lovable, more beautiful than any actual daughter, who of course brings you not only so much pleasure but also worry and pain.

Perhaps a life of false feelings and pseudo-desires would be worth having if the alternative were to have nothing, not to be alive at all. But surely it is not worth having when compared to the real thing. And this is so even if the real thing is less perfect, less glamorous, less exciting than the substitute. As John Stuart Mill expressed the matter: it is better to be an unhappy Socrates, than a happy pig.

Honest Toil

Suppose that what you had wanted was to become a scientist. This involves toiling to discover truths about cells, genes, or electrons. In the dream world, you will experience yourself as discovering many such truths, and you will think that you have discovered them through your own efforts. The truths that you think you have discovered might even *be* truths. But you will not have discovered them, and you will not *be* a scientist. So, if being a scientist—a good, successful, and respected scientist—is what would have made your life meaningful, your life inside the dream machine, however it might feel to you, would not actually *be* a meaningful life.

All of this implies, however, that the inventor of the dream machine cannot really fulfill his promise. The inventor described what consequences the machine would bring about. He promised you that the world you experienced inside the machine would be exactly the world you wanted to live in here outside. He said that you would lead a successful, happy life. He suggested that you would lead a meaningful life, a life worth living. But this was all, in fact, a trick.

Chapter 2: Truth and Goodness

Living in Truth

Why is truth important? Why is it important to have true beliefs about your external surroundings? Why do the oh so vivid experiences of the dream machine not suffice? To see the problem, imagine that you own a valuable Chinese vase that you inherited from your grandmother. You love and cherish the vase, and like to show it off to visitors.

Suppose someone wants to buy it. Not for any price, you say. But then the prospective buyer explains that she owns a machine which can make exact replicas of things (picture a device like the transporter from *Star Trek,* except that this one makes exact three-dimensional copies). The buyer offers to make an exact replica of your grandmother's vase, which is guaranteed to be indistinguishable from the original. She also has an extra little device that will (with no side effects) destroy just that part of your memory that pertains to this transaction. Upon the replacement of the vase, you will not remember that the exchange ever happened, and everything else will be the same. For you, the vase has so much sentimental value that you will decline the offer. But why? You cannot say that it is because you might somehow find out later that the vase was not the real one. We have ensured in our thought experiments that this is not possible, that copy is really—molecule for molecule, scratch for scratch—indistinguishable from the vase you inherited.

Why, then, would you decline the offer? The answer is again the same: you want your beliefs to stand in the right sort of relation to the world around you. For your beliefs about the vase after the switch has taken place, this will no longer be the case. Whatever it is that you value, whether this be a beautiful vase or a beautiful daughter, an act of kindness or an act of courage, you want to value it for the right reasons—you want your

appreciation to be founded on true beliefs.

Knowledge and the Tracking of Histories

You want your beliefs to track the world. They should add up to *knowledge.* To see what this means, consider the following story. You are a detective assigned to find the murderer of Fred. You knew Fred—he lives in your neighborhood, and you recall very well the fights he and his wife Lois used to get into. You begin to suspect that Lois might be the murderer. When you arrive at the scene of the crime you find some blond hairs, a pair of gloves and a mobile phone. Lois is blond. She once had gloves just like these. And it turns out that the phone is hers, too. You tell your colleagues that you have good reason to believe that Fred's wife is the murderer.

But do you *know* that she murdered him? Well, for this there is at least one further condition that must be satisfied: your belief must be true. You can have all the evidence you want, but if Lois did not actually murder Fred, you still could not *know* that she did. So you can know something about the world only if you have a belief about it that is not merely justified by the evidence but also true. Your belief must conform to the facts.

Suppose all the evidence—the hair, the gloves, the phone—was planted by Fred's only son, Peter, who wanted to land his mother in jail so he could inherit the family fortune. But suppose further that the case is still more complicated: Peter was not the only one who planned to kill his father, and when he arrived on the scene his father was already dead. For it was indeed Lois who did the deed, but she left no evidence. The only evidence at the crime scene was planted by Peter.

You have evidence that justifies your belief that Fred's wife is the murderer, and this belief is furthermore true – so you have a true, justified belief. Even so, you still fail to *know* that Lois killed Fred, because your belief is not justified in the right sort of way.

A true, justified belief that fails to be knowledge is known as a 'Gettier belief', after the philosopher Edmund Gettier. Gettier beliefs are interesting in that they show what else is needed in order for your beliefs to be worth having: they must track reality. In the case described, they must track the histories of the people involved.

There is the well-known story of General Motors trucks and their exploding gas-tanks. In 1993 (?) NBC showed in a news program how the tanks mounted outside the truck's underframe were prone to exploding when hit from the side. In the video produced by NBC to demonstrate this, a GM truck burst into flames after being hit from the side. A safety consultant went on the air and described the fire as a holocaust. What was not mentioned was that NBC had faked the demonstration. They had attached toy rockets to the truck's fuel tank and detonated the rockets by remote control at the moment of impact. So even though it was true that trucks from General Motor had caught fire in circumstances like the one depicted in the video, this truth was not presented by NBC in a way that would track the reality that made it true.

Here is another example reinforcing the same point. You have a rich uncle who goes out of his way to ensure that you succeed in everything you do. Every time you strive to achieve something, your uncle secretly arranges for you to get what you want, and he does this in such a way that you think that your success is the result of your own efforts. Since you did after all work very hard to achieve your goals, your belief that you get what you want by striving for it is true and justified. But it is just a Gettier belief. It does not track reality. The fact that you get what you want is the result not of your efforts, but

of your uncle's.

When our beliefs are connected in the right way to the world around us, when we are, as we might say, living in truth, then our beliefs add up to knowledge. Living in truth, it will turn out, is part of what makes life meaningful. And this is yet another reason why a life inside the dream machine would not be meaningful. For inside the machine our beliefs and experiences do not track reality at all.

More on the Virtual Life

Suppose you meet someone who tells you that you are attractive. You want him to tell you this for the right reasons: because of the way you look and behave – in other words, because he thinks that you really are attractive. In fact, however, he says this because he is a psychologist who is performing experiments on the effects of flattering speech. You, of course (the psychologist has taken care of this), will never know the difference. Why do you prefer the one case so much more than the other?

There are things that you want to know: that your children are doing well in school, that the person you are in love with is also in love with you, that your boss and colleagues like and respect you, and that you have a chance of getting promoted next year. Why do you want to acquire knowledge about all these things even though it will sometimes bring you unhappiness? Because you need such knowledge in order to stand in the right relation to the world. Only if you stand in this relation, only if you are living in truth, do you have a chance of leading a meaningful life.

It matters not merely that you think your beliefs are true but also that they be true, that they be caused in the right way by the right things in the real world. It matters that there

be the right sort of connection between what makes a belief true and why you hold it. It is important to believe that Lois murdered Fred not merely on a whim, or on circumstantial evidence, but because *she left them there when killing her husband*. And there is a monumental difference between believing that your new co-worker is in love with you (a) because you want to believe it and (b) because it is the case. The whole point of holding beliefs is that they be true, and true for the right reasons.

The same connection between the truth of beliefs and the reasons we hold them applies in the realm of other mental states, too, including feelings. Consider happiness. There are certainly cases where we feel happy without awareness of any cause. In most cases, however, a feeling of happiness does not just enter into our minds from out of nowhere. It is caused by our passing a test, landing a new account, cooking a nice meal, playing a really difficult guitar riff, falling in love – and it is even heightened by the fact that we are *aware* that it is caused by these things.

Doing Good

Part of what makes a life meaningful, we can now say, is this: it must be a life in which you do not merely experience pleasure (or pain or other feelings) in your mind, but that these feelings should track the reality around you. The desires you strive to realize by acting in the world should then also track reality: they should be desires which are rooted in knowledge of the world around you.

We can now ask again: what sorts of *actions* will make your life meaningful? What should you do to make your life worthwhile?

One candidate answer is: you should do good. Mother Theresa devoted her life to helping other people. Her actions had positive value. Hitler's life, on the other hand, had

what we might call negative value. Let us use the term 'valuable' to describe a life whose positive actions outweigh the negative ones .

Is there any difference between a life's being *valuable* and a life's being *meaningful*? Is it executing actions with positive value that makes a life worth living?

Leading a valuable life is certainly one way to lead a meaningful one. But doing good is not in and of itself sufficient to make your life meaningful. Sally is lazy, lacks motivation and does not have any special desire to help others. However, it turns out that she is (rather like Forrest Gump) in a certain sense charmed. Strange coincidences happen to her regularly. She accidentally saves a little boy's life by kicking his ball back onto the sidewalk. If she had not been there he would have run into the street and been hit by a car. She buys the last portion of clams from a fish stand, unwittingly saving the life of an old man with a deadly allergy who would have bought them had she not gotten there first. And this goes on and on every day. Sally smiles at everyone she meets and spreads happiness throughout the world. But her smiles are the product of a nervous facial tick.

Sally's life is, surely, *valuable* by our definition. But this does not make it *meaningful*. Her actions prevent bad things from happening and they bring happiness, even though (except for the people who think she is smiling at them) nobody is aware of this, not even she herself. The problem is that her actions are valuable for merely accidental reasons.

Willing Good

Perhaps, then, what is needed to make life meaningful is that it be not merely valuable but deliberately so. Mother Theresa did not merely do good. She intended to do good,

and she was aware that she did so.

But can this really be the complete answer to the question of what makes life meaningful? Imagine a world in which we are all helping others, in a big circle. Zeb is helping Allan, Allan is helping Ben, Ben is helping Chip, Chip is helping David, and so on. Some human beings must, surely, sometimes able to break out of this circle in such a way as to realize plans on their own behalf. Helping others is after all to a large degree helping them to realize their plans.

If this is so, then the conception of the meaningful life as one spent deliberately doing good cannot (yet) be the right answer to the question of what it is to lead a meaningful life is.

Chapter 3: Achievements

Achievements

You like to climb mountains. You have already scaled many of the world's tallest peaks and you look forward to trying your mettle on the Eiger. But one night you are kidnapped by aliens who fly you in their spaceship to the top of the mountain, where they leave you behind. Well, there you are on the peak. Even so – you would not claim to have attained your goal. For your goal was not simply to be able to look down from the top of the Eiger; you wanted to get there *in the right sort of way*, which means: by your own efforts and at a time of your choosing. Climbing the mountain was to be your achievement. Being dumped at the top by someone else is something else entirely.

We can now formulate another part of our thesis: *achievements* are one central part of what makes a life meaningful.

What matters in life, what makes life worth living, is that you yourself create goals and that you yourself set about fulfilling them. In setting a goal it matters that it is you who sets it, and it matters that it is you who are responsible for realizing it.

When you have realized a goal, you have achieved something. If you have achieved something then you have shaped your life in a meaningful way. Achievements therefore have lasting results, and these results may apply not only to yourself but also to others. If you are a good parent, your children will grow up in a certain way, enjoying the preconditions for being good people. If you have won a swimming championship as a child, this will make your parents proud and the trophy will remain on your shelf for the rest of your life.

But a problem arises. For it seems that we can draw boundaries wherever we like. Suppose Mary gets only half way up the mountain and then loses interest in her

mountain-climbing project. She then still has to her credit the achievement of getting half way up. Even the person who did not finish the test did turn up on time in the exam room. This means that, if we are not careful in our formulations, whatever we do will end up counting as an achievement of some sort, and we are back with the dream-machine race, a race which everyone wins.

Activities

John is eating lunch in a diner. When he finishes, he drinks a cup of coffee, goes back to his office and works for a few hours, then walks home. He spends the evening watching TV and sipping fruit punch. All of these are activities on John's part. John's life, like everyone else's, is a never-ending chain of such activities. Activities have no real beginnings or endings. An activity is whatever you are doing over a certain interval of time: walking, talking, sipping, humming, tapping your feet, reading this book. An activity is not bounded in time in and of itself. It can be a bit shorter or a bit longer and still be the same activity.

A life, to be meaningful, must be composed of more than activities. Our activities must become part of something larger, something that is directed towards an end or goal. The activity of running can be part of running a race. The activities of sawing and nailing can be part of making a chair, or they can be part of teaching someone how to saw and nail. Jackie's walking may be part of her daily exercise routine. Phil's moving around the living room with his vacuum cleaner may be part of his weekly housecleaning.

If you complete your daily exercise then you have achieved something. An achievement is a completed activity. Examples of achievements are: Martha's having fed her children, Gloria's having made a chair, Susan's having painted a picture, John's having gotten an education. A lot of walking makes up a walk. A lot of blowing and banging makes up a performance of a military *marche*. A lot of studying and testing makes up an education.

Activities, we want to say, contribute to the meaning of your life only insofar as they lead towards achievements in these sorts of ways. It is an achievement when Mary reaches the top of the mountain, when Paula finds the dueling pistols she has been looking for for months. It is an achievement when John receives his diploma.

Goals

Sometimes we engage in activities with no particular goal. Most often we direct our activities towards some result, some end. We climb because we want to reach the top. We play chess because we want to win. Achievements cannot come about without our wanting to achieve them. If we reach a goal by accident this is not an achievement, and being deposited on the top of the mountain against your will is no achievement on your part.

Peter wants to get a part in a play at his local theater. He has set this goal long before the casting decisions are to be made, and he has been preparing diligently for the audition. He gives of his best in the audition and is cast in just the role he had in mind

and performs marvelously well. He has achieved something. This achievement is part of what makes his life meaningful, because he has attempted to shape his life in a way that will also have a lasting effect on the world around him, and he has succeeded at shaping it in the way that he wanted.

We will need to do some work in defining achievements, however, for too many activities will count as achievements if these are defined simply as completed activities that are still merely trivial. Suppose that Lisa turns on the television in her living room. This is an achievement in the sense laid down so far: it is an activity bounded in time that is the result of a deliberate intention directed toward some goal—in this case: the goal of turning on the television set. It does not seem reasonable to suppose that an achievement of this sort is enough to contribute to the meaningfulness of Lisa's life

But why not? Consider the story of Susan who became the lighting designer for *Madame Butterfly* at the Metropolitan Opera. She started her career as a lighting board operator for a small community theatre, gained experience, worked her way up in the theatre circles through constant effort until her work was noticed by those in charge. Landing this job is a real achievement on Susan's part, in a way in which it would not have been had she been picked out by a producer friend who felt like doing her a favor. Yet the end result is the same in either case.

So something more than *mere* achievement is needed. It seems that only certain special sorts of achievements can contribute to the meaningfulness of our lives.

On Means and Ends

It will bring us one step closer to explaining meaning if we point to a distinction between achievements that are ends in themselves, and those that are the mere means to other ends. Distinguishing between these two kinds of achievements is of course dependent on the reasons we have for doing what we do. Writing poetry, raising a family, watching a movie can all be ends in themselves; but they can also be done to achieve some other, different end. Sometimes you go to a movie you know you'll hate so you can get someone you really want to get to know better to go with you. Sometimes you go to the movies because your friends are going and you'd rather not stay home alone. But sometimes, maybe often, you go because you simply want to see the film. Poems can be written for the sake of writing poems, but they can also be written to vent emotion or to make a political statement, or to win a scholarship to the creative writing program of your local university. Some achievements we aim at because they relate to a larger purpose. They are instrumental – they are instruments to some goal. Others, however, we aim at for their own sake, not because they are means to further ends, but because they are ends in themselves.

Is the hour you spend watching television a means to something else? Or is it an end in its own right? Well, that depends on why you are watching. If you are watching a do-it-yourself program to find out how to make a chair, it is a means to something else. If you watch a movie for the pleasure it will bring, then it is an end in itself. It is tempting,

now, to suggest that it is those achievements which are ends in themselves which contribute towards your leading a meaningful life. But this is not right. Playing video games is an end in itself, studying hard for your exams is a mere means. Something more is needed.

Measures of Success

How are we to characterize those genuine achievements which contribute meaning, and the trivial achievements which do not do so?

Suppose you want to bake a cake. There exists here a measure of your success: how good it is, how much you and other people like it. The measure here is real: it is based on how your cake is judged—or would be judged—by people who are honest and critical, who know enough about cake to be able to tell a good one, and who would not tell you that they like the results of your baking just to be polite. Your cake, if it is a good one, would still be good by this real measure even if for whatever reason no one ever in fact has the opportunity to make a judgment about how good it tastes (in the same way that a tree falling in the forest *does* make a sound even if nobody hears it).

Suppose you want to build a house. Here, too, there is a measure of your success: how good it looks, how comfortable it is to live in, how well it fits into its setting, how well it weathers storms. You had several different goals in mind for the house when you built it, so the success of each goal may have to be measured separately, by several different criteria. Certain of these criteria must be judged by standards set by the world; for

example, time will judge how well your house's structure abides by the mathematical and physical laws that will enable it to withstand forces like hurricanes, or gravity. Time is the judge that will rate the success of your house's relationship to the world, human judges will determine your house's success in meeting other criteria. An artist could rate its aesthetic appeal, your family could rate its coziness.

Some measures of success will be not so easy to apply. The will point in different directions. People will disagree. Some criteria will be such that we simply cannot know for sure whether they have been met, because we do not have means sophisticated enough to determine.

All of this means that it may be difficult to know whether a given achievement has contributed meaning to our lives. Members of the French resistance who died before France was liberated could not have known that their intentions were fulfilled—the meaning in their lives was recognized, but only retrospectively and by others. The key here is that meaning exists even independently of being recognized. We can assume that the meaning in an achievement *will* be recognized if people come to know about it, but in extreme cases, this may take a long time (generations, even centuries).

Genuine Achievements Defined

A genuine achievement is an activity that is directed towards a goal and is marked by the existence of some measure of how well you do in realizing this goal – a standard of right and wrong, of success and failure. Only where such a standard or measure exists can

there be a genuine achievement, and only a genuine achievement can contribute to the meaningfulness of your life.

There is a famous passage in *Through the Looking Glass* in which Lewis Carroll describes a race in which everybody wins. There is something eerie about this passage. The whole point of a race is to test those who take part by leaving open the possibility that they can lose. A race has a built-in measure of success; otherwise it would be just a lot of people running about. There is a Monty Python sketch which starts with six swimmers lined up at one end of an Olympic-sized pool. The tension builds as the official with the starting pistol moves to his position near the end of the line, raises his pistol, and fires. What happens then is that the six swimmers jump into the pool, and stand in the water staring past each other. What is wrong, again, is that where everyone, or no one, wins there is no measure of success, and where there is no measure of success, there can be no genuine achievement.

Measures of success may take time to develop—there always has to be a first occasion when some new type of achievement is realized. An enterprising caveman is sick of slinging animal carcasses over his shoulder, so strings together some branches with twine and makes a rudimentary raft on which to float his carcasses home. There are not yet measures of success for building rafts, but the caveman has a genuine achievement to his credit nonetheless—and the right sort of measure will follow in course of time. The caveman has created meaning by building the raft in history. At the same time he reached a more immediate goal. Other people in his cave society judged to be good

because it made their lives easier than they were before.

Society is structured in such a way that many activities come along with their own measures of success. Such measures apply to our activities in law, chess, religion, business, athletics, music, science, medicine. There are measures of success in child rearing, in homemaking, in teaching and learning, and in Tae-kwon Do. These measures are often highly elaborate and may need to be sustained through the efforts of many people spread out through time and space. Think of the International Chess Federation or the Nobel Prize Committee.

The creation and upholding of such standards can themselves reflect achievements on the parts of the persons involved in applying them. That is, there are second-order achievements which are brought about through evaluating the first-order achievements of others. These second-order achievements can contribute in turn to the meaningfulness of the evaluators' lives in light of yet further standards of success for the activities of evaluation, all spreading in ever widening circles to comprehend ever more people in time and space. We find meaning not just by playing football or acting in plays, but also by coaching and umpiring football, by producing, directing, and writing plays—and by organizing dog shows and charity baking competitions. And because others are involved in creating and applying mreasures of success in relation to each person's achievements, almost all achievements are to this degree the results of collective actions and intentions.

Genuine achievements are achievements for which there is some measure or standard of success and failure in relation to which you have to exert special kinds of effort if you

are to ensure success. Your efforts need to be calibrated in relation to measures of success and in principle also in relation to the community of those who apply them. Genuine achievements are in this way opposed to more prosaic achievements like turning on the TV or watching the paint dry. We can now see why both the achievements that you execute as ends in themselves and the achievements that you intend as means to further ends can be genuine achievements. Earning your architect's diploma will contribute to the meaning of your life, even though you educated yourself for the sake of your future as an architect. Getting an architect's diploma is itself a genuine achievement: it is subject to standards of failure and success. This example reminds us once more that some achievements may presuppose others, and that achievements may be nested inside each other in complex ways. The life you spend gaining your diploma will be full of additional, larger and smaller genuine achievements along the way: learning new skills, passing exams, making new friends. The time you spend meeting, dating, and getting to know your mate can be time denoted to a genuine achievement.

The world of business measures success in the form of profit. In raising a family success is measured in the happiness, health, or future careers of your children. For the life of an alcoholic or a drug addict there is no such measure of success, just as there is no measure of success for the life of the person who lives by following the whim of the moment.

Measures of Success and Failure must be Public

If your achievements are to give meaning to your life the measures of success and failure must be public. If you win a race in an athletic competition we can all see that you have won. If you perform well in a play at your local theater we can all see the quality of your performance. If the measures of success are to be public, then so, too, must the achievements to which they are applied. A meaningful life has to be a life that is lived in the open. If corruption, nepotism, or cheating enter in—if you pass the test because you bribed or blackmailed the examiner, if you win the race by taking steroids, if your business makes big profits because you import your raw materials illegally—your achievement is nullified.

This can help us to see why a mobster, or a Hitler, cannot be said to live meaningful lives. Certainly, there are standards of success and failure in organized crime or fascism; but these standards belong to the same category as cheating and lying. They are not standards which can be applied publicly and openly.

The example of resistance-fighters in Nazi-occupied France seems to offer an exception to the rule that activities that must be hidden from the public do not contribute to the meaningfulness of the lives of those who engage in them. The resistance fighters led meaningful lives even though they had to hide their activities, but this is because even here, once the war was over, public measures of success and failure were indeed able to be applied to their actions.

Once again we see that measures of success do not have to be contemporary to the achievements they measure. Points of view, new artistic forms of scientific methods, are often vindicated only long after they are introduced. The Greek astronomer Aristarchus's discoevery that earth orbited around the sun was ignored until Copernicus's posthumous publication brought the idea to public attention again in 1543. Even Galileo, who gained fame (or notoriety) on account of his support for the Copernican theory, was not acknowledged by his contemporaries for his scientific achievments. History, however, vindicated heliocentrism—and thereby also revealed the genuine achievements of Aristarchus, Copernicus, and Galileo.

If we are right, indeed, then meaning can exist even if it never gets to be recognized. Even if the efforts of the French Resistance during World War II had never been made public, the member of the Resistance would have led meaningful lives nonetheless.

The Right Sort of Society

If the meaning of your life depends on your achievements, and if genuine achievements have to be determined by a standard, some public scale of system of evaluations, against which they can be measured, in the light of day, it only makes sense that some societies are likely to be more conducive than others to individuals leading meaningful lives. The key is that people are judged on their own merits, not on the basis of who they know but on the basis of what they do. It is such a society in which measures of success are applied openly, and according to rules that apply equally to everyone and are known to everyone

beforehand.

Such a society provides a framework that is likely to support the making of the right sorts of choices on the part of its members. In such a society the things you create—whether works of art, houses, meals—are evaluated on the basis of how good they are, and not on the basis of who your father is, who your college professors were, or who you know.

Achievements Require Effort

Our lives are sequences of activities. Each activity is continued in time by another activity. Some activities have boundaries—winning a race, climbing a mountain, inventing a new drug, having a baby.

In order for something to be an achievement, as we saw, it needs to have the following components: a goal, some public measure of success and failure, and the reaching of this goal in a way that is truly in accord with the measure of success. But we also need one further component: an achievement must involve real effort on your part. If your activities amount to genuine achievements then you must be fully conscious of the risks, and of the expenditure of effort is required and you must go ahead with your attempt to realize your goal even in spite of this belief, and even in spite of your awareness that you might fail in your attempt.

We cannot achieve everything we might desire. We have to choose. Given our talents there are some things we can achieve easily, like reaching out for another bottle

of beer, and other things that take real effort, involve a certain amount of risk, and will give rise to the sort of achievement that will contribute to the meaning of our life.

If John inherits from his aunt the red sports car he has always wanted, then getting the car is not an achievement on his part. Certainly, it may make him happy and satisfy his desires, but it does not in and of itself contribute anything to the meaning of John's life. If Sandy's children turn out to be good people, not because Sandy was there to help and guide them when they needed her, but because they were lucky enough to have good friends and good teachers, then the fact that the children turn out well, that they grow up to be kind, wise, and successful adults, is not an achievement on Sandy's part. Of course, she could be there for her children in an indirect sense—by choosing the right babysitters—but if she herself is doing nothing for her children, if she herself invests no effort in their upbringing, then her being a mother, in the sense simply of having given birth to children, does not contribute to the meaning of her life.

The need for real efforts means also the possibility of failure. To lead a meaningful life thus requires not only a degree of effort and endurance, but also of risk-taking that is above the norm: one might speak here in terms of a *115% rule*. An achievement must satisfy the condition that it is not something that you would in any case have arrived at in the normal course of events. It takes extra, directed, strenuous effort.

Barry Marshall

In July 1984, 32-year-old medical resident Dr. Barry Marshall drank a dose of

potentially toxic bacteria to prove his controversial theory that bacteria, not stress, cause peptic ulcers. People had thought that nothing could survive in the acidy regions of the stomach. But Marshall discovered in nearly all of his ulcer biopsies samples of a corkscrew-shaped bacterium that had burrowed into the stomach lining. He believed that a simple cure was at hand in the form of antibiotics. After drinking the bacteria solution he developed flu-like symptoms, and two weeks later an ulcer was found in his stomach lining. By 1994 scientists had finally accepted Marshall's theory, and the National Institute of Health now endorses antibiotics as the standard treatment for stomach ulcers.

Talent and Meaning

If leading a meaningful life involves the application of unusual efforts then resources of talent and imagination are involved, too. You make plans in light of the opportunities to which you are exposed, but you choose and plan also in light of your specific talents and dispositions. A football player needs to have good eyes and a disposition for the development of good leg muscles; a piano player must have long fingers and good ears. It seems that certain people are born with talents (practical or intellectual) for doing certain things, just as some people seem to have more staying power or doggedness than others in applying their talents to achieving what they set out to achieve. Doggedness may be related to happiness, in that we are more likely to achieve significant goals by pursuing avenues that make us happy—for then we are more likely to stick with our efforts even through hard times. (To this degree—in spite of all that was said in our

discussion of the dream machine above—happiness is relevant to the leading of a meaningful life).

So although happiness does not in itself imbue a life with meaning, it is related to meaning in virtue of the fact that a meaningful life is likely to involve strenuous efforts. When it comes to choosing what sort of life you will lead, and what avenues you will choose to create meaning, you will thus be well advised to choose the sort of activity that makes you happy—in hard times, enjoyment of the activity might keep you going.

Because a meaningful life involves hard work over long periods of time, and because dedication and sacrifice are the bedmates of hard work, it is more likely that you will sustain an activity that gives you pleasure.

Achievements May Be Collective

But we are still not done. Even given the right kind of measure of success, and the right kind of effort on your part, you will not attain meaning in your life in certain cases. It is important to remember that many achievements are collective—they can be brought about by no single person acting alone but only through collective intentions that you share with others.

Many of your achievements involve the help of collaborators just as much as they involve efforts on your part. Peter wants to build a house. He might hire people to do the work, or he might build his house with his friends. But in either case he has still accomplished something by bringing about the circumstances that enabled the house to

be be built. It was his idea to build it, he invested effort, risk, money, and hard work. He selected and organized architects, builders, plumbers, and painters. In helping to give rise to Peter's achievement, all of these people contribute to the meaningfulness of Peter's life, and he may have contributed to the meaning of theirs.

There are various other ways in which other people may play a role in making our lives meaningful. We marry, have children, and make friends. Raising a family and keeping up friendships affect our life, shape our beliefs and memories, and contribute to making and realizing our plans. But our plans, too, have an influence on which people we come into contact with. Jody is an oceanologist. She meets John at a conference and sees that they have similar ideas and interests. They become friends. They talk about ocean matters, about fish plancton, the Gulf Stream. John comes to play a specific role in Jody's life. And here, too, we see the gulf that can open up between having a meaningful life and having a happy life: having friends brings responsibilities, it brings the possibility of loss, and sadness.

Our lives can involve a complex tapestry of friendships, and the conversations, exchanges, and collaborations we have with our family, friends and colleagues stretch across our life and contribute to holding it together, and to giving it just that sort of texture which makes for a meaningful life.

Chapter 4: Actions and Products

On Making a Chair

When Gloria makes a chair, she takes some wood and glue and fabric and she shapes these parts simple and puts them all together with considerable skill to form a new, more complex object. Her achievement brings something into existence which was not there before. The coming into existence of the chair constitutes a genuine boundary in time. It is true that those of Gloria's activities which were involved in making the chair were caught up in the seamless flow of her life. They were all of them continued immediately by other activities. But her achievement is nonetheless genuine because it is genuinely separated off within this seamless flowe *by the coming into existence of the chair*.

Gloria's chairs are highly prized. Each chair she makes is unique, a work of art. When she finishes a chair this is a genuine achievement; it gives meaning to her life.

Suppose that Dick writes a term-paper. He takes out his laptop and begins to write down a first rough sketch of what he wants to say. He works day and night in giving shape to and polishing his work. When he is finished he prints out what he has written

and reads it through, proudly anticipating what his professor will say when it is handed in on time. Again: the activities brings something into existence which was not there before. Even though they continue and are continued by many other activities on Dick's part, it is still a genuine achievement. It gives rise to something new as its product.

Promises and Obligations

We said that genuine achievements bring something new into existence. Achievements are distinguished from mere activities by the fact that they culminate in some new product whose beginning to exist marks a genuine boundary in time.

Not all acts in the social realm bring new meaningful products into being. Suppose you are driving down the road and you signal to turn left. The flashing light is significant because our culture has made it so. There are rules which bring it about that certain events (flashings of lights, moving over to the left side of the road, slowing down, etc.) *count as* signaling to turn left.

Such rules are necessary. But they do nothing more than regulate our pre-existing behavior. For example they tell us that we must drive on the right. All that matters is that

we all agree on this choice. Other rules, in contrast, are much more than this. The rules of chess, or of religious rituals, or of town planning matter, because acting in accordance with these rules *bring new objects into being*.

The new products we thereby bring into being are of many different sorts. To see this let us take a very simple example of an achievement. John and Peter discuss Peter's project to build a new house. After much toing and froing John makes a promise to Peter that he will help him in these and those ways to realize his goal. When John makes the promise something new comes into existence. But it is not something concrete, as in the case of the chair. Rather it is an abstract thing: a social bond. John's obligation to Peter is the culmination of John's discussions with Peter. What comes into existence is a special sort of relation between John and Peter, which will remain in existence until John has fulfilled his promise and the house is built.

When you make a promise something quite mysterious happens. Just through speaking you bring into existence a special sort of bond, the bond of obligation. When you say 'I promise to help you with your homework after supper' you are not just stating a fact or making a prediction that you will help with the homework. You are not just expressing

your desire or intention to help with the homework. Rather, in uttering those words you are *binding yourself*, you are making yourself answerable to this other person (and to yourself) in the future. As you acquire an obligation towards this other person, so he acquires a claim on you. But how can a mere utterance give rise to an obligation and a claim in this way? Our bare intentions and desires have, after all, no consequences of this sort, and it is difficult to see why things should be different merely because your intention is spoken out loud.

This is not a matter restricted to purely personal affairs. Promises are involved also in the signing of legal contracts, in the forming of business partnerships and in all the larger and smaller scale projects by which in a complex society things get made or built or bought. Each of these, too, involves the bringing into being of mutually correlated claims and obligations on the part of those involved. If you buy a guitar, there is an obligation on the part of the store-owner to make amends if the guitar does not do its job.

Claims and obligations are nothing physical. But they also go beyond the purely psychological. This means that they are not just a matter of what people believe. They cannot exist inside a dream machine. We can be mistaken about what obligations exist

just as we can be mistaken about any other part of reality. You can believe that you are under an obligation when you are not. And you can be under an obligation without believing that this is so. Claims and obligations are human creations in some ways similar to the rules of chess. When once they have been created, they go on existing in an unchanging, abstract way, in large degree independently of the events which go on around them. Yet they nonetheless affect and shape these events in determinate ways, and they cease to exist just as soon as the right sorts of events occur to discharge them.

We can divide what exists in the world into two sorts as follows. On the one hand are those material things which exist, and go on existing independently of our thinking or believing. My mother and your daughter, a lion or a rock, an earthquake or a flood are examples of things which exist independently in this way. On the other hand are those things such as smiles, salutes, the moves in a game of chess, promises, and obligations, laws and religious which do not exist in and of themselves but only in virtue of the fact that we think and act in certain ways.

The new thing that comes into existence when you make a promise is not the sort of thing you can touch or move around. But it exists nonetheless.

The Dynamics of the Promise

A promise involves in the simplest case two persons: the one who makes the promise and the one who accepts it. A promise cannot be made unless both of the persons involved are conscious and in possession of their faculties. If a friend promises to help you build your house, then both of you intend that this promise be fulfilled. Of course, promises can be broken. But when you make a promise, then you must intend to fulfil it at the time you make it—otherwise you did not make a promise at all, you just pretended to do so. And because, when you make the promise you do intend to fulfil it, you will in fact often do so, a fact which is reinforced by the face that the institution of promising is tied up with our institutions of praise and blame. When John promises Peter that he will help him build his house, John becomes obliged to Peter. This obligation also has a moral dimension. If John fails to fulfil his obligation we can hold him to blame for what results. He is to blame if he does not have a good excuse for breaking his promise—for example, because he fell ill or was involved in an accident or because his truck broke down. If, on the other hand, John breaks his promise just because he doesn't feel like getting out of

bed, then we will find him morally at fault, and we will deal with him differently in the future.

Promising is thus a reliable instrument for improving social coordination. We can organize poker games and doctor's visits, we can invite people over for dinner and we can fly in airplanes—because promises are usually successful. Making a promise puts constraints on the future. It creates real meaningful relations into the world that in most cases result in future real effects. It thus on the one hand narrows the future, but it can also open up the future by making more things possible. We can fly to the moon; we can be elected President; we can invent the Internet.

The Parts of Promising

Your promise needs a sincere intention or act of will, and it needs also a sincere intention to bind yourself through the promising act. A parrot cannot make a promise by saying 'I promise you 100 dollars'. This is because a parrot cannot intend to bind itself through speaking in this way.

An act of promising has parts linked together in specific ways. This same structure can

be realized at different times and places. Promising has a pattern which recurs on many different occasions and in many different places. It is like the patterns illustrated in the world of shapes of triangles, squares and other geometrical shapes.

What are the parts of the promise? Some we have met already: there is a promiser, there is an act of speaking and an act of understanding, there is a certain content that is promised, and an intention to act in the future; there is an intention to bind oneself in the future by using words in a certain way. Once the promise has been made there is an obligation on the part of the speaker and a claim on the part of the person to whom the promise is made. These elements serve to link together speaker and hearer in a meaningful way. More complex webs arise when whole groups become linked together by promises, for example when business firms make promises to their employees or costumers or when orchestras plan a new season of concerts. We live in a world that is made meaningful, in part, through the existence of interconnecting webs of this sort.

This helps us to understand also why you should keep your promises. Breaking a promise lets down the other people who have formed expectations and made plans concerning their future conduct in light of what you have promised.

The Products of Social Acts

It is not only in the realm of promising that meaningful patterns are to be found. When two people get married—when they declare in public and in solemn fashion that they intend to spend the rest of their lives together—then this too brings a meaningful pattern into existence, namely the pattern created by the bond of marriage. A wedding is an achievement, by our definition above: it brings something new into existence—a marriage bond.

If a priest utters the word 'I declare you man and wife' at a certain point in a wedding ceremony then two people become joined together as man and wife. It is obvious here that one person's mere act of will would not be able to bring about an effect of this sort. Something more is needed: the people involved must already be connected together in a special way; there must be rules and meanings which they accept. Only then can something new be added by the utterance of just these words in just this particular context.

In many other ways, too, we can change the world by speaking aloud against a

background of already existing meaning—by accusing, apologizing, congratulating, warning. Nations create meaning when they pass new laws or enter into treaties with one another. The Meanings of our lives are shaped as much by the nations in which we live as by the neighborhoods in which we live. The existence of a nation can give an extra dimension of meaning to the lives of those who live both inside and outside its borders. There are bonds of obligation which hold between citizens, parents and children, between officers and soldiers, between bosses and workers, and all of these give new scope for achievements and new scope for the leading of meaningful lives. The bonds may survive and they will affect in myriad ways the lives of those involved, even when the latter are far apart and thinking of quite other things. What holds of obligations holds also for other sorts of abstract products of human activity. It holds of new songs, new religions, new political ideologies, new theorems. Making a new law or finding a new cure is an achievement which involves the coming into existence of a new kind of abstract thing.

What Do You Achieve When You Climb a Mountain?

It is an achievement when Peter climbs a mountain. But what sort of change in the world is involved here? Peter has done something, yet no physical product like a chair and no social product like a marriage bond is created. What is it, then, which sets Peter's achievement of climbing a mountain apart from the continuous flow of activities that continues on behind it?

Mountaineering is a part of Peter's life. He wants to add this mountain to his list of achievements. He tells his mountaineering friends about his plans. In a way he becomes obligated to them, and to himself, to reach the top. Against this background, reaching the top acquires a special social significance. Peter's ascent is not a mere physical movement but has the additional property that it brings about the fulfillment of all those informal obligations which Peter has entered into with his friends. It ensures that Peter retains the respect of his peers. But more: it fits Peter into a new place in the social web of meanings, the place of those who have (fairly, honestly, through their own efforts) scaled this very mountain. Climbing a mountain is like receiving a promotion at work or a prize for one's cooking: its significance lies in the fact that one moves to a new level in the social web.

This example reminds us that it is often easier to achieve something if other people are involved. Suppose you decide that you will quit biting your nails or coming late to work. But you do not tell anybody else about your promise. You are then obligated only to yourself. And if you fail to realize your promise, then it is only you yourself that you will have to face. No one else is a witness to your promise. Religion plays the role of making it easier for people to live meaningful lives, not least because religious believers hold that there is always someone watching over them whenever they make promises or enter into obligations or embrace goals of other sorts.

Prizes, marriages, term papers, political proclamations, recipes, marketing plans, computer programs—all of these are products of your action that help to give your life meaning. They provide a meaningful background, a launching pad, for further achievements. When you found an association to compaign for political reforms then your association creates a framework within which not only you yourself but also others can aspire to achievements of new sorts.

Cheating and Lying

Sometimes actions, as we have seen, give rise to products in incorrect ways which involve cheating or lying. You publish under your own name the proof of a theorem which you stole from the desk of a dying colleague. You found an association which masks political corruption with the phony pursuit of high-sounding political ends.

We can now reformulate our remarks above on the role of cheating as a detracting from the meaningfulness of your life by distinguishing, among the products of our actions—those which concert mere activities into achievements and the fake. Real products are those which come into existence as a result of actions governed by mental and physical processes of the right sort. It is real products that contribute meaning to your life, products which come about through the right sorts of processes.

When Phil promises Sue that he will clean the living room, his promise must be governed by the right sort of intention: he must actually intend to do the cleaning and to do it for the right sorts of reasons (not least, for the reason that he wants to fulfil his promise). In the case of fake products, on the other hand, these processes are defective. Suppose Phil merely utters the words, 'I promise to clean the living room' but does not

in fact intend to do so. He said what he said merely to keep Sue quiet while he reads his newspaper. Later he will go bowling with his friends. Phil's words do not create an obligation, but they are still not without enduring consequences of a sort which will affect his life. What they create is a set of false beliefs on Sue's part: an expectation that will not be realized. Later this expectation is replaced by a feeling of resentment, and by a lack of trust in Phil.

A Real Product May Survive You

Some of the products of your actions live on after your death—this is true of products such as children, families, communities, drawings, buildings, sculptures. Shakespeare died many centuries ago, but people still read his poems and perform his plays. His thoughts live on long after his death. These thoughts have been materialized in a form that permits them to continue having effects on the lives of each successive generation. It is for this reason that we have no doubt that Shakespeare led a meaningful life, a life full of genuine achievement.

When we say that Shakespeare's thoughts live on, we mean that his actions have

affected others and have led them to produce thoughts similar to his. All of his was made possible only through the invention of writing and printing, inventions which raised the level of meaningfulness of the lives of countless millions of people in subsequent generations. Shakespeare did so much to enrich the English language that even those English-speakers who are unfamiliar with his poems and plays are nonetheless affected by what he achieved.

But there are two aspects of the meaningfulness to Shakespeare's life. On the one hand is his life itself: the actions he performed. On the other hand are the products of these actions, products which endure in a way that contributes to making our lives meaningful today, and to enriching the web of meanings in which all of us live. To see why both aspects are important. Imagine, first of all, that Shakespeare lived exactly the life he did lead but that for quite accidental reason his works did not survive after his death. His life would then have in the first aspect exactly the same meaning as it has in this world—though we of course would not know about Shakespeare and his works, and thus we would not be in a position to appreciate this meaning. In the second aspect however something vital is missing. If you spend your life writing poetry and the entirety of your

work is burned in a fire after your death, or if you bring a child into the world and the child dies in a terrible accident, then these things do clearly have an affect upon the meaningfulness of your life, in ways we still need to explore.

On the other hand however if you enjoy eternal fame because your name is attached to a bunch of plays which you did not write, then even though everyone thinks you led a meaningful life, your life itself was without significance—and this is both of the two respects distinguished.

Fixing Our Ideas

We said that the inventions of writing and printing brought about a new level of complexity in the web of social meanings, affecting not only the way we speak and write but also every other realm of human endeavor, including science, commerce and law. Printing and writing allow what is transitory to become enduring and they allow what is private to become public. They allow memories to become fixed and externalized. An idea for a new building can become expressed as an architect's plan. An idea to improve your local community can become expressed as a new law.

There are many ways in which this transformation of what is fleeting into what is enduring can occur. Children are one way in which the meaning of your actions can be carried over into the future. The achievements of a child may be part of the achievements of the parents without actually being the parents' achievements. Because our children are parts of our achievements we will do things for our children which we would not normally do for the children of others. There are goals which the two of you share, goals that you want to realize with him together. Your playing football can become expressed in the trophy on the shelf in your living room.

Another way in which what is fleeting can be carried over into the future is through books, paintings, trophies, diplomas, cathedrals are all carriers of *meaning* into the future They are not dead physical objects, but have externalized memories embodied within them. Such meaning exists in the full sense only where there are mental activities to grasp and recognize it, but the meaning is nonetheless there, held in readiness, waiting to be grasped by other people in the future.

A poem or a contract, a law or a national monument similarly have meaning held in readiness inside them. Certainly, the meanings evoked by a poem in different people and

at different times are not identical, but the poem is at least able to invoke similar experiences and feelings in many people. The meanings we grasp to this extent are shared, and if an individual allows his life to be enriched by such shared meanings then to that degree also his life is meaningful.

Chapter 5: The Right Sorts of Plans

Plans and Achievements

Peter wants a bottle of whisky. He believes that walking across the street to the liquor store and buying it will enable him to realize his desire. He makes the effort to walk across the street. He succeeds in buying the whisky.

When Peter gets back home he has a new desire: he wants to drink his whisky. He believes that unscrewing the bottle and pouring whisky into his glass and putting the glass to his mouth will help him to realize his new desire. But does he really achieve anything? Peter's story reminds us that there is more to achievement than wanting something, believing that these or those means can bring it about, and putting an effort into realizing what we want.

Peter's drinking whisky is not a *genuine achievement* in the sense of this term we introduced earlier. At best it might be part of some genuine achievement—for example part of celebrating the conclusion of a great project. But it is not an achievement in and of itself.

We have already seen why this is so. One reason is that it is too easy. Another reason is

that it is not associated with any standard or measure of success. You cannot get drunk more or less successfully. Peter's achievement merely satisfies some desire on Peter's part; in this it is too closely related to the actions of animals. The lion hunts its prey out of instinct; he is wired to satisfy his need to eat in just this way. The spider spins its web, and the web is an enduring, perhaps even a meaningful product. But it represents no achievement because the spider's part. This is because there is no order of ranking of the spider's desires. The spider does not consider its various desires and conclude that only some of them can be realized, that some of them must be abandoned, that some of them are more important than others, that some of them must be realized to make the realization of others possible. The spider makes no choices.

This brings us to a new idea in our account of how genuine achievements serve to make our lives meaningful. Genuine achievements go hand in hand *with a willingness to sacrifice one goal for the sake of another*. Most importantly, they go hand in hand with a willingness to delay immediate gratification for the sake of the realization of some more significant and more challenging desires in the future. Thus, they go hand in hand with some process of planning.

Young children are normally quite unable to organize their behavior in this respect—they are unwilling to delay gratification for the sake of some valuable outcome in the future. Whatever it is that they do, they just do it. They have what economists call a high time preference. Genuine achievements, on the other hand, of the sort that can contribute meaning to your life will characteristically arise not from the things that you just do, but rather from those things which involve a degree of sacrifice and forethought.

A life spent satisfying each successive desire of the moment—a life in which you always give way to your immediate impulses—leaves room for luck. But it does not leave room for that sort of planning which makes genuine achievements possible.

What is a Plan?

Amelia is a mother of six children. She is a good mother, and she has always provided her children with food and loving care. Bridget is a violinist in an orchestra in which she plays every night. Carla is a football fan, and she follows her team closely from week to week. Zeno is a successful chicken farmer. Each, in one way or another, has made plans, sometimes stretching over many years, and is now engaged in realizing them.

A plan involves several components. First there is a goal, a desire to bring something about in the future. Second there is the belief that this or that series of actions will satisfy this desire. Third there is some knowledge of ourselves and of the way the world works. Finally there is the realization of the plan—which may be very complicated, and may involve many sub-plans.

Plans are devices our minds build to bring about controlled changes in the future. We can bring about such changes only by doing something today that will have consequences tomorrow. In order to act in the world, we must have desires about what we want to achieve. We must also have beliefs about how these desires can be brought about. These must rest on sound knowledge of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. A plan must involve knowledge of what will actually lead to the realization of your goal. Thus it must involve knowledge of how actions of given types will lead to this or that result of how one action will lead to another and how this will lead to a third action, and so forth. This implies some knowledge of the regularities which obtain in the world and of the causal connections which obtain between events of different sorts. It also implies some knowledge of human psychology—knowledge of the meaningful ways

in which people act and interact with each other. And it also, and not least importantly, implies some knowledge of the sorts of ways in which things can go wrong.

We have such knowledge because we have experience of the world. As we grow older we accumulate a store of experiences. These experiences are not random. They relate first of all to common patterns in life, to the patterns of events which reappear from one day to the next, for example, eating, walking, cooking, driving. They relate also to the common patterns we perceive in the behavior of those around us: in this man who is trustworthy, in this other man whose behavior is marked by crippling jealousy, and so forth. And they relate also to the ways human institutions work, and to the whys and wherefors of our physical environment.

As we accumulate more and more experiences we become familiar with ever more complex patterns of regularities in the world around us. This means also that we can embark upon the realization of ever more intricate plans directed towards ever more complex achievements.

It means that our actions in reliable ways raise the probability that what we want to happen will indeed happen in the future.

Constraints

There are constraints on the sorts of plans you can make. You cannot plan to win the lottery. You cannot plan to make 2+2 equal 5. The plans we make need to be within the limits of the actual world with its physical and logical laws. They also—except in very exceptional circumstances—need to be within the limits of the laws set by your society: you cannot lead a meaningful life by breaking the law.

You make plans to bring about ends. Sometimes, however, our plans can have positive and meaningful consequences quite independently of their contributions to the realization of the goal which you had set yourself. This means that your life can be meaningful but for the wrong reason. Suppose that you and your husband own a farm, and that you decide to have children only because you need willing helpers help with the harvest. When the children are born, you feed and you care for them only because you want to raise them well enough to become good workers. This means that your are a

good mother in the sense that you raise bright and robust and healthy children—and for that reason your life is meaningful, even independently of the reasons why you brought your children into the world. Suppose you join your school swimming team, even though you have no particular passion for swimming, simply because you think the swimming team will look good on your resume when it comes to college applications. You work hard to get on the team. You work even harder to stay on the team, and you start to excel as a swimmer, winning prizes and medals. These achievements are still genuine achievements, and they are achievements which reflect the activities of your will; thus they, too, will contribute to the meaningfulness of your life, even independently of your original reason to take up swimming.

Accidents

There are many who say that love alone is enough to make for a meaningful life. What they forget is that falling in love is only the beginning of the story. If your love is to

endure and to prosper and to bear fruit, then you must do something about it. You must make your life together with your loved one. And that means: you must make plans. You may fall in love a hundred times, but your love will make for a meaningful life only if you and your loved ones make and shape your lives together. Falling in love can happen by accident, and accidents, however lucky, are never in and of themselves enough to add meaning to your life.

This does not mean that accidents are irrelevant to the shape your life will take. It was an accident that penicillin was discovered by Alexander Fleming in his laboratory in 19--. But it contributed nonetheless to the meaning of Fleming's life because he saw the importance of what was happening before him. He made plans to initiate further testing of the drug and began a process which led to the saving of many lives. Many complex plans needed to be realized by Fleming and others before the drug could be used for the treatment of infections.

An accidental event can contribute to making your life meaningful only if it is the beginning of a course of events which reflects some achievement on your part, and so in such a way as to involve your making and realizing plans. Religious conversion, too, is only the beginning of the story as far as meaning is concerned.

Suppose, on road to Damascus, you are suddenly hit by the realization that you must

live your life in the service of God. Then, too, you cannot simply wait for things to happen. To serve your God in the right sort of way will not be easy; it will involve risk and sacrifice. You need to *do something*—the right thing, and for this you will need to bring about achievements and that means that you must involve yourself in the making of the right sorts of plans. The same applies if your long lost uncle dies and leaves you a fortune in his will. Becoming rich is not enough to make your life meaningful—you still need to do something with your new-found wealth. And this means *making and realizing plans*.

Taking Your Life Into Your Hands

Suppose your boss suggests that you take on a new role in the company. This will mean that you have to work much longer hours and spend long periods away from home. This is something that you really do not want to do, but the boss persists with his request until finally you agree because you fear that you will otherwise lose your job. You now have two ways in which you can adjust yourself psychologically to the new situation. In the first case, you can resent your boss, and your work, and you can become progressively less and less involved in what you do there. In this way your work life will also

contribute less and less to the meaning of your life as a whole. In the second case you can decide, at first reluctantly, to accept your boss's plan as your own. This means: putting your whole heart into your new role in the company, and making every effort to ensure that your success. Your boss's plan then becomes also *your* plan. This is so in the first place because it is a part of the larger plan you have for your life that you keep your present job—and this means accepting not only its nice features but also the parts you do not like. In the longer term, however, to success in your new role becomes for you an end in itself; it provides a new framework of challenge and obstacles to overcome and a new framework of achievements.

In order for you to have achieved something it is not enough that you simply realize your plan. The plan must also shape your life from day to day. It must be a plan that you have made your own. You can take the elements of plans from your boss, or from your friend, or from the conductor of the orchestra in which you play, but then you must invest your energy and effort into the task of realizing the plan as a whole.

Suppose your goal is to become rich. Your plan is to buy a lottery ticket every day. This is not a good plan in our sense of the word. Certainly, you do raise your chances of winning the lottery by buying a ticket every day; but there is nothing else you can do, once you have bought the ticket, to make it more likely that you will win. You can *intend*

to do your homework or to become a chicken farmer, or a good husband or violinist. You cannot intend to win the lottery—you can only *hope* that you will win. You might similarly hope that you have an uncle in Switzerland about whom you know nothing but who will leave you all his money when he dies. But you cannot plan, you cannot *intend*, for this to happen. And the things that you do which rest upon plans have the chance of amounting to genuine achievements.

Spontaneity

Plans can exist merely in the form of a general idea, with much room being left to the forces of spontaneity. Suppose you want to go out to your favorite restaurant for lunch. You do not bother to figure out exactly how to get there. Rather, you simply drive, allowing the landmarks you see to tell you what to do next. The world itself helps you to find your way. You leave it to the world to remember how to get to the restaurant. And similarly when you are just fiddling around—perhaps literally: you are playing on your the jazz violin—playing first one note, then another, you discover your fingers playing, and only then do you spot some pattern which the notes are making, which eventually becomes a tunes and then a whole song.

Jazz is essentially a matter of improvization in two directions at once: the musician

knows the general chord structure of the melody upon which he intends to improvise, and he knows that in 22 measures the piano player will join in, and then the bass player, and so on. Apart from this, though he has no more than a general outline of how things will proceed. The details he will invent as he goes along. How things develop will depend on the notes he and the other players have already played, and they may develop almost without any plan at all. Something similar occurs when you're writing a book or taking a holiday. You are sitting in the restaurant. So far you have only a general plan: you want to eat and have a good time. The particulars are worked out not only in conformity with this general idea, but also in conformity with the particulars of the situation you find yourself in: what does this restaurant offer to eat? Would your friend be offended if you ordered pork? How much money can you afford to spend?

Spontaneity is important in life and in plans. But for the sorts complex achievements which, in combination, make for a meaningful life spontaneity must be kept in check. Above all if we are to realize complex achievements then we must know when we are doing the right thing and when we are falling short, and for this. Our plan must have a core—consisting of a goal and of a general ideal of how we want to achieve it—which we will not allow to be changed as circumstances develop. Certainly each plan needs to be flexible enough that it can be changed in light of new circumstances. A plan has to be

ready with new sub-plans when new obstacles need to be surmounted. We have to train ourselves and those around us to be ready for such changes. But these new responses should always be in keeping with the core of what we have set out to achieve.

Don't be a Passenger on Someone Else's Journey

We said that a genuine achievement must be the result of a plan that you yourself have made. This holds even in those cases where you need to collaborate with others in order to achieve some larger goal. Suppose one of your friends suggests that the two of you go on a journey together to some remote country. When you accept her idea, then the plan becomes your plan, too, but then you must be involved in the setting of the details of the plan. If you let your friend make all the decisions, so that you go along just for the ride, then you are a mere passenger on someone else's journey, and such a journey does not contribute to the meaning of your life.

In order for you to have achieved something and for the achievement to contribute to the meaning of your life, the goal of your plan must have been achieved by you. If you act as an automaton, passively responding to the orders of others or to the whims of the

moment, then whatever the outcome of your actions might be, it will not amount to a genuine achievement because it is not something which you can call your own.

Suppose you are an architect. You plan to design a house together with a colleague. But you are lazy, and your colleague ends up making all the drawings for the house. Still she puts your name on them alongside hers. However successful the design might be, and however much of the subsequent glory might be attributed to you, still this is not your achievement, and it is not something which contributes to the meaning of your life. Or suppose that you make a plan to cook a really good dinner for your friend. But you do much less than is needed to realize this plan. You buy ingredients at random and you throw them all into a pot, well aware that what results will probably be hardly edible. By accident the dinner turns out to be the best you ever made—but this is not an achievement on your part, for the reason that the connection between your plan and the end-result was accidental, not something you worked toward and put effort into.

Plans Depends on the Reliability of Others

We need a plan to walk across the street. But we do need a plan, indeed we need many plans, to become a good parent. We must know many things about children's needs, we must plan to provide for these needs, we must make sure that we feed our children and that we raise them correctly. And before all of this, of course, we must fall in love, and we must make a home together with our partner. Clearly, something might go wrong at any stage in all of this. Bringing children into the world involves risk and sacrifice. But we will have no chance at all of succeeding unless we act in accordance with plans, with forethought, with sacrifice and with the willingness to delay gratification.

But something more is needed. Suppose you have a plan to take your family to Hawaii. It is not just you and your family who are involved in realizing this plan, but also the people who drive the cabs and fly the planes; the people who make the timetables for the planes, the people who check your ticket, the people who run and staff your hotel, as well as many other people of whose existence you are likely unaware.

Using planes, cabs, hotels and restaurants to realize your plans presupposes that you are living among people you can trust. The more you are surrounded by people we can trust, the more elaborate your plans can be. If you could not trust the many people far

and wide who are needed to make your plans work, then you could not make and realize those plans. You would have to fall back instead or make other plans, which would be either less ambitious or more difficult to realize. If your plan involves sending a package from Dallas to Quebec, but you could not count on the people who are supposed to collect and transport and deliver it, then your plan will fail, or you will have to waste time with some alternate plan.

If your plan involves registering your car, but you could not count on the people in the insurance office and in the motor vehicle office to do their jobs on time, then not only this plan but also other plans might fail—you might have no car—and you would have to turn once again to other, less satisfactory, alternatives.

If you make an arrangement to have your friend help you build your house on a certain weekend, then you expect your friend to keep her promise and to be there when you need her. There are of course no guarantees that she will in fact turn up—life does not come with guarantees—but making an arrangement of this sort is one of the many things you must do in order to realize the sorts of plans which lead to genuine achievements. Here again we see that the striving for genuine achievements goes hand in hand with the risk

of failure.

Responsibility

If we are to realize complex plans then we need to rely on people to fulfil their obligations—including some we may never meet and with whom we have a purely impersonal relationship. This means that we must live in a society where people are held responsible for their actions, a society in which negative consequences will follow if people regularly fail to live up to their responsibilities. Only such a society can support that sort of large-scale coordination which is needed if your activities are to be sustained in the right sorts of ways to allow genuine achievement. To maximize the changes of leading a meaningful life, therefore, we need to live in a society in which the right sorts of consequences follow from our actions—a society in which we are rewarded for doing the right thing and punished for doing wrong.

In such a society each person will be held responsible for his decisions. This will mean that his attentions are directed to what his actions bring about. If we are held responsible, we will act with care.

To see what happens when things go wrong in this respect, consider the story of Kafka's novel *The Trial*, the story of Joseph K., someone who lives in a society which is of exactly the wrong sort to sustain complex achievements. K.'s life is meaningless precisely because things happen to him over which he has no control and for reasons about which he has no knowledge. He is arrested one morning, but the warders who come to arrest him, who are dressed like tourists, can give no meaningful explanation of why he is under arrest. He is brought before the Inspector, who briefly and vaguely interrogates him. He then receives a summons to attend a further interrogation, which is to take place on Sunday, but no time is given. K. arrives first thing in the morning on Sunday at a large apartment building. From there he is directed to the Court of Inquiry by a washerwoman. There he enters a hall with a row of important men on a stage, who berate him before a large crowd for being late. K. responds with a speech in which he insists that there must have been some mistake, since he hasn't been told of any charges against him. The crowd applauds the speech, which is brought to an end by a woman's shriek from outside the room. Joseph returns a week later, when he is led through a maze of dark corridors lined with men each waiting for news of his case. After six months,

during which the charges against him have still not been explained, K. is told that he needs a lawyer, but he ends up talking to a painter who specializes in portraits of judges. After K. has assured him of his innocence, the painter sets forth his options: he can try for actual acquittal, but this is never granted; or he can try for apparent acquittal, which will only bring on further trials; or he can try for protraction, which means that the case will be kept going on forever at the lowest levels. On the eve of his birthday, two men take Joseph for a walk around the city. They begin passing a butcher's knife over Joseph's head and then one of them stabs him, twisting the knife twice, and killing him like a dog.

The Principle of Sunk Costs

You plan to go to the theater for tonight's performance of *Macbeth*. You are a normal person who is reasonably well off. You have a quite expensive theater ticket for a play you have been looking forward to seeing for months. You have worked hard in the last few days and you certainly deserve the night out. But when you arrive at the theater you realize that you have left your ticket behind. Your evening is in ruins. Everything is lost.

What should you do?

You plan is to become a successful soldier. You have worked on realizing this plan for many years. You are just about to be promoted to the rank of colonel, when you are involved in a terrible accident and you lose the use of your legs. Your life is in ruins. Everything is lost. What should you do?

The answer in the first case is clear: You should simply buy another ticket. That is to say, you should act according to the principle of sunk costs, which says that what is lost is lost. What this means is that you should not let the time or energy or money you have invested in the past influence what you do in the future. What is past is past. The only factors which should be weighed in making a decision now are the *future* costs which that decision will bring. Costs incurred in the past have been incurred already. They are sunk. Hence, they should never be counted in making decisions about the future. You begin at zero whenever you have lost something. The world is new each day.

The answer in the second case is of course much more difficult. The soldier faces pain and total readjustment of his life, perhaps humiliation. Yet the answer is nonetheless the same. The soldier should act according to the principle of sunk cost, and see all the

time and energy he has invested in the past as irrelevant to whatever future plans he now chooses to make.

Suppose your firm has invested thousands of dollars in machines which become obsolete overnight. The only rational course of action, as every economist recognizes, is for you to write off the machines. You have made a mistake. But you should not even waste one second in crying over this fact. Rather, you should focus on finding out what your options are in the new situation. You should then make plans for your new future in the light of these options.

The same principle works, and even with respect to things that are not in any sense economical in nature. Suppose that you have been dating a woman called Lisa for two years. But then things start to go wrong. You begin to consider whether or not you should break things off. During the two years you have been together you have been very generous to Lisa. The question is: should you let the fact that you have spent so much time and money on Lisa affect your decision about your relationship with her in the future?

Again, the answer is clear. We ought never to look back at costs irretrievably

incurred in the past when deciding how to behave in the future. Those costs are now sunk; they are irrelevant to any future decisions.

But suppose you *married* Lisa? Should you now just dump her? Here another factor is in play. In marrying Lisa the two of you had made plans together. We shall assume that you did not marry on a whim but that your marriage is part of the core of these plans that deifne your life. The situation here is very different. Plans point towards the future: they are not just relicts of the past. And core plans should not simply be abandoned because of obstacles encountered on the way. Rather the two of you should do everything in your power to make your marriage work.

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This explains, too, why making flexible plans is conducive to leading a meaning life: if your plan fails, because of bad weather or transport strike or something worse, you should not brood but immediately fix on an alternative.

Plans can be long- or short-term, but they are in every case directed towards the future.

We sometimes need a plan to achieve something very simple, such as meeting a certain person at a certain time next week. We must make sure that we remember the meeting, that we make no other appointments at the same time, that we actually arrive at the meeting place at the right time, and so forth. A plan of this sort is involved whenever we have desires that cannot be realized immediately.

Sunk Costs and the Meaning of Life

The sunk cost principle tells us that if your plans fail, then this is indeed sad, but it is of no moment when it comes to deciding what your plans should be for the future—and it is only your plan for the future which matter, because these are the only sorts of plans there are. Whatever happens in your life, therefore, you should focus on finding out what your options are in the new situation and make your plans accordingly. The time to start leading a meaningful life is always: now.

Suppose your plan is to become a member of the swimming team. You denote

every moment of your free time to practicing in the pool. If you are to make the team, then you will have to swim just that bit faster than you have ever done before in your best discipline. But in spite of all your good efforts you fail. Now what do you do? You practice and practice for another year and try again. Or you give up the idea of joining the team and you make new plans. How you make the decision is up to you, but the fact that you have been practicing for all those thousands of hours is, when it comes to making your decision, irrelevant.

Of course, this does not mean that you should not try to find out why your plan could not be realized the first time round. You should do everything you can to learn from your mistakes. Perhaps you did not practice hard enough. Perhaps you were ill on the day when you were trying out for the first time. Perhaps the person you fell in love with was just not the right type of man for you. Or perhaps you yourself did something wrong to drive him away. These things might be things that you can change when you make new plans or when you try again to realize the old ones. But once you have learned what you could from your failures in the past you should forget about what you have invested in those old plans and move on to the next phase in your life.

Regret is Bad

The philosopher Spinoza tells us, because "Repentance is not a virtue, i.e. it does not arise from reason. Rather, he who repents what he did is twice miserable". We are first of all miserable when we fail. And then we are miserable for a second time because we are feel regret over our failure. To be miserable involves not merely feeling bad (this you could do in a dream machine) but *being in a bad way*. The person who regrets what he did is twice in a bad way. Whoever did or suffered something bad is, independently of how he feels about it, badly off. The pain of regret then makes him badly off a second time. But this, according to Spinoza, is not reasonable. That one suffered once does not mean that one should go on and make things worse by suffering a second time.

As Nietzsche puts it: "Never give room to repentance, but tell yourself at once: this would mean to add a second piece of stupidity to the first".

You cannot change the past. If you have done something wrong, if you realize that you have done something which you should have done differently, then you should

take careful note of your mistakes in order to do better in the future. You should then spend your energy making and realizing plans and shaping your future in a better way.

This does not mean that you should not try to make amends. Regret is one thing. Energy spent on making up for what you have done is quite another. Suppose you are a truckdriver you are normally careful and conscientious, but in recent weeks you did not have your brakes checked regularly. You are unlucky to hit a patch of ice and when your truck skids out of control you end up killing a child. Although you ought to have checked your brakes, there is a big portion of bad luck involved in the fact that you—rather than the thousands of other truck drivers with brakes not recently checked—should have been the one to hit and kill a child. Should you repent over what you did? Of course. But not if this means going over and over again in your mind what happened and what you could have done to avoid it. Rather, what you should do is to try to make amends. You owe the people you have hurt your time and energy. You could try to do something for the family who lost their child. You could spend time working for organizations promoting safer driving. What you should not do is spend your energy feeling sorry for yourself.

Your feelings should, in other words, be future directed. Instead of crying over

the education you did not have, you should take the necessary steps to gain an education now. Instead of crying over the children you never had, you should think of what you can do for your sister and brother and their children. Instead of crying over the man you never married, you should try to find another man with whom you can share your life. Whatever has happened in the past, you can still find a way to shape your life in the future, and to give it meaning.

Chapter 6: Life Plans

Partitions

You are in the theater, watching what is happening on the stage. The events on the stage are in the foreground of your attentions. Everything else is forgotten.

Whenever you are engaged with something as part of the realization of some plan, you put the thing with which you are engaged in the foreground of your attentions, and the rest of reality fades away in the background.

When you focus your mind on your friend John, it is as if you draw an imaginary line around a portion of reality which you set into relief and make the focus of your attention. The rest of reality is traced over. This focusing and tracing over is a feature of all our experiences. It is also a feature which makes planning, and thus achievements, possible.

When you focus on a particular portion of the world you pick out certain parts as being of special concern to you at the moment. When you think about John you might focus on his strong arms and the table you need moving to the kitchen. When you think

about the chess board, you think about the different pieces arranged upon it, the relations in which they stand, the threats presented by your opponent. When you think about your garden, you think about the different types of plants arranged in a certain way within it, and the weeds that are growing up between them.

In each of these cases it is as if you impose a certain grid (a partition) upon reality which hides some parts and picks out others. When you think of John, you cannot think of *all* his parts and aspects. Perhaps you picture him with arms, legs, a face and so forth, but you do not picture all the cells or molecules in his body. You make new partitions involving John for different purposes, and these might contain more or fewer details. Before you first meet John you might think of him rather abstractly, as a man, or as a person, or as a future co-worker. Then, as you get to know him better, you think of his facial features, his characteristic talents and gestures, his needs and foibles. Your partitions become more fine-grained with time; they pick out finer details.

You can also extend your partition of reality by adopting a wider focus—you might think not just of John but of John and his family, or of John and his colleagues at work, or about all the people who live in John's neighborhood or who use John's gym. In

this way you can zoom back, and forth between John, his surroundings, and the details of his life.

Our attentions are constantly zooming in and out like this, focusing now on this and now on that portion of reality. The doctor who is examining the freckles on your skin is not focusing on your financial worries. The priest who is helping you with your marital problems is not concerned with the pains you are having in your feet.

Histories

The partitions we use when focusing on reality form sequences, and these can sometimes tell stories over time. Think of a chess game, which is made up of a certain sequence of positions on the board. Or think of your journey to Detroit, which began with your drive to Kennedy Airport at 3 o'clock, continued with the boarding of your flight at 5 o'clock, and ended with your landing in Detroit at 6 o'clock on the same day. A story like this we shall call 'a history'. We shall use the term 'history' to refer to a sequence of partitions of this sort, a sequence of cuts through reality at different times, each partition picking out certain details and tracing over others.

In the simplest case, a history is a sequence of partitions relating to what has already taken place in the past. Biographies are backward-looking histories in this sense. Memories, too, may be organized in the form of histories. Think of your last vacation. Perhaps you took photos, which you have arranged in chronological order in an album. If you tell your friends about the holiday, then you might tell the story in part through speech and in part through looking at the snapshots. You might go into much more detail in your descriptions than the photos are able to reveal. The result is then a fine-grained history of a certain course of events in the world.

But not all histories are backward-looking in this sense. The screen-play you write for a film you plan to shoot next year is a history which faces forward into the future. Plans are forward-looking histories, and so is the flight itenerary you receive from your travel agent when you buy your ticket to Detroit.

A plan is like a picture or a map that is spread out into the future. It throws a certain sort of light on a specific corner of the world as it will exist in the future—that corner of the world which you can affect by means of your action.

Our plans do not need to come packaged in a form that can be printed out in the form of a list of things to do. They can take the form of secret dreams, of longings which may never be expressed, not even to ourselves.

Plans and Sub-Plans

Our larger plans, the plans whose realization gives meaning to our lives, cannot be realized in one go. They must be built out of various smaller sub-plans, each of which needs to be realized in succession. In order to go to the theater, you need to buy a ticket for the play. Planning to buy a ticket is a sub-plan of your overall plan. Large plans are made of many smaller sub-plans.

You plan to go to the theater next Saturday with your friend. This involves plans to invite your friends, to purchase tickets, to work out how you will get to the theater—and it involves realizing all these plans. You work out these sub-plans in a step-by-step fashion. When once you have planned to purchase the tickets you will then have to plan how you get to the theater to purchase them.

Compare what happens in the middle of a military campaign when the commander issues to his troops a warning order to the effect that a new operation will begin at dawn in two days time. The troops adopt the new mission as their own and new measures of correct behavior are formed. New goals, new obligations sprout up like spring crocuses. What is conveyed in the warning order is intended to create group interaction, resulting in a staggered chain of events according to a precise time table. The mission statement conveys to the troops all of the subordinate tasks which they will be called upon to perform. The order to attack entails that a route to the objective must be planned, weapons must be cleaned, teams must be designated for support and assault, radios must be cued, and so on. Many of these tasks are never explicitly stated. Rather, they have been established through standard operating procedures which have been drilled into the troops since the beginning of their training. It is helpful to think of the order process as a chain reaction or a snowball effect. A simple order touches off a truly remarkable chain of events wherein each participant performs one small part of an otherwise impossible task.

New Heading

As soon as you face a system of sub-plans like this, very quickly you realize that things can go wrong. You plan to drive to the theater on Saturday. As the evening approaches, however, you find out that it is snowing too heavily to drive and you decide to use the subway instead. You now need to do more planning in order to get to the theater. You need to plan to buy your subway ticket, check the timetable, get to the station on time and so on. Already in this simple case a number of sub-plans is involved, and each of these, too, can in principle go wrong. All of this means that your sub-plans cannot be organized together in the form of a mere list (do this, then do that, then do this, until you reach your goal). For this would mean that your whole plan would fail if something should go wrong with even one of your constituent sub-plans. Large plans need to be more robust than this. This means that they must have flexibility built in: they must be organized in such a way that they can be adjusted if things go wrong along the way. You must be able to recallibrate your plans and sub-plans to take care of the obstacles you meet along the way.

The more significant your goal the more complex will be the plans which you need to realize it, and the greater the likelihood that things will go wrong. This is especially so if others are also involved in the realization of your plan. Thus, the more significant your goal the more will your plans confront the risk of failure. Risk is built into the very formulation of many of your plans: you plan to move to a new and better job. But first you must *apply* for the job, you must have your resume considered, you must be called up for an interview, you must perform well in the interview, and even then the decision as to whether you get the job will not be in your hands.

Plans are Forward-Looking Histories

Think of your plans for next week. Perhaps they exist merely as a series of notes you jotted down in your calendar. These jottings constitute a forward-looking history. Each separate item may be realized; but it may also be cancelled or modified. Not all forward-looking histories are in fact realized.

That our plans *can* become actualized turns on the fact that they are *coarse-grained*. If they were too fine-grained, if that is to say they involved the specification of

too many details, then it would be very hard, if not impossible, to realize them. You can realize your plan to meet your friend next Tuesday. The plan calls for you to meet him under the railway station at 6 o'clock. You can also realize your plan to go on from there to a special restaurant. Plans like this can be realized, as we know from our own experience. But suppose your plan were a forward-looking history in which every little detail were planned out in advance. Suppose that you worked out in your mind beforehand what clothes to wear, the way to set your hair, the exact road to take to get to the meeting place, the exact food you were going to eat, the exact things you were going to talk about, even the very words you were going to use. Such a plan would be impossible to realize.

You cannot possibly plan how all details will turn out, not even in regard to just a few minutes of your life. And this is why, when you make plans, many aspects of the world must be traced over. Your plans ignore them. It is usually not possible to plan who will be serving the food in the restaurant, or who will drive the cab you will take to get there. It is not possible to plan whether or not there will be noise in the restaurant or unpleasant people at the adjoining tables.

We are finite beings with limited sources of information. Our world is marked by a patchwork of random events against a background of causal and human regularity. Our time for planning is short. We cannot plan how sequences of events which are very close together in time will work out. We can only build larger plans out of partitions that are not too detailed and not too close together in time.

Some plans are more fine-grained than others. Think of a big wedding in a church followed by a reception and dinner. You have planned who the priest will be, what music will be played, who will be included in the guest-list, who will be present at the reception and dinner, what you are going to eat, who is going to provide the food, what music you are going to hear, and so forth. Such a plan comprehends a very wide range of detail, but it still leaves many things unspecified–it leaves open what the weather will be and thus also where the wedding photos will be taken; it leaves open what words of wisdom the priest will offer to the happy couple at the ceremony; it leaves open what nasty jokes the best man will tell about the groom at the reception.

Still, a wedding plan involves much more detail than does your plan to meet your friend for drinks tomorrow evening, a plan which will become more fine-grained only

with the passing of time. Every plan, however, involves in its realization the making of decisions along the way, and this means: exercising your will, and actually executing those decisions in your actions.

Our Plans Go Wrong: Saving the Core

Forward-looking histories differ from their backward-looking counterparts in that they can always still be changed. But this means also that they involve an element of uncertainty: things can always still go wrong. The sequence of partitions printed on your airline ticket which summarizes your trip to Detroit next week is a forward-looking history. It can be actualized and thus become more fine-grained in a variety of ways. You might eat a steak or a hamburger before you arrive in Detroit. Your friend Mary might or might not be a member of the crew on the plane. The seat next to you may or may not be empty, and so on. All these fine-grained histories are possible ways for the future to be, and, providing you actually execute the plan that is printed on your ticket, they all contain the corresponding coarse-grained history as their common part. Thus they

are—on that coarse-grained level—all equivalent. We shall call the coarse-grained history shared in common by your plan and its acceptable alternatives the *core* of your plan.

Sometimes the Core is not Saved

Your trip to Detroit is in the future. The future has not yet taken place. It is therefore possible that the trip will be cancelled or that the route you take or the time you leave will be changed. All the flights to Detroit might be cancelled because of a strike of air-traffic controllers. You might decide to go to Cleveland and drive from there to Detroit. The history describing your travel via Cleveland is an *alternative* to the history in which you fly directly to Detroit as originally planned. When you toss a coin it can come down heads or tails, but it can't do both at the same time. When you go to Detroit you can either fly directly or your can fly via Cleveland, but you can't do both at the same time. You might also drive the whole way.

Eventually, if we go through all the possibilities, we will arrive at a collection of alternative histories each of which begins with you in New York and ends with you in Detroit. Such a collection of alternative histories constitutes what we shall call a 'library'. A library is like a collection of alternative possible worlds or possible ways of behaving if you want to reach a certain goal.

You are a reliable individual. If you promised your boss that you will be in Detroit on a certain date, then it is very likely that you will be there. Something out of the ordinary would have to happen—perhaps some terrible weather catastrophe—to prevent your turning up on time. Thus, there is a very high probability that you will in fact go to Detroit.

And this is quite generally the case when people make plans, the probability is normally quite high that these plans will be realized. As we have seen, however, plans and sub-plans may be realized only to a certain degree, and this is especially so when plans are collective affairs. We counteract this by making coarse-grained plans and so leaving lots of alternatives open. What results then has a maximal chance of coming out satisfactorily to everyone involved. If you arrange to meet your friend next Tuesday and

you have planned to eat together, then it will not matter if your favorite Italian restaurant is closed; you will just go to a Greek place instead. Your plan to eat dinner together on that particular night will still be realized.

If your first rather detailed plan cannot be realized as a whole, then you may still be able to realize some acceptable alternative, which means: a plan in which the core of your original plan is still retained.

The Structure of Plans

Plans can be so complex or so detailed that they are impossible to realize. But plans can also be too simple. An example is: do whatever you like, or even: keep doing whatever you like. Or even: behave at random. Plans that can give rise to genuine achievement need to fall between the two extremes of to much complexity and too much randomness. Genuine achievements should be not too easy to realize. The plans to realize them will almost certainly heed to contain elements of genuine risk, and they will require extraordinary effort on your part to be realized successfully. They should contain what are, for you, genuine challenges (we might talk in this connection of the 115% Rule).

Plans of the sort which can lead to genuine achievements should be plans which can fail—but also succeed, given the right amount of effort and persistence on your part.

Your plans, if they are to be realizable at all, must be *coherent*. That is, the means must match the chosen end. If Jackie wants to go to the Carribean, if this is her plan, then she must eventually take the steps necessary to realize this plan; she must work out how she is going to get there. Initially her plans may be very sketchy ("somehow ..., someday ..."), but they will need to become more detailed as time goes by. They will need to be extended with sub-plans which together determine a specific course of action that is needed to get her from where she is now to where she wants to be.

It is important here to remember that ends, too, can be the object of rational deliberation. We want our plans to involve maximally ambitious, coherent, well-rounded total achievements. And achievements, as we have seen, have to involve changes in the world.

A Way To Understand Future Conduct

To be coherent, a plan must be such that its various sub-plans are consistent both among themselves and also in relation to the world in which they are to be realized. Your plan, as we have seen, should rest on knowledge of the relevant portion of the world and of the relevant knowledge of your obligations, for example, as well as knowledge of our mental and physical capacities. Living a meaningful life must rest on living in truth (no cheating and no sheer luck).

Realization of the plan should be possible given the circumstances as they are. Suppose you want to leave your car for your wife to use, but you also need it yourself to get to an important meeting. To put these two desires together would make a bad plan. A plan must be internally consistent in the sense that all if its sub-plans are dovetailed together. A plan must also be consistent with your beliefs and desires. Consider Peter, who plans to go on a picnic in the woods with Odile, even though he believes that it will rain; or John, who plans to marry Mary even though he knows that Mary is happily married to Phil; or Andrew, who plans to become a neurosurgeon even though he knows that he is very clumsy with his hands. Plans like these are doomed to fail.

Can Meaningful Parts of a Life be Added Together to make a Meaningful Whole?

If your life has a plan, however general and abstract and however much in need of detailed filling in and alteration as time proceeds it may be, then your whole life is, to the degree that you realize this plan, an achievement. But it is unlikely that you realize this achievement in a single sprint, without false starts interruptions, obstacles and setbacks. Rather your life will be divided into phases, into good years and bad years, happy times and unhappy times—and even into phases of your life which are more and less meaningful. The author of a biography has to divide up the life of his subject into chapters. We can imagine a biography with chapter headings like: 'First Promise', 'The Wasted Years', 'Searching for a Mission; 'Final Fulfillment'. Or it might be: 'Years of Innocence', 'The Beginning of a Life of Crime', 'The Road to San Quentin'.

But if one part of your life is meaningful and another part is not, then how do we add up the meaningful and meaningless phases? Can we simply add the meaningful phases of a life and subtract the meaningless phases and come up with a final total—

some sort of meaningfulness quotient? Or do the meaningful phases somehow count for more? Can we talk of calculation here at all? Is a long life already for this reason more meaningful than a short life? How are we to do justice to the various ways in which early promise can be squandered? How are we to do justice to our feeling that there is a certain satisfying, well-rounded shape by which a particularly meaningful life is often marked? (Think of Beethoven or Jesus, or Thomas Jefferson.)

Mary has done nothing with her life. She has so far just drifted along, with no particular plans and no particular achievements to her name. She has done this and that, but without order or direction. When she is forty years old, she decides to change her life. She makes a life plan—she will get an education and a challenging job; she will make for herself a real career. She begins to realize her plan, and makes new and more detailed plans as each new phase of her life unfolds. Her life is now beginning to have meaning—it takes on shape. Mary realizes her plans with greater or lesser success until she is eighty years old and then she dies a natural death. The first half of Mary's life was meaningless, the second meaningful. Does the earlier, meaningless phase of Mary's life cancel out the later, meaningful phase? Was Mary's life neutral as concerns

meaningfulness? We think not. Mary's life is full of achievements which hang together in the right sort of way to give her life shape. Certainly Mary did not begin to make and realize plans until she was forty years old. But then there is some considerable achievement involved already in this. Certainly the first forty years of Mary's life have a low meaningfulness quotient under the conditions described; but from the point of view of meaningfulness it is only your life as a whole which matters, and this means that Mary's life has a high meaningfulness quotient when taken all in all.

Note that it would make all the difference if we switch things around and have Mary first living a meaningful life, a life of dedication and fulfillment and then suddenly upon her fortieth birthday, running out of steam and leading a desultory life until she dies at the age of eighty. Most of us would prefer to lead the first kind of life rather than the second. The first is a story of improvement, the second a story of deterioration. In each case the events earlier in Mary's life affect the meaning of the events which come later. In the first case the later events acquire even greater meaning precisely because they represent an overcoming of the wastefulness of Mary's earlier life. In the second case the later events take something away from the meaning Mary had already achieved: the

goals she had set for herself in her earlier life remain unrealized—the plans she had earlier made no longer fits into the larger pattern of her life as a while.

The Narrative of Life

All of this points to the conclusion that to lead a meaningful life one's life should tell a story of a very special sort.

It is of course not possible to add up directly the valuable or meaningful phases of a life and yield some sort of meaning-quotient. We can say, however, that a life that has even one short phase of meaningfulness is certainly more meaningful than a life that has no such meaningful phase. This is of course a trivial remark but it has one important implication: it means that it is *never too late* to begin to make something meaningful out of your life.

If you are hooked on drugs, and spending your life stealing to buy more drugs, you can always make your life meaningful by coming off the drugs and setting about the business of leading a normal existence.

Consider St. Augustine, who led a debauched life until the age of ..., when he suddenly underwent conversion and became a religious teacher and Father of the Church. The positive value at the end of Augustine's life, according to our usual view of these matters, cancels out all the negative value which came before.

The Esthetics of Phases

Alice has lots of plans. For years she moves from job to job. On a whim she travels to Europe where she meets a man who is traveling around also, with no plans of his own. The two work for a while on an olive farm in Italy and then they drift around with no particular goal in mind, beyond that of enjoying the sun.

Compare Alice's life to that of Jackie. Jackie has a plan to go to college and finish a degree in medicine in order to be able to go to Africa to help set up local medical services in communities in economically challenged areas. She does indeed realize her plan and works in Africa for 30 years. She retires, happy and satisfied, and goes back to

America where she enjoys the rest of her life meeting and making friends. Which one of these two lives is the more meaningful? If we counted the time spent and the number of plans realized, Jackie and Alice might have spent the same time realizing and making plans. Alice might even have realized more plans than Jackie. Yet surely, Jackie's life is more meaningful than Alice's. This is so because Jackie's life consists of plans and phases of realization which are knitted together in such a way as to form a single meaningful whole. Jackie's life has the right sort of narrative structure which a meaningful life should have. A life is meaningful to the degree that it is directed towards a single goal or a family of mutually supporting goals. A life is meaningful to the degree that the plans it contains are part of a single life plan. A life is meaningful to the degree that the plans it contains are not off in all directions.

On Looking Back

There is a view which lies deep in our common culture and mythology which links the meaning of life with what happens when you reach the end of life. You have had a meaningful life, according to this view, if you can look back across your life, run over

the events in your mind, and see that your life has been good, fruitful, satisfying, a rounded whole.

What makes your life meaningful, on this view, is that it ends properly. Of course, this cannot, as it stands, be a good account of life's meaning. Your doctor might give you a pill just before you die which gives you exactly the feeling that you have led a good, fruitful life. Would this mean that your life had been meaningful? Or you might die by accident, just before you reach the point where you can look back to survey your life as a whole. Would this mean that your entire life up to this point was now without meaning? Clearly what is needed is more than just a feeling of having led a meaningful life.

You might believe, as you lie on your deathbed, that you have led a good, happy, successful life, But suppose that you are deluding yourself. Your beliefs are false. In fact the looking-back-at-your-life theory of meaningfulness has things exactly the wrong way round. The meaning of life is always forward-looking. The reason why the deathbed scene has played so important a role in myth and literature is because it draws attention in a poignant way to the structure of your whole life, and to the way this life must be

organized if it is to be meaningful. It has to organize in the way in which a certain sort of story is organized. It must have a narrative structure, containing low points and high points, containing especially prominent achievements that stand out as landmarks, and the achievements should cumulate in such a way that they are knitted together to form a whole.

Changing Plans

Suppose Sonja mother suddenly discovers an enormous talent for mathematics when her children are ten years old. Her plans, thus far, have been centered around her children. Should she now give up these plans and devote herself instead to mathematics? The answer is clear. Sonja can amend her plans; she can add to her life a new dimension of mathematical activities. But she cannot give up her responsibilities to her children, since the commitments she has already made constitute the framework within which her future plans have to be made and realized. A life is meaningful to the degree that the plans it contains add up to a single whole. To lead a meaningful life means: to build a life of

achievement but in such a way that one fulfils the obligation that one has made along the way. The need to make new plans within the framework of commitments already made can add meaning to your new plans: artists create greater art when they have to master strict rules; people create more meaningful lives when they have to honor their commitments.

Sometimes, however, a change of plans is a good thing. Cheryl Mendelson grew up in southwestern Pennsylvania in the 1950s. Her Italian and Anglo-American grandmothers taught her how to keep house. Both grandmothers had devoted themselves to homemaking. Both were very traditionally minded but they came from different traditions. Cheryl's Anglo-American grandmother believed that ironing was the queen of the household arts. Her grandmother believed that beds should be aired out, and never ironed every morning. But Cheryl left all that behind her when, like many women of her generation, she went off to college and threw herself into studying, writing, and an academic career. A Ph.D. in philosophy from Rochester was followed by a law degree from Harvard and excruciatingly long hours as a young attorney. Her apartment she

treated like a hotel room. She did not cook, listen to music, or knit. She hired someone else to clean-up behind her.

Many young women and men have in recent years been lured into a life like this. Their mothers, whose formative years were the 1960s, abstained in principle from teaching their daughters the arts of housekeeping. Their daughters, they thought, were just like their sons: made for better things—for career, freedom, excitement. The result was that many entered adulthood without any knowledge of how to cook or keep a home.

But for Cheryl, the new life, centered entirely around her career, proved unsatisfying. During her first marriage, she came home in a rainstorm and found three muddy dogs curled up on her unmade bed. She burst out crying and vowed to change her ways. Eventually she realized that she actually enjoyed taking care of both things and people. She started collecting old household manuals, and soon she had a *home* once more, and living in it made her feel like a new person. It gave meaning to her life.

She gave up her career as a lawyer in order to write a manual of homemaking, a guide to all those women—and men—of her generation who were ignorant, in matters of the home. She tells us how to iron and fold, about what sort of utensils are needed for a

well-equipped kitchen, why potatoes and apples should be stored separately. She tells us how to determine the thread count of a shirt (get a magnifying glass and, with the aid of a needle, count off the number of warp yarns in a quarter-inch square: then multiply by eight).

Cheryl writes like a Harvard-trained lawyer: yet she is telling us not how to litigate a case, but how to make a home, a home that is bright, open, welcoming, friendly; a home that is full of meaning for those who live in it; a home that is a fixed landmark in the bustle of your life. She lays down a brilliant defense of the thesis that homemaking can contribute just as much to the meaning of your life as can the drudgery of a career.

Life Plans

We already saw that our plans can have sub-plans as parts. Similarly, our plans can themselves be parts of larger plans and ultimately they can be part of a plan which extends across the whole of your life part of what we shall call a *life plan*. Examples of life plans are: Mary's plan to be a good mother and wife and to watch her family grow

and prosper; Peter's plan to enter politics; Sally's plan to enter medical research; Jackie's plan to become a successful actor; Mary's plan to enter the trucking business.

A life plan (think of Beethoven) involves one or more long-term goals and the right sort of arrangement of sub-plans for realizing these goals. A maximally meaningful life is a life structured by a life plan of the right sort. There is no one thing which makes a life meaningful. This is what we meant, at the beginning of this book, when we said that it would be a mistake to search for *the* meaning of life. Rather, there are many different sorts of life plans which you can make your own: raising a family, doing well in your job, being a good citizen, painting beautiful paintings.

Most people,of course, do not have one single life plan which colors almost everything they do in their lives from waking to sleeping (most people are not Beethoven) But the nearer you are living your life in terms of a single plan the greater your chance of maximizing the meaningfulness of your life.

can rely on the people around you.

Life plans must for obvious reasons be very coarse-grained. You might have a very fine-grained life plan in mind, but a fine-grained plan stretching over the whole of the rest of your life could never be realized. You might plan to get a certain job, but you might well have to be satisfied with a different sort of job. The important core of your life plan will then still be realized.

A life plan should be a plan that can maximize the realization of all of your goals across your life. To get rich by robbing banks does not meet this condition. (A person who robs banks is likely to be caught and go to prison.) There are laws, in societies like ours which bind together actions in such a way that wrong actions are punished. This is why we sense without much thought that a life of crime will not be a meaningful life. You have a greater chance of leading a meaningful life, as we saw, if you live in a civilized society. It is much easier to realize your plans if you can rely on the people around you.

Realizing Plans

Suppose that you plan to write a book. Writing a book is something that already involves certain things that must be done. You must give the book a certain structure and content, you must make it interesting enough that people will read it. You must write it down, sentence for sentence for sentence; and each new sentence will change, slightly, your plans as to the sentences which follow. Writing a book thus involves an incredibly complex and ever changing filigree of plans and sub-plans. Planning to write a book is a coarse-grained history. Realizing this plan involves realizing lots and lots of fine-grained plans along the way.

Planning to start a family is another coarse-grained history that will have to be filled out—soon enough—with lots and lots of details and complexities. Having children involves the taking on now of responsibilities for the future. It involves realizing a plan that is extended over a very long time-interval, almost certainly across the whole of the rest of your life. The responsibilities it brings will mean that your life will become intertwined in a very special way with the life of your spouse, and then also with the lives of your children. Having children means that you realize your own version of a never-ending story that has been realized by so many people before you.

Self-Reliance

We can now formulate a more precise statement of what it is to lead a meaningful life. We can see that it is not just your achievements—the consequences of your actions at different points in our life—that matter, but also *how* you arrive at these achievements. It matters how they hang together across your life, it matters that they are realized honesty and that you respect the commitments you have made along the way. It matters that they should not be too easy to realize. So that their realization should not be a mere collection of achievements but that they should add up to something more.

To lead a meaningful life requires inner strength, self-reliance, and endurance. It requires inner strength as expressed by the efforts you take to learn to do things for yourself and to make your own way in the world. Self-reliance is involved when you take responsibility for your own plans. Endurance is involved when you have already achieved much but still want to achieve more.

The opposite of self-reliance is being dependent on others. Dependence is not in itself a weakness. We become dependent for all sorts of reasons whenever we collaborate with others and rely on them to do their part in realizing our collective plans. A husband and wife are dependent upon each other in this way. They can still each have their own plans and realize these plans even though they are joined together in marriage, but they can now formulate and realize plans together, plans of a sort which simply could not be realized by either spouse alone.

Another person can help to give meaning to your life. John is a mathematician who proves the first half of a tough theorem and then gives up. But he can still help to put meaning into the life of his student Jill, if Jill can prove the rest of the theorem, and then Jill's achievement will in its turn add to that of John. A son can help to give meaning to the life of his father by completing the father's work after the father dies. Since the realization of your plan will often involve others, this planning explains also why we care more for some people than others and why we it is right that we should do so. We care more for our children than for strangers because our children are parts of our life plans. Our parents might be parts of our life plans, too.

Adversity

The best years of our lives are not always the easiest years—the years when our plans go well when the world seems to conspire to give us the maximum freedom to do just whatever we want. The best years of our lives are often times of adversity—we are called upon to fight for our country in time of war; we lose our job and are forced to move to a new state and build up our life from scratch. How can what we said about the meaning of life apply to cases such as this. How can you lead a meaningful life if you or your child is suffering from a terrible illness? Our answer is exactly the same as before. The way to lead a meaningful life, both in easy times and in times of the most terrible adversity is to make and realize genuine plans and so to impose a pattern on your life, and on the world around you, in the form of genuine achievements. Of course, you will need to make will now be of different sorts: there are plans made in response to adversity. Not plans to get a diploma and start a new career, but plans to become a good infantry officer and to lead your unit into battle against the enemy. Not plans to complete

your collection of Chinese jade stamps, but plans to help stall the epidemic of bacterial disease unleashed by bioterrorism. The plans you make must then, even more than under more normal circumstances be able to survive through twists and turns of adversity imposed from the outside. But you still must have a plan: to get well, to survive the next battle, to make the world a better place, and one day, to go home and start a business. If on the other hand you respond to adversity in a desultory way—now in this direction, now in that—then your life will be as lacking in meaningfulness as will any other desultory life.

A person who becomes handicapped in an accident and loses the capacity to walk, but who then makes the plan to walk again and strives with all her might realize that goal is leading a meaningful life.

Planning with self-reliance means making commitments yourself and others and thus accepting constraints on your life in the future. These constraints have first of all to do with your actions: you must do this and that, be ready at these and those times. But they also have a psychological side—you must be ready and willing to pay the price of

failure. Your life will certainly be an easier, more comfortable life if you avoid making the sorts of difficult and challenging plans which make for meaning.

Suicide

Tonjua Twist was a famous stylist to the stars. One day, at the age of 26 lined her bathtub with a comforter and a pillow and placed several candles, a CD player, a selection of CDs and a cell phone on her floor of the bathroom. She then proceeded to swallow 80 pills, a mixture of painkillers, antidepressants, sleeping pills, and tranquilizers, some left in the medicine cabinet by Stevie Salas, her boyfriend of 12 years.

Tonjua's had considerable talent. She worked on the original *House of Style* with Cindy Crawford, and dressed stars for magazines and music videos. One the morning of her death Stevie had stopped by her apartment and told her that there was no chance that they might get back together again: 'you cannot live through me'.

Perhaps it was right that suicide should feel tempting after she had been treated so baldly by her boyfriend. But even in what must have been for her the worst of all circumstances, Tonjua can still think, she can still reason and, she still has the energy and will to plan for suicide. And everyone, even in a position like that of Tonjua, can by using just some small amount of effort get order back into their life, where they can lead meaningful life on their own behalf. However, bad things might seem it is never too late to renounce the mistakes of the past and to plan for a new life.

Jim Lovell

On April 13, 1970, Navy Capt. Jim Lovell was two days and about 200,00 miles out from Earth as the commander of Apollo 13. With him were Fred Haise, pilot of the main command module Odyssey, and Jack Swigert. They were going to the moon. It would have been America's third lunar landing. As we know, the ship suddenly shuddered and began to roll erratically. At first, all the astronauts knew was that a cloud of debris and icy condensate, like snow, was spraying from their ship's side. For a moment they thought a meteor had struck. It turned out that because of a fault in the oxygen supply

Apollo 13 was severely damaged and the electricity-making fuel cells were dying. Now, their only thought was to survive. The crew invented new ways to operate the ship. The men moved next door into the smaller Aquarius module with its topped-up batteries and full oxygen supply. NASA had designed the Aquarius to take two astronauts down to the moon's surface. It could probably work for a short time as a lifeboat, but not for the four days it would take the Apollo 13 crew to reach home. The only way to save the situation was through lots of thorough planning, on the part of different groups of experts spread around the globe, dictating exactly how to maximize the usefulness of remaining resources of fuel, good, oxygen, water, battery and computer power, thrust from the rockets own inertia and from the gravitational pull of earth and moon. Before the power died in the main command module, Lovell transferred navigation data into the lander's computer. Ground control in Houston helped him to use the lander's smaller rocket to boost the wounded spacecraft into a trajectory around the moon and back to Earth. But with the rest of Apollo still attached, the lander did not work as planned, so Lovell and his crew were forced to aim their engine burns were forced by eyeballing the sun and moon. They also turned off the lander's batteries except for a few essential systems.

Conditions became ever more terrible. The food packets froze. No warm clothes or blankets were on board. The crew hardly slept. Haise fell into chills and fever with a kidney infection because of the shortage of water. Carbon dioxide reached nearly lethal levels. But the crew survived and the lunar module landed in the Pacific.

Creation of Goals

Consider Malene, a biochemistry student in Copenhagen. Malene is very sharp. She gets the highest grades in her class and clearly has a promising career as a biochemist ahead of her. But at the age of twenty she is diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a disease which will lead to severe handicap, in fact to paralysis, within ten to fifteen years. Many people with multiple sclerosis die at a very young age. The symptoms take the form of attacks on the nervous system which become more and more frequent over time. After each attack the person will be worse off than before. After Malene's first attack she can still walk, though she walks poorly and has lost a lot of feeling in her legs. Many things

change. She cannot dance at parties, she cannot walk up and down stairs, she has to move to a new apartment on the ground floor. She can no longer have the children she earlier thought she would have. But she still decides to go to graduate school in order to study for a Ph.D. in biochemistry. In fact she is offered a generous fellowship, which it would be difficult to turn down.

But her physical health continues to go downhill. She is now in her late twenties and has finished her Ph.D. What should she do now? In the best case she will live perhaps for another ten years. Should she attempt to get a job in some biochemist's lab, so that she can live as far as possible as she would have lived if she did not have the disease? A job in biochemistry involves a lot of moving around, and would for her almost certainly be painful and difficult. She could also get another, easier job, such as becoming a science journalist. Or she could decide not to get a job at all, but spend the money to travel around the world?

It is we ourselves who decide what sorts of plans we need to realize given the circumstances of our lives. You might through yourself into a boring job in a supermarket because it is a means for you to be a good mother (you need to feed your

children). Then, however, you do in fact desire to work in the supermarket, for that is what enables you to realize your plans.

Small Plans

Are life plans necessary in order for a life to be meaningful? Small plans, too, can after all contribute meaning to your life. This could be a really, really small plan, even a trivial plan (where the word 'plan' is no longer really appropriate), such as the plan you make to reach out to pick up a glass of wine from the table in front of you. But such a plan contributes meaning to your life, we shall argue, only if it is a part of a larger plan. There is an immediate purpose in reaching for the wine: you want to drink it. But there may also be a larger purpose to your being in this special situation: you are at a party given by your boss; you want to please your host so that he will think well of you; you want to get to know your colleagues better; you want to learn more about wines from this particular region.

The term ‘small plan’ is of course vague. How small could a plan be and still contribute meaning to your life? Playing solitaire to take your mind off your sorrows is one thing. Taking part in an important poker game against tough opponents may be quite another.

You don’t have to attend to the fact that this small plan is a part of your life plan in order for it to contribute in its own small way to the meaning of your life. But it must be a part of your life plan nonetheless. If you have no life-plan, if all you are doing is sipping wine, day after day, for no further reason other than habit, then your life is to this extent lacking in meaning.

If I say ‘What are your plans for your life?’, you might not be sure how to answer. You are a teacher. You say, ‘I shall read and write and teach until I drop dead’. Then you remember that your front door needs painting, and so you add that to your list. And you also want to visit an old friend in Boston, and so you put that on your list. And so it goes on. Or perhaps you say something like ‘I plan to be happy—or rather continue to be happy.’ Not many people can say something like: ‘I plan to create a room-temperature fusion device and solve the world’s energy problems.’ That of course would be a significant achievement. But it is in one sense no different from ‘I plan to paint my front door’ or ‘I plan to visit Amsterdam’ for in each such case, we can always ask: And

then what? After you visit Amsterdam, invent a fusion device, feed all the people in Africa—after all that has been accomplished, then what will you do.

A life plan is, we now want to say, different from all these other plans because it leaves no room to ask this question. A life plan is a plan for what you will do with your life.

Certainly meaning is found in all the long- and short-term plans which make up your life, but if you want to maximize the degree to which your *life* has meaning, if you want to lead a meaningful life in the fullest sense, then you can do this only to the degree that there is some non-accidental connection between all these various plans and sub-plans. And this means: only to the degree that they add up together to form a meaningful whole which you yourself have planned.

You might not know what your life plan is, you might never have thought it through in detail, it might consist only in your inchoate dreams, only in a vague notion of the sort of shape our life should have. But this might be enough. It is necessary only that you go about realizing some of the plans that constitute it (you want to become a good friend, a good sister, a good partner, a good colleague, or perhaps all of these things). Your life plan, as we saw, will become more detailed and more fine-grained as time passes and it will almost certainly change and evolve. Perhaps at some point you will

decide to become a chicken farmer instead of a philosopher. But whatever your life plan is at any given time it will still give meaning to the sub-plans which it contains.

You can maximize the degree to which your life represents a meaningful whole, if you succeed in fixing upon what is just the right sort of life plan for your very early in your life. But even if you are not Mozart, even if it takes many false starts before you settle upon the sort of life you want to lead, you can still do very well in the meaningfulness stakes. Your life plan might need to be abandoned and replaced by another but this, too, is fine provided you do in fact settle on a plan for your life and devote yourself thereafter to realizing this plan. There are limits to the number of changes you can make in your plans along the way. This means that there is a trade-off between spending effort trying out different life plans in order to find out what is right for you—and actually realizing some single life plan now, even at the risk that with just a little extra effort you might find a better life plan around the corner.

Chapter 7: The Social Web of Meaning

The Web of Meanings

In realizing plans you will accumulate obligations and commitments along the way, which form a sort of framework for your actions. Where your plans and the efforts and actions it takes to realize them belong to your own personal realm, obligations, and commitments belong to the realm of social objects. They belong to, where they exist, alongside nations, orchestras, religions, airline timetables, baseball leagues. Such social objects form a dimension of reality that is created and maintained by human beings. Social objects have their own lives, their own characteristic ways of being born and dying; they have their own qualities, and their own ways of functioning and of interacting with each other and with the persons who participate in them. Social objects are dependent on historical circumstances and are subject to more or less intelligible patterns of change. The game of chess has existed for many centuries, and it will likely continue to exist many centuries into the future. It has been able to survive even in spite of radical changes in the population of those who were involved, at different stages in

history, in keeping it alive. The Hungarian nation has existed for many centuries, and it will likely continue to exist for many centuries to come. It, too, has been able to survive in spite of radical change in its people and in the people who rule it. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has existed for many centuries. It was born at a certain point in time, made its way through the world in performances and translations and in people's thoughts, and has been able to survive in spite of radical changes in the people involved in keeping it alive.

To perform *Hamlet* is to enter into certain commitments with oneself, one's audience and with Shakespeare, too (not just any old collection of actions and words on a stage can count as a performance of *Hamlet*. Social objects of the given sort can survive over time because there are in each successive generation people who are willing to make such commitments, commitments which become interlinked to form complex webs involving many different groups and extending over many different generations. We can think of these commitments as so many strands in a gigantic social web, or as fibers in a rope extending over time. No fiber extends through the hole rope, but the individual fibers are packed together sufficiently tightly to ensure the survival through time of the

bundle as a whole. Airline timetables are the outward signs of large interlinked webs of this sort. An airline timetable is made and sustained in existence by many people who have entered into obligations with each other and with an unknown totality of customers. The work of an airline rests on slowly evolving traditions—as timetables become more complex and more reliable over time they allow more and more people to cooperate together in performing complex acts leading to achievements which would otherwise be impossible and which just a few decades ago would have seemed miraculous.

We live in a world that is structured through and through by a scaffolding of many different types of social webs—webs of social commitments and social objects. This means that when we travel across the surface of the earth we are not just drifting about in a world without order and direction. Rather we are moving from one town or region or country to the next. We are moving meaningfully through a world of social objects which have been created and bended and preserved in existence since long before we came upon this earth. We are living in a world of maps and signposts, of rules and traditions, a world of groups and communities all of which provide order and guidance to our lives. Just as we are caught up in a web of physical causality so we are caught up in a

web of obligations, meanings, responsibilities. They make us what we are, and we can test ourselves against them. And if we pass the test, then we move ourselves onto a new level—as mother, as husband, as mayor, as coach for your local football team.

Something happens when you say sincerely to your spouse, 'I promise that I will do the dishes tonight'. In performing this social act, you change the world. Your act is not a passive experience like say, feeling a pain or hearing an explosion. Rather it is an expression of your entering into a commitment. You change the world by bringing this commitment into being and thereby adding one small piece to the already existing web of commitments which are shared by you and your wife and by the other members of the society in which you live.

The world contains commitments, obligations, claims, commands, laws and relations of authority, it contains rules of grammar, rules of chess, rules of singing; it contains songs and poems, ideologies and rituals. We can think of all of these taken together as forming the social web of meanings. This social web of meaning helps us to make simple and complex plans, to coordinate with others, and to lead meaningful lives. A physical object, like your heart or your car, changing all the time, reflecting the many causal

relations in which it is involved. The objects which make up the web of social meanings—social practices, standards, obligations, institutions, rules, laws—change only slowly. The existence in time of social objects may for long periods involve no change at all. Even where a social object, like a chess club or a law, is subject to change, this will typically consist merely in small discrete steps: one member joins or leaves, a clause is amended with a new clause. If your job description or your contract changes, this will be in single steps often with gaps of several years between them.

Social objects enjoy a certain isolation from the concrete world of constant causal change. This holds not only for obligations, rights, debts, and relations of ownership, but also for cultural artefacts such as works of music and literature. Even naming your child is a change in the realm of social objects. Your child might later change her name; but she cannot change her name every day or every hour. You join together with your neighbors to petition the local council block the traffic on your street. Your street becomes safer, your children can play, trees can grow, many things will happen. But the street itself as a result of your petition undergoes just one change: before it was a through

street; now it is a street blocked off to traffic. The street, as it plays a role in your petition, is a social object: a part of the social web of meanings.

The web of meanings, built up out of such social objects is thus to a degree isolated from real changes in those real things, including you and me, by which it is sustained. Your football club does not change when its president catches cold. It changes only when a new member joins or an old one leaves. We cannot change the rules of football, or of the Catholic religion, just at random. These sorts of changes can be made only when a whole series of conditions have been satisfied, dictated by the practices of those involved which may here developed over hundreds or thousands of years.

There are many things you can make: a career, a tapestry, a cocktail, a temple, a home, friend, love, babies. As human beings work together in realizing their plans, they add ever new strands to the social wev of meaning. The social web of meaning is like a great city, with steep and gentle inclines, which means: large and small challenges for every person Homemaking is one such challenge. Splitting the atom is another. Climbing a mountain is another

We do not need to rely on other forces (e.g. God) to lead a meaningful life—we can create frameworks within which genuine meaning exists even though we create it (just as we can create legal frameworks within which genuine lawhood exists.

Tending the Social Web of Meaning in your hands

We tend the social web of meanings as we tend a garden: pulling up weeds, resolving clashes of color, laying down new flower beds, adding special touches of our own, collaborating with others to make the garden better, stronger, more attractive. The ways we tend the social web of meanings include praising and blaming, teaching and learning, joining and donating, planning and building. Deliberating and legislating. They include raising our children to respect the rules of grammar and etiquette. They include all the various legal and commercial and behavioral mechanisms by which a culture is held together.

In one sense, now, *it is very easy to lead a meaningful life*. All one needs to do is simply to participate in the social web of meanings. This is, as it were, the minimal level

of meaningfulness which we can all achieve, with very little risk and effort. To go beyond this minimal level, however, you need to do something more. You need to grapple with the social web of meanings in some serious way; not merely to float passively through life, but to take life and its meaning into your own hands.

Measures of Success

Suppose Jim seeks to give meaning to his life by reading the astrology predictions in the newspaper every day. John does not achieve anything by reading these predictions, because there is no sense to the claim that he either succeeded or failed in realizing his plan. There is here no standard of success. Plans can lead to genuine achievement only where there are corresponding standards or measures of success. These measures of success, too, belong to the social web of meaning, and they, too, are therefore comparatively difficult to change. Since measures of success must be public, it follows that there can be no such thing as a private achievement. A loner can have a meaningful life—he might for instance write beautiful poems in total isolation from other poets—but the meaning and the quality of what he has written must be at least intelligible to others.

Even the loner, if he is to have genuine achievement to his credit, must subject himself at least to this degree to the judgment of others: that if they were to evaluate his works, then they would evaluate them positively.

That the measures of success must be public means that they must be shared in common, at least to some degree, by all of those involved in a given activity. We say 'to some degree' because there will characteristically be a division of labor between those who are charged with applying the measures of success—by organizing international competitions or by grading tests or exams—and those who merely engage in the activities in question and subject themselves to the judgments of the experts.

The social web of meanings is thus much more than the result of the whim of any single person. We live in a meaningful world because human beings, over many thousand of years, have together *made* the world meaningful—not only by founding nations, establishing cultures, creating laws and religions, but also by tending and maintaining institutions a great tapestry by means of which our lives are guided and our achievements judged.

Is Meaning a Mere Invention?

We insist that there is a difference with respect to meaningfulness between the lives of animals and the lives of human beings. But the authors of this book are themselves human beings, and thus we are far from being independent witnesses in this matter. Perhaps we human beings merely invented the idea of this difference between ourselves and the animals; perhaps it is just a comfortable illusion. That animals cannot make plans is an objective matter, not open to dispute. That this difference between animals and human beings is enough to give the lives of human beings meaning—meaning of a sort which animals' lives can never possess—is a problematic claim, one which is in need of further argument.

How, then, are we to refute the claim that 'meaning' is a mere comfortable invention? Note, first, that the entire social web of meanings is indeed a product of invention—and indeed of human invention. It is something that has been laid down and slowly extended as a result of the totality of human achievements over many thousands of years. But this means that it is not an illusion. It truly exists, and so do the standards of success and failure of achievements which it contains. And it is meaningful—the laws,

norms and commiments, which it contains are not a matter of random noise but rather a vast and intelligible tapestry. When once all of this is granted, however, then it is a purely objective matter that a human life has meaning to the extent that it participates in the right sort of way in this meaningful background.

The difference between human beings and worms in terms of meaningfulness thus turns in no small part on the fact that we, but not worms, are able to create such a social web of meanings. This fact, too, is an entirely objective matter. This difference in our respective powers of invention is *discovered* in the same sense in which DNA or the continents of America were discovered.

History and Tradition

Towns, universities, clubs, families, churches, nations—all of these can sustain themselves through time even though they gain and lose members from one generation to the next.

A chess club is dependent on people who want to play chess, and who want to create and sustain a forum in which they can fulfil their goal of playing—and winning—at

chess. Its members may engage in ever more competitive chess with better and better opponents; in this way their club becomes a forum for genuine achievement.

The game of chess itself has a long a history. It has changed over time, most particularly in recent years as concerns the rules for organizing international competitions and international rankings. The rules of the game are not subject to such changes, since they have long since established themselves as rules which enable interesting, challenging play. Winning in these circumstances is an achievement. Whether you are a beginner or an international master, when you play chess, and you play to win, then you achieve something if you realize this goal. The game of chess is a mere invention of mankind, yet human beings can realize genuine achievements by subjecting themselves to its rules. Contrast this with the case where a group of children invent a new game for themselves, a game in which everyone wins. Here no achievement is possible, however much the children involved might believe that they have achieved something. Meaningfulness rests on real achievement, not on the mere belief in achievement. And real achievement is something objective even where it rests on rules invented by human beings, for these rules represent a framework independent of those

involved at any given times and a framework which is resistant to change precisely because it has proved itself as able to sustain genuine achievement. We cannot make up just any old goal when playing chess. We cannot make up the goal of winning at chess by poisoning our opponent, or by setting fire to the chessboard, or by moving the pieces at random about the board. Why not? Because the rules of chess are part of the enduring background web of social meanings to which we have committed ourselves and to which we re-commit ourselves each time we sit down to play the game.

To enter into an activity like chess—or architecture, or music, or medicine—is to enter into a relationship both with our contemporaries, and also with those who have gone before. There will be some of our predecessors whose achievements changed or expanded the activity in important ways. This architect invented a new way of building a domed ceiling, another found a new way to embellish a building with glass. The achievements and the authority of such predecessors go together to form the tradition which each new question of participants in the activity must confront and from which they must learn.

Standards of Success

Chess has clear standards of success and failure, which rest in part on the fact that its social web of meanings extends—through chess associations, international competitions, systems of medals and rankings—across the entire world. This means that there is a system of carefully tended, open, public and objective standards for what is good and bad play. The existence of these standards serves to raise the level of chess from century to century and it serves also to guarantee that the apparent achievements of chess-players in the higher reaches are in fact genuine achievements.

Athletics, too, is an area with carefully tended standards for success, with medals, rankings, local and national and international competitions, and something similar applies to very many kinds of sports.

In business the measure of your success lies in the profits that you make. In science the measure of your success lies in the fruitfulness and originality of your hypotheses, and, most importantly, in how well these hypotheses stand up to experimental testing. In science, too, there is a well-established and well-tended international system of rankings and medals extending at its peek all the way up to the Nobel Prize.

The life of an international chess Grand Master, of an Olympic athlete, or of a Nobel prize-winning physicist or cancer specialist, is—we take this for granted—a meaningful life. But there are measures of success, at every level, from the chemistry tests you faced in secondary school to the appreciation of your guests when you cook a nice dinner.

Everyone who knows something about raising children or parenting knows that there are standards for what is good and bad. These standards can change, but they change only slowly. They do not change, and they cannot be set out of action, in response to some single person's whim.

Achievements must be Public Achievements

A life is meaningful to the degree to which it is built around genuine achievements, and this means: achievements for which there exists a public measure of success. That the measure of success be public does not merely mean that there are individuals and institutions with recognized authority to apply the measures and to report upon their application. It means also that your achievement itself should be something that will still count as an achievement when exposed to public view. This means: no doping if your are

an athlete; no faking of financial statements if you are a businessman; no poisoning the food of your opponent if you are playing chess.

It means that you must achieve what you achieve without cheating; without kidnapping, without secret torture chambers or that you must achieve what you achieve by realizing honestly the plans you set about to realize.

There are achievements which come about as side-effects of your collaboration with others. If you build a house with the help of your friends and neighbors, and you make promises and enter into obligations, then between the making of your plans and the completion of the house there will come into existence a network of social relations may very well survive the completion of your house, and then it will become part of what makes your life meaningful. As you build bonds with your neighbors the web of social relations in which you live becomes richer and stronger, and this, too, adds meaning to your life. Playing in an orchestra odds meaning to your life not only because of the performances in which you participate, but also because of the social relations you form with the other members. Through the cameraderie of work and the relationships you build with your colleagues you share also in the trials and tribulation of their lives, and

this adds meaning to your life even independently of what, together, you are able to achieve.

Internal Goods

Your daughter Judith is a highly intelligent seven year old and you decide to teach her to play chess. Unfortunately, however, she has no particular desire to learn the game. She does, though, have a strong desire for candy, and very little money. You therefore tell her that if she will play chess with you once a week then you will each time give her a dollar's worth of candy. You also tell her that you will play in such a way that it will be difficult, but not impossible, for her to win—but that, if she does win, then she will get double the amount of candy. This motivates her to play and to play to win. But so long as it is the candy alone which provides Judith with her reason for playing chess, she has no reason not to cheat. Indeed if she can cheat successfully, then she has every motive to do so.

After a time, though, Judith's chess improves and she begins to find a value in chess for its own sake. She starts to want to acquire the particular kind of skill and imagination

it takes to play well. A new set of reasons appears in Judith's world. From now on she plays not just to win, but to win by playing well. We can say that she tries to manifest a new sort of excellence in her life—and that it is chess which makes this possible. Judith now does not even think of cheating, for this would be a betrayal of herself. Slowly but surely she discovers a whole new province in the web of social meanings, she discovers the world of chess and of all the commitments, responsibilities and measures of achievement which are associated with the game.

We can thus distinguish between two kinds of good that can become associated with an activity like playing chess. On the one hand are those goods that are external to the game but may come to be associated with it in a given case. These are goods that arise in reflection of the specific situation of those involved. Candy or money is for Judith an external good. As far as such external goods are concerned, there are always equally good alternatives. Money that can be gained from playing chess could be gained equally well from playing football or driving cabs.

On the other hand, however, there are goods which are internal to playing chess, goods which can be realized only through playing this very game. We call such goods

internal for two reasons: first because we can specify them only in terms of chess; and secondly because they can be identified and recognized only by those who have become involved in this very activity. Those who lack the relevant experience cannot judge the degree to which internal goods are realized. They cannot judge the standards of good play.

There are many domains of human activity which general internal goods in the same sort of way, and which thus go to form a corresponding province of the social web of meanings. The internal goods surrounding the theater reflect a whole family of interrelating measures or standards relating to the quality of plays, of acting, of theaterical production, and of stage design. The goods internal to the game of football help to form a province of the social web of meanings which includes the standards for good play, good coaching, well-run leagues and championships, loyalty of fans, and so on.

External goods are things like money and possessions. They are things that you can acquire by giving up something else. The realization of internal goods, in contrast, represents an enrichment of your life. In areas like chess or football such realization is

the outcome of a competition to become the best. In areas like family life it is the outcome of doing your best to make a good home for your spouse and children. In each case there is a measure of success, of the quality of your achievements. If there is no way of telling the difference between good and bad football, or good and bad parenting, then there is no way in which those involved in these activities can strive to do them well.

Posthumous Harm

When you are dead you no longer exist. So whatever happens when you are dead will fail to affect you. If the world is destroyed, after you are dead, then this may affect your children, but it will not affect you. For there is no 'you' after your death. Does it matter whether a promise made to you by your children, is kept after your death? Intuitively, it would seem that it does matter. But how can it matter? After all, you no longer exist. If it matters, then does this mean that posthumous events can affect a person's life?

Posthumous events can affect whether we are successful in the attempt to realize our plans. It can affect whether or not the attempt to perform a morally praiseworthy or blameworthy act is successful. How? Suppose Mary shoots John in their living room. But before John dies he grabs his gun and shoots Mary. Mary dies. John calls an ambulance. Consider two possible situations. In the first John dies in the ambulance. In the second the ambulance people save John's life. Surely, it is the events after Mary's death which determine whether Mary is a murderer or Mary only attempted murder. It's blameworthy in either cases though. Thus, a posthumous event has affected Mary's life. If the posthumous event takes place, then she is a murderer. If it doesn't take place, then she is not a murderer. Mary had a plan (a bad one) to kill John. But whether or not her plan is successful is determined by other factors external to herself. She is not fully in control over whether or not her plan is realized. And this is the reason that events that happen when she is dead can change her life. In this case, Mary's act is at least taken to be more blameworthy if John dies.

Can we be harmed posthumously? Yes, in a somewhat similar way. On one view, people might be harmed when their ulterior interests are disrupted. Posthumous harm can

occur because posthumous events can have the effect of thwarting certain ulterior interests that the deceased person had. Surely, a posthumous event cannot harm the deceased person at the time when it occurs. Rather, it can harm the person during his or her life. For example, suppose you work the whole of your life to raise enough money to build a school in a certain needy city in Africa. It seems that your plans will success. After your death, however, you're your accountant finds a way to steal all your money. This is posthumous harm. It is not the case that there exist such a thing as backward causation. In other words, it is not the case that an event in the future can affect something that happened in the past. Rather, your plan to build schools is a plan that will become realized if the corporation does not interfere and it is a plan that will not become realized if the corporation does interfere. So at the time when you are working to collect money for the schools, we can assume that you do not know whether or not your plan will succeed. But if some thief disrupts your plan, then this has in some sense harmed you while you were still alive. We might assume that harm occurs only if you have invested substantial time and effort trying to realize the plan that will be thwarted.

Your life is less meaningful if your plans fail to come to fruition after your death, because success in realizing your plans would have added an additional level to your life by rounding out the narrative story it would otherwise represent. A meaningful life is one which achievements are realized even in spite of the risk of failure—and your plans are good plans to the extent that they can still succeed even if, after your death, individuals with other ends in view should set out to thwart them.

Chapter 8: Does Life Have Meaning?

On Doing The Same Thing Over and Over Again

Sisyphus was punished by the gods. His punishment consisted in having to roll a large stone to the top of a hill, and to watch the stone immediately roll back down to the bottom. Sisyphus had to do this over and over again. For all eternity.

Sisyphus' life is meaningless. And its meaninglessness will never end, for Sisyphus will never die. Sisyphus may make plans, but he will never achieve anything. In this he is in an even worse position than is XXX in *Groundhog Day*. Even though XXX woke up

every morning to find that it was still the same day, he was still each morning, able to plan his life anew. The meaninglessness of Sisyphus' life consists first of all in having to do the same thing over and over again. The very same thing. Whatever he does is immediately undone. The stone rolls back to the bottom of the hill. Furthermore, Sisyphus has no say in determining his own life. He is forced to push the stone for the rest of his life, whether he likes it or not.

Doing the same thing over and over again is not necessarily meaningless. A competition swimmer must swim lane after lane after lane. Whenever one training session is accomplished, he must start another, and then another, for month after month after month. But he does this for a purpose. He has a plan. His plan is to become a better, faster swimmer, and there is a good chance that this plan will be realized precisely because of his constant training. A piano player must practice the same piece of music over and over again. But he does this for a purpose. His plan—this may even be his life plan—is to become a better pianist.

The Pig-Breeder

Consider Aristide, the pig-breeder, who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more hogs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more hogs. Can Aristide's life be meaningful? His life plan seems to make him go round and round in circles, and this meakes his life sound much like that of Sisyphus. But to recognize meaning, as we saw, we always need to fnd the right perspective. Sisyphus is not increasing anything. He is not working towards any sort of goal. Aristide, in contrast, is working to build up his farm. He is achieving something.

It may be hard to explain what is so much better about buying more land than pushing a stone to the top of a mountain. But through his hard work and skill, Aristide is able to feed many people and at the same time he is able to build up his farm and leave a certain corner of the world in better shape for future generations.

Perspective

But what is it all for? Mary believes that it has meaning whenever a black cat crosses her path. We believe that human life has meaning to the extent that it involves the realization of these and those sorts of plans. But Mary is wrong, and perhaps we are wrong too. Can it be that human life has meaning only in the sense that people believe that it does so? Could it be that meaning, like beauty, exists only in the eye of the beholder?

Someone who gives a positive answer to this question holds a subjective view of the meaningfulness of life.* At the opposite extreme from the subjective view is what we might call ultra-objectivism. An ultra-objectivist is one who thinks that meaning can be found only by looking at life from the perspective of the whole universe. The life of a single person like you or me, is then too small to be meaningful: it can make too negligible an impact on the unfolding history of the cosmos. The life of an ant, from this perspective, has as much meaning as the life of your or me, because those features which make human beings special—planning, striving, the ability to test ourselves against the achievements of others—are quite insignificant when seen in the ultra-objectivistic light of the whole cosmos.

[We should distinguish between objectivism and existentialism even if they come to the same conclusion. Most existentialism begins by focusing on the uniqueness and freedom of the individual person against the crowd, or the mass society. Existentialism emphasizes individual responsibility, individual personality, individual existence, and individual freedom and choice. It holds that life's most important questions are not accessible to reason or science. The only certainty for existentialists is death. In the existentialist world, each person is born, lives, chooses his or her course, and creates the meaning of his or her own existence. There is a human struggle to achieve self-definition through choice. All people are fully responsible for the meaning of their own existence and creating their own essence of self-definition .

Objectivism is the starting-point for some existentialists, but need not be]

'From the perspective of the universe as a whole we do indeed appear to be creatures whose lives are no more meaningful than was that of Sisyphus. Life on earth will one day come to an end. One day there will be no more human beings. Perhaps life, and even something like human life, will arise somewhere else in the universe and the whole

dance of evolution might repeat itself over and over again. But one day the universe itself will collapse, so that the entire universe might seem to be following the same route as Sisyphus.

A gratuitous gesture.

Both the subjectivist and the ultra-objectivist hold the view that your life is in fact meaningless: the subjectivist because meaning is a mere subjective illusion, the objectivist because human lives like ours are cosmically insignificant. We might thus respond to both with the challenge to provide an answer to the question: why is it worth while to go on living? If the subjectivist is right, however, then we have difficulties in explaining how it is that we can have false beliefs about the meaningfulness of our lives. Susan might believe–out of modesty or for some other reason–that her life of dedication to charitable works has no intrinsic significance, when it is clear to everyone else that this belief is false. Tony, out of immodesty, believes that his life is of tremendous significance—when again it is clear to the rest of us that the poor man is just a bag of hot air. Already our dream machine thought experiment shows that people can think that

they are leading meaningful lives in circumstances where they are not in fact leading any lives at all.

Against ultra-objectivism we can point out in addition that the case has yet to be made that meaning or significance can exist at best only at the level of the entire cosmos—a view which recalls earlier and now discredited doctrines according to which the life of the individual has no significance when set against the life of the entire nation or race to which that individual belongs. The cosmos is, after all, filled almost exclusively with vast-expanses of near vacuum. It is surely not unreasonable to suppose that just as there are occasional agglomerations of *dense matter* within this vast ocean of nothingness so also there are occasional islands of *density of meaning*. One such island of density of meaning is to be found on our own planet earth. It becomes visible once we realize that the meaningfulness of human life is to be sought in some unknown pattern of cosmic history in which we humans play no role but rather among events which occur at human scale. It is then more than possible your life, too, can have meaning on the basis of the thesis that the meaningfulness of human life is to be sought precisely among events which occur at human scale and not in some unknown pattern of cosmic history in

which we humans play no role. It is then more than possible that your life, too, can have meaning, that it can form a part of the island of density of meaning here on earth.

Recall your thirsty brother who holds up his glass and says ‘this glass is empty’. The hygiene inspector who looks more carefully at the same glass is forced to conclude that it contains a veritable zoo of microscopic organisms. Both are right, because they are focusing on different things. The beauty of a painting is invisible under a microscope; the romance of a great symphony is invisible when the sounds are analyzed in a sinuscope human life appears to have no meaning. And similarly when viewed in the context of the universe as a whole, but this cosmic view is not the only one we have available.

The ultra-objective holds that meaning can exist only on the cosmic scale because only on the scale of the whole cosmos can we have meaning that is not relative to something else. He is searching for ultimate meaning; for an ultimate place to stand, a god’s eye view from which meaning can be recognized with ultimate certainty. He thinks that the sort of meaning that can be recognized only from within our, all too human perspective is not meaning at all. Compare the position of the ultra-skeptic, who seeks not ultimate meaning but ultimate certainty. We tell him that it is raining. But he refuses

to believe us and asks what is our evidence for this belief. We respond by pointing to the raindrops falling onto the street, which we can all see very clearly through the window. But he now want to know what justifies our belief that those are indeed raindrops which we can see. We tell him that this belief is justified on the basis of the beliefs we have formed when experiencing rain and rain-drops in the past. But he now wants to know what justifies our belief in the reliability of our memory—and so it goes on. All we are left with is a series of claims which have no *ultimate* foundation.

Death. Perhaps it is part of human psychology to desire a permanent place to stand. Maybe the very thought of an unending series produces a kind of vertigo. This might explain why both the ultra-objectivist and the ultra-skeptic are so anxious to find something beyond—beyond all the separate somethings which make up our normal human lives. The ultra-objectivist is not content with activities which point to still other activities. He wants a meaning for *life itself*. Perhaps he thinks: living simply results in death, and if death is nothing to us, then life points to nothing! Life therefore has no meaning!

But let us examine these matters more carefully. Certainly a person's life cannot have any meaning for that person when that person is dead. But from this it does not follow that this life is without any meaning. First its meaning might be recognized by other people who are still alive In a still more important sense, however, a life can have meaning *even if no one is ever aware of it*. For if there is meaning in your activities with your family and friends then this is an objective fact like any other (as objective as, say, facts about rain or sandy beaches). It cannot be denied that there are people who want something further, people who cannot accept that meaningfulness can be found already in the activities of life; so they go looking for what their completed lives might point to, and they find nothing at all. But they want what they cannot have. And they ignore the fact that there is already something much more substantial before their eyes.

Existentialism

From the ultra-objectivist perspective the best we can achieve is to console ourselves, or distract ourselves, in order to make ourselves feel better in the face of the sheer cosmic meaninglessness human life, which is, like everything else, nothing more than the sheer random play of material particles. This will remind us of the doctrines of the so-called existentialists—Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus—the Continental European philosophers of Nothingness, Absurdity, and *Angst*. The existentialists claimed that human life is, ultimately, a gratuitous gesture, and that the best we can do is to invent for ourselves from moment to moment a fake meaning in a world that is in and of itself absurd.

But we can already see why this is wrong. Existentialists, again, are looking at human affairs with the wrong focus. Consider the promises we make to each other in living our lives. Promises are not just physical matter. They are a way in which meaningful structures can inhere in physical things, and we are surrounded by many other examples of such meaningful structures. Nations, laws, families, rituals—each of these belong to the same world of physical matter. But each is also something more—something meaningful.

Although you create your goals, this does not mean that you can arbitrarily invent or create meaning in your life. It will not make your life meaningful if you just try to attach meaning to something in arbitrary fashion.

The existentialists claim that this something more to human life is but a useless passion. We are alone in the universe, and we must all make sense of things *for ourselves*—but no way of doing this is better or worse than any other. You could be a brain surgeon or a pickpocket, a nun or a junkie—and you have to do something with your life—but each of these choices is as good or as bad, as meaningful or as meaningless, as any other. Nothing stands out as something which it would be right for you to aim at—unless we make it so by sheer random fiat. You have no *essence*, but only *existence.* So, the existentialist says, the way we give meaning to our lives is by self-deception: we blind ourselves to the absurdity of human existence and attach ourselves to something—anything—by some act of gratuitious commitment, a commitment that is then sustained by mere animal habit. Even a commitment which you sustain through the whole of your life would still, in the eyes of the existentialist, be no more than an empty gesture.

The existentialist is right when he points to the randomness involved in the life choices you will make. You choose in relation to the opportunities presented by the world around you, a world into which you have been thrown by circumstance. But even if when you come to a fork in the rod of your life, and you can go either way you do choose entirely at random—this does not mean that the existentialist is right to conclude that your striving to create for yourself a meaningful life is so much useless passion. For whichever fork you take, if you work resolutely to realize your plans, then your life will have meaning—and objectively so. Even out of randomness great things can grow. Flemming's discovery of penicillin grew out of an accident in his life; but what gave his life meaning was not the accident but what he did, the plans he made, the achievements he realized, in the wake of this accident. Even out of randomness great things can grow.

Our Theory of Meaning

Life can have meaning in an objective sense. The successful chicken farmer is successful because he meets the pertinent standards of success for being a chicken farmer. His chickens are healthy. His eggs are tasty. His farm is well maintained. His workers are

happy. It does not matter whether these standards of success are applied by himself and by other people. It does not matter whether they are in fact applied at all. What matters is that if they were applied then he would meet them. A mathematician who leads an isolated life proving theorems may still satisfy the standards of success of his discipline even though his work is never communicated to others. His proofs may still be elegant and valid, his theorems may still be important and original, even though no other mathematician ever determines that this is so.

In most cases, of course, others are in judging and grading your achievements. Olympic athletes cannot fulfil their goals in isolation, and neither can a would-be farther, or magician, or chef. Yet even in these cases you satisfy the pertinent measures of success not because these or those observers have decided that you do so, but because your achievement is in and of itself successful: you did indeed win the race, your crepe suzettte is indeed exquisite, your child is indeed a successful, charming, well-brought-up and well-adjusted child.

Who Decides?

When we say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder we are saying that beauty is *subjective*. Taste, too, is subjective. Perhaps you do not like strawberry ice cream. Your disliking strawberry ice cream is a subjective matter, a matter of your opinion. Perhaps you adore green olives, but your husband hates them. So hating or adoring green olives, too, is a subjective matter. That murder is a bad thing is, on the other hand, objective. It does not depend on a particular person's opinion. Hannibal Lector might think that serial murder is a perfectly good thing, but this does not make him right.

It is characteristic of what is subjective that it gives rise to a special sort of immediate knowledge. You cannot be wrong about whether or not you like green olives. If your friend sincerely judges that he is happy, or that he is in love, then you cannot correctly say that you know better. This is because happiness and love are subjective matters. The judgment: 'I am happy', if expressed sincerely, cannot fail to be true. Something is subjective if its presence depends on a given person's opinion. Something is objective if its presence does not depend on any given person's opinion.

If a person says that he is happy, and if he means what he says, then what he says is true. This is so even if he later says that he only *thought* that he was happy at that earlier

time. Happiness is something a person feels at a given moment—it is not something that can be evaluated and corrected at a later time. Of course, we might feel so much happier now than we did earlier, so that our earlier happiness seems to pale by comparison. This does not however make what we had said earlier false. That 2+2 equals 4 is an objective matter. You can tell a person who says that 2+2 equals 5 that she is wrong. The same applies to 'The Buffalo Bills won their last game in Jacksonville' or 'It rained in Boston on June 22, 2000'. These judgments are about objective matters of fact.

There are some similarities between being subjective and being relative to the culture in which you live. It might be merely a subjective matter that you like green olives. But it might also be because you live in a certain culture where everyone eats olives all the time. It might be your culture which explains why you don't like the taste of horsemeat or pork. Some jokes are funny in one culture but not in another. Hence it may be that there is no objective fact of the matter with respect to whether or not a given joke is funny. Different communities impose different standards with respect to humor; you grow up with these standards; they shape the way you evaluate the jokes you hear.

Meaningfulness is Objective

What, now, is to be said about meaningfulness? Does meaningfulness depend on the norms of your society? Is it something subjective like happiness, or something objective like temperature or height or football scores? Our answer to this question will by now be clear. It might be that everybody in a given culture fails to appreciate that a certain person's life is meaningful, but this person's life is either meaningful or not, independently of what other people have to say about the matter. This means that we can say truthfully of another person that she is living a meaningless or meaningful life, even if that person sincerely denies it.

A saint or a hero or a rebel may behave in ways which almost no one in the surrounding culture can understand, yet he may lead a life that in meaningful nonetheless. Of course what meaningful lives are lived—and the degree to which lives have a chance of being meaningful—will depend upon what the surrounding culture has to offer. But whether or not your life or my life is meaningful is independent of the culture in which we live.

The meaningfulness of your life is, like your age or your income, something objective. But this is not necessarily to say that it is easy to evaluate. Above all, it will be hard to evaluate the meanings of other people's lives unless we share with them many deep interests. If you are a football fan and your interest is in following your local team, then this may make *your* life meaningful. But those with other interests looking at you from outside will likely find it difficult to grasp why this is so. To be able to evaluate the meaningfulness of another's life, you will have to understand the other person's goals and something about the means he has chosen to reach them and you will need to have some familiarity with the associated standards and measures of success and also with the social web of meanings into which this person is immersed.

It is Your Life and Your Meaning

Your achievements may be very impressive and we are all convinced that your life is meaningful. But in order to make this judgement it is your perspective—as art collector, as little league coach, as toy designer—which we need to take into account We need to

find the right province within the social web of meanings within which the relevant measures are to be found, and we need to find out about the specific set of circumstances pertaining to your life and talents. It is only in this context that the meaningfulness of your life comes into view. You yourself of course know this context very well. But since meaningfulness is an objective matter it is still possible that even you may be mistaken about the meaningfulness of your life. John may be convinced that he is a failed mathematician with no important or original discoveries to his credit, not realizing that after his death his unpublished jottings will open up whole new avenues of mathematical research.

Temporary Meaningfulness

We have said that to lead a maximally meaningful life you should try to give a single pattern to your life, to ensure that your life adds up to a single whole. But this, of course, is a mere ideal. Much more common is that we try out a number of alternative plans before we settle on the one which seems to hold most promise. Sometimes, too we settle on a type of life which can be pursued only for a certain length of time before it has to be abandoned. Every life will involve successive phases, each phase contributing in different ways to the realization of the whole. Getting an education is one important phase in most people's lives. But what about becoming a fashion model, or a soccer plyer or a ballet dancer, or a soldier. Can even these necessarily temporary phases in

your life contribute to the meaning of your life as a wholee? Well of course they can. Each can broaden your perspectives.

Suppose you are a beautiful young woman who chooses to become a rich man's mistress. The relationship endures for several years. You sleep with the man. In return you have a glorious life. He gives you gifts, big earrings and nice clothes. He pays your rent. You join him on his journeys to exotic places all around the world. But then the whole things comes to an end, perhaps in tears. He trades you in for a younger, thinner model. Can even *this* contribute meaning to your life? Well, let us assume that you were conscious of what you were doing from the start—and of the risks involved. You were aware of the lack of permanence. You calculated very carefully the costs and benefits involved. Your lover is a man of the world. He can teach you a lot. He can offer you experiences you would not otherwise enjoy. Through him, your world expands, the range of the plans you can now realize is wider than it would otherwise have been.

What happens if your plans fail? As Mr. Polly says: "If you don't like your life, you can change it." Whatever happens, however late in the day it might be, it is never too late to

start to realize new plans, even if these be plans which involve your children or grandchildren, your nephews and nieces, your colleagues and friends, and even if there be plans which can be realized only after your death.

The word ‘Epicurean’ meaning ‘one who loves life’ is derived from the ancient Greek thinker Epicurus. Epicurus was a hedonist, which means that for him the purpose (if not the meaning) of life lies in the attainment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. At the same time Epicurus defends a quietistic philosophy—a philosophy which says that you should take no risks, draw back from achievement, and rest content with simple contentment. Epicurus’s view is that we ought to strive for what he calls *ataraxia* or peace of mind—a mind free from all anxieties and disturbances.

Epicurus is right when he says that we should seek the meaning of life in (what we do in) this life. He is right, too, when he says that we have to create our own meaning and he is right also when he insists that there is no ultimate external standards for doing so. But he is wrong when he divorces leading a meaningful life from striving and planning. In counselling drawing back from effort Epirucus makes the mistake made by all

proponents of a quietistic philosophy—he gives happiness too central a role. ((Shopenhauer: 'there is only one inborn error and that is the notion that we exist in order to be happy … Much would be gained if, through timely advice and instruction, all young people would have eradicated from their minds the erroneous notion that the world has a great deal to offer them' – check quote)) Like Schopenhauer, he places too much weight on fear and anguish at the loss of happiness. Because plans can fail and lead to unhappiness, Epicurus holds, we should not strive to realize plans.

The question 'what is the meaning of life?' is, on his view, a presumptuous question. 'You are born, you live, you die' and there can be nothing more. But the phrase 'you are born, you live, you die' already covers all the many great and small things in life that give it meaning. There is meaning in thinking about paying for your car, or in talking to the woman you are falling in love with. Your activities have meaning because they serve your goals.

Epicurus is wrong also because he overlooks the fact that your plans may often continue to be realized even after our death. You might have made the plan to raise your children in such a way that they can live meaningful lives. Of course, it is true that there is no you after death. But it does not follow that your plan to be a good father is no

longer your plan after your death. As people who make wills know, even plans which are brought to realization only after your death can still contribute to the meaningfulness of your life.

Faith and Mysticism

It is one implication of our view that mysticism—by which we mean the withdrawal from all activity and a pure life of meditation—cannot make for a meaningful life. This does not mean that we deny that Teresa of Avilla and the other great mystics of former times led supremely meaningful lives. For these individuals did not withdraw from practical activity. They wrote about their mystical experiences and often used them as a starting point for efforts to make the world a better place. Mere faith and mysticism leave no imprint on the world. A mad scientist might program his computer to make you believe that you are undergoing mystical experiences of the most subline intensity, when in fact all that is happening is that he is stimulating certain pants of yor brain with electrical impulses of a special sort. What matters for meaning is not the experiences you

have but what you do with them—and this means: making plans and realizing them in just the way described in this book.

Should you Try to Lead a Meaningful Life?

Meaning is discovered not invented. The existentialists say that the meaning of our lives is something invented. It is not that there is no fact of the matter in regard of meaningfulness. Rather, we find something in our lives which we call 'meaningfulness'. To have a life plan which is sufficiently difficult to realize and for which there exists a public measure of success and to try to realize this life plan in a satisfactory way is to have a meaningful life. But we are not saying that you *must* be a great pianist or that you *must* have children, or that you must do any of the other myriad things which you might do in order to lead a meaningful life. You might prefer, instead to lead a happy life, or a quiet life, or a moral life, or a mystical life—with no thought at all for meaning and achievement. We say only this: that, if you want to lead a meaningful life, then you must set about realizing a life plan if a certain sort, a plan which will take effort and risk, which has the right sort of fit with your talents.

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A Meaningful Life Need Not Be A Happy One

Some philosophers—called utilitarians—think that a meaningful life is necessarily a happy one and vice versa, because they view pleasure as the ultimate goal of all human endeavors. If you practice for a swimming competition, it must be because you think you will be happy if you win. If you seek to be a good mother, it must be because you think that being a good mother will bring you pleasure – and so on, for all the other ways in which you might strive to shape your life.

We can now see that this must be wrong: a life can be happy, indeed entirely happy, yet at the same time meaningless. And it can be meaningful and at the same time entirely unhappy. Imagine a person who devotes his whole life to caring for an irritable invalid parent or to a severely disabled and suffering child. Imagine a person who spends her life trying to solve one particularly difficult math problem. Imagine Beethoven, who strove to compose the most beautiful music, which at the end of his life he could no longer hear. In a letter to his brothers in 1802, the so-called 'Heiligenstadt Testament,' Beethoven reported that he was considering ending his life because he saw no escape from his despair. Beethoven's life was marked by sudden outbursts of anger and by insulting behavior towards those around him. Yet Beethoven led a meaningful life for all that, a life that was also unhappy.

Very often, as we shall discover, meaning and pleasure do indeed go hand in hand with each other. We most often enjoy the activities we are good at,, and these are also the activities which are most likely to add meaning to ourselves. But this is not always so. Picasso was often so preoccupied with his painting that all other concerns fell by the wayside. He neglected his health, his friends and his family; we can well imagine that obsession with painting might have left no room at all for feelings of pleasure.

But why should anyone want to lead such a life? Why should we not always prefer happiness over meaningfulness? One answer might run as follows: happiness does not endure. It is a momentary thing that comes and goes, and there is nothing that can guarantee that it will not fade away. Meaning however might endure. For a first clue to understanding why, consider that being happy is something that applies only to human beings, who can be happy only for certain phases of their lives (which must also be waking phases). Being meaningful, in contrast, applies to many sorts of objects: to human lives, but also to poems and statues, to laws and constitutions, to plays and symphonies, to love letters and scientific theories—and it applies to these things not just in certain phases of their existence, but directly and timelessly. A poem is meaningful not just on Wednesday, and not just in my lifespan, but in a timeless sense.

Human beings do not enjoy a timeless existence. But how, then, can their lives enjoy the sort of meaningfulness that poems can enjoy, the sort of meaningfulness that makes our lives worth living even in spite of all the troubles they might contain?

Further Reading

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Nozick

Slote, M. 1995. "Agent-Based Virtue Ethics", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20, 83-101, reprinted in: R. Crisp. and M. Slote (eds.), *Virtue Ethics* (1997), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 238-262.

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Appendix

((This cannot be divided into chapters before our chapters are definitive))

Chapter 1 (The Time Machine): Add a quote from Nozick.

See Lewis’s “Survival and Identity” where he talks about what matters in survival.

Chapter (Achievements)

See Vendler on the distinction between achievements, accomplishments, and activities.

Susan Wolf: “From the perspective of one’s deathbed, at least so I imagine, one looks back on one’s life and evaluates it, hoping to find in it a basis for thinking that it had a point, or that it did something good or that it realized some value that makes it a life worth having lived. One wants I think specifically to be able to answer the threat of the thought that one’s life has been just so much wasted energy, that one’s having existed

will have made no difference, left no mark, like a bubble in syrup whose appearance, on bursting, is immediately absorbed without a trace." (P. 6)

Chapter (Non-Cognitivism and Existentialism)

Taylor argues that life is meaningless even if there is a point to one's activities. The real meaning of life is life itself, which animals and plants also have. There is then no difference between the life of Sisyphus and that of the great composer or the good mother. According to Taylor, the differences with respect to meaningfulness between Sisyphus's life and the life of a great composer or a good mother are merely invented, as is the difference between animal's lives and those of human beings. Only from a subjective or anthropocentric perspective does there appear to be a difference between the life of a great composer and the life of Sisyphus, but Taylor's view is external, it is the view of an ultra-objectivist. For him what is subjective or anthropocentric does not count.

Chapter (Cognitivism)

Wiggins, in opposition to Taylor, advocates a cognitive approach to the meaning of life. There is a difference between the life of cannibalistic blindworms and that of human beings (because human beings can adjust the end to the means as well as the means to the end. There is a difference also between the life of a person who contributes something to a society with a continuing history and a life lived on the plan of the pig-breeder who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more hogs. The practical concerns of this man are, according to Wiggins, at once regressive and circular. We disagree with him here. The life of the pig-breeder need be no less meaningful than that of the great composer. For us it is not only the value of the things produced that determines whether or not a life has meaning, but also the efforts invested in their achievement. The severely handicapped person whose main goal is to be able to walk again can have as meaningful a life as the great painter who has given us beautiful pictures that will last for many generations.

According to Wiggins, 'if we can project upon a form of life nothing but the pursuit of life itself, if we find there no non-instrumental concerns and no interest in the world considered as lasting longer than the animal in question will need the world to last in

order to sustain the animal's own life; then the form of life must be to some considerable extent alien to us' (p. 102). We disagree with him on at least one point. We think that a life can have meaning even if the things achieved do not outlive the person whose life it is. But we agree that if there is no non-instrumental concern (no concern for a goal that goes beyond the immediate needs of the moment), then the life is not meaningful.

Macintyre on Goods Internal to Plans

Slote (1997) on the badness of being parasitic on other people and on self-reliance. Velleman on the life of improvement vs. the life of deterioration.

On Sunk Cost. See Nozick, and then Steele 'Nozick on Sunk Cost'.

Reference to Searle (promises)

'We shall not have found what it takes for individual lives to have the meaning we attribute to them unless we link meaning with rationality' (Wiggins p. 118)

[where is this from?]

15. (400) As anthropologists have recognized for generations, *marriage* is not the same as mating and not the same as a pair bond. Unlike what is found in the animal world, it is a *symbolic relationship*. It is the establishment of alliances: promises and obligations that link a reproductive pair to the social groups of which they are part, and often a set of promises and obligations between the kin groups from which they arise. Marriage contracts establish both vertical lineal symbolic relationships [parent, child, niece, godchild] and horizontal affinal symbolic relationships [sister, cousin, age-group member, co-wife].

Susan Wolf: to have a meaningful life is to realize value in a roughly Aristotelian way the 'meaningful life' question is not identical to the question of the meaning (cosmic significance) of human life in general (micro vs. macro).

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Valuableness

The very idea of a valuable life is itself difficult to define. A valuable life is a life which is of value to other people, a life which involves doing good for some people. But it might at the same time involve doing harm to others. Suppose you do good for John, but this makes Lisa miserable with jealousy. Perhaps we can get around this by adding up the amount of good your actions cause and then subtracting the amount of harm.

In this way we could *compare* valuable acts and so also compare valuable lives. The more people who benefit from your life, the more valuable your life is. This is what philosophers call a utilitarian approach to the value of life. It says that an act is good if it increases the overall happiness in the world when all the unhappiness has been taken into account.

The problem with an account of value in terms of such happiness arithmetic, however, will be clear. We could maximize value very easily, on this basis, simply by ensuring that we and all our friends and ultimately the whole humanity should enter the dream machine.

As the philosopher Spinoza said "Repentance is not a virtue, i.e. it does not arise from reason. Rather, he who repents what he did is twice miserable" (*Ethics*, part IV, prop. 54).

As Nietzsche puts it: “Never give room to repentance, but tell yourself at once: this would mean to add a second piece of stupidity to the first” (*The Wanderer and His Shadow*, 323).

As Wiggins puts it: ‘We shall not have found what it takes for individual lives to have the meaning we attribute to them unless we link meaning with rationality’.

Nozick (in 1969) uses the dream machine argument against socialism. Socialism is the idea that you can create political systems in which people will be guaranteed free houses, free schools, and at the end of the month they will get a little pocket money to spend on other things. Nozick’s argument is that if we can choose to go into a world in which we are not very successful but where we are responsible for our own destiny, then what happens depends on you.

Acknowledgement

David Suits for discussing Epicurus and existentialism.