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THE MEANING OF LIFE

A Very Short Introduction

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For Oliver, who found the whole idea deeply embarrassing

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Preface

Anyone rash enough to write a book with a title like this had better brace themselves for a postbag crammed with letters in erratic handwriting enclosing complex symbolic diagrams. The meaning of life is a subject fit for either the crazed or the comic, and I hope I have fallen more into the latter camp than the former. I have tried to treat a high-minded topic as lightly and lucidly as possible, while at the same time taking it seriously. But there is something absurdly overreaching about the whole subject, in contrast to the more miniature scale of academic scholarship. Years ago, when I was a student in Cambridge, my eye was caught by the title of a doctoral thesis which read 'Some aspects of the vaginal system of the flea'. It was not, one would guess, the most suitable work for those with poor eyesight; but it revealed an appealing modesty that I have apparently failed to learn from. I can at least claim to have written one of the very few meaning-of-life books which does not recount the story of Bertrand Russell and the taxi driver.

I am very grateful to Joseph Dunne, who read the book in manuscript and made some invaluable criticisms and suggestions.

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Chapters 1

Questions and answers

Philosophers have an infuriating habit of analysing questions rather than answering them, and this is how I want to begin.¹ Is ‘What is the meaning of life?’ a genuine question, or does it just look like one? Is there anything that could count as an answer to it, or is it really a kind of pseudo-question, like the legendary Oxford examination question which is supposed to have read simply: ‘Is this a good question?’

‘What is the meaning of life?’ looks at first glance like the same kind of question as ‘What is the capital of Albania?’, or ‘What is the colour of ivory?’ But is it really? Could it be more like ‘What is the taste of geometry?’

There is one fairly standard reason why some thinkers regard the meaning-of-life question as being itself meaningless. This is the case that meaning is a matter of language, not objects. It is a question of the way we talk about things, not a feature of things themselves, like texture, weight, or colour. A cabbage or a cardiograph is not meaningful in itself; it becomes so only by being caught up in our conversations. On this theory, we can make life meaningful by our talk about it; but it cannot have a meaning

¹ Perhaps I should add that I am not myself a philosopher, a fact which I am sure some of my reviewers will point out in any case.

in itself, any more than a cloud can. It would not make sense, for example, to speak of a cloud as being either true or false. Rather, truth and falsehood are functions of our human propositions about clouds. There are problems with this argument, as there are with most philosophical arguments. We shall be looking at a few of them later on.

Let us take a brief look at an even more imposing query than 'What is the meaning of life?' Perhaps the most fundamental question it is possible to raise is 'Why is there anything at all, rather than nothing?' Why is there anything about which we can ask 'What does it mean?' in the first place? Philosophers are divided about whether this is a real question or a bogus one, though theologians for the most part are not. For most theologians, the answer to this inquiry is 'God'. God is said to be 'Creator' of the universe not because he is some kind of mega-manufacturer, but because he is the reason why there is something rather than nothing. He is, as they say, the ground of being. And this would still be true of him even if the universe had no beginning. He would still be the reason why there is something rather than nothing even if there has been something from all eternity.

'Why is there anything and not just nothing?' could be roughly translated as 'How come the cosmos?' This could be taken as a question about causality – in which case, 'How come?' would mean 'Where does it come from?' But this is surely not what the query means. If we tried to answer the question by talking about how the universe got off the ground in the first place, then those causes must themselves be part of everything, and we are back to where we started. Only a cause which was not part of everything – one which transcended the universe, as God is supposed to do – could avoid being dragged back into the argument in this way. So this is not really a question about how the world came about. Nor, for theologians at least, is it a question about what the world is *for*, since in their opinion the world

has no purpose whatsoever. God is not a celestial engineer who created the world with some strategically calculated goal in mind. He is an artist who created it simply for his own self-delight, and for the self-delight of Creation itself. It is understandable, then, why he is widely considered to have something of a twisted sense of humour.

'Why is there anything rather than nothing?' is rather an expression of wonderment that there is a world in the first place, when there could presumably quite easily have been nothing. Perhaps this is part of what Ludwig Wittgenstein has in mind when he remarks that 'Not how the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is'.² This, one might claim, is Wittgenstein's version of what the German philosopher Martin Heidegger calls the *Seinsfrage*, or question of Being. 'How come Being?' is the question to which Heidegger wants to return. He is less interested in how particular entities came about, than in the mind-bending fact that there are entities in the first place. And these things are open to our understanding, as they might easily not have been.

Questions and answers

For many philosophers, however, not least Anglo-Saxon ones, 'How come Being?' is a supreme example of a pseudo-question. In their view, it would not only be difficult, if not impossible, to know how to answer it; it is deeply doubtful that there is anything there to be answered. For them, it is really just a ponderous Teutonic way of saying 'Wow!' It may be a valid question for the poet or mystic, but not for the philosopher. And in the Anglo-Saxon world in particular, the barricades between the two camps are vigilantly manned.

In a work like *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein was alert to the difference between real questions and phoney ones. A piece of language can have the grammatical form of a question but not actually be one. Or our grammar can mislead

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London, 1961), 6.44.

us into mistaking one kind of proposition for another. 'What then, fellow countrymen, once the enemy is vanquished, can we not accomplish in the hour of victory?' sounds like a question anticipating an answer, but is in fact a rhetorical question, to which one would probably be ill-advised to return the reply: 'Nothing'. The utterance is cast in interrogative form simply to enhance its dramatic force. 'So what?', 'Why don't you get lost?', and 'What are you staring at?' sound like questions but aren't really. 'Whereabouts in the body is the soul?' might sound like a reasonable sort of question to pose, but only because we are thinking along the lines of a question like 'Whereabouts in the body are the kidneys?' 'Where is my envy?' has the form of a kosher question, but only because we are unconsciously modelling it on 'Where is my armpit?'

Wittgenstein came to believe that a great many philosophical puzzles arise out of people misusing language in this way. Take, for example, the statement 'I have a pain', which is grammatically akin to 'I have a hat'. This similarity might mislead us into thinking that pains, or 'experiences' in general, are things we have in the same way that we have hats. But it would be strange to say 'Here, take my pain'. And though it would make sense to say 'Is this your hat or mine?', it would sound odd to ask 'Is this your pain or mine?' Perhaps there are several people in a room and a pain floating around in it; and as each person in turn doubles up in agony, we exclaim: 'Ah, now *he's* having it!'

This sounds merely silly; but in fact it has some fairly momentous implications. Wittgenstein is able to disentangle the grammar of 'I have a hat' from 'I have a pain' not only in a way that throws light on the use of personal pronouns like 'I' and 'he', but in ways which undermine the long-standing assumption that my experiences are a kind of private property. In fact, they seem even more like private property than my hat, since I can give away my hat, but not my pain. Wittgenstein shows us how grammar deceives us



1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, commonly thought to be the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century

into thinking this way, and his case has radical, even politically radical, consequences.

The task of the philosopher, Wittgenstein thought, was not so much to resolve these inquiries as to *dissolve* them – to show that they spring from confusing one kind of ‘language game’, as he called it, with another. We are bewitched by the structure of our language, and the philosopher’s job was to demystify us, disentangling different uses of words. Language, because it inevitably has a degree of uniformity about it, tends to make different kinds of utterance look pretty much the same. So Wittgenstein toyed with the idea of appending as an epigraph to his *Philosophical Investigations* a quotation from *King Lear*: ‘I’ll teach you differences’.

The Meaning of Life

This was not a view confined to Wittgenstein alone. One of the greatest of all nineteenth-century philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche, anticipated it when he wondered whether it was because of our grammar that we had failed to get rid of God. Since our grammar allows us to construct nouns, which represent distinct entities, then it also makes it seem plausible that there can be a kind of Noun of nouns, a mega-entity known as God, without which all the little entities around us might simply collapse. Nietzsche, however, believed neither in mega-entities nor in everyday ones. He thought the very idea of there being distinct objects, such as God or gooseberries, was just a reifying effect of language. He certainly believed this about the individual self, which he saw as no more than a convenient fiction. Perhaps, so he implies in the above remark, there could be a human grammar in which this reifying operation was not possible. Perhaps this will be the language of the future, one spoken by the *Übermensch* or Meta-man who has got beyond nouns and discrete entities altogether, and therefore beyond God and similar metaphysical illusions. The philosopher Jacques Derrida, a thinker much indebted to Nietzsche, is rather more pessimistic in this respect. For him, as for Wittgenstein, such metaphysical illusions are built

into the very structure of our language, and cannot be eradicated. The philosopher must simply wage a ceaseless, Canute-like war against them – a battle which Wittgenstein sees as a kind of linguistic therapy, and which Derrida terms ‘deconstruction’.³

Just as Nietzsche thought that nouns were reifying, so someone might think this of the word ‘life’ in the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ We shall be looking at this more closely later. It might also be thought that the question models itself unconsciously on a different kind of question altogether, and that this is where it goes wrong. We can say ‘This is worth a dollar, and so is that, so how much are they worth altogether?’; so it feels as though we can also say ‘This bit of life has meaning, and so has that bit, so what meaning do all the various bits add up to?’ But it does not follow from the fact that the parts have meaning that the whole has a meaning over and above them, any more than it follows that a lot of little things add up to one big thing simply because they are all coloured pink.

All this, to be sure, brings us no nearer to the meaning of life. Yet questions are worth examining, since the nature of a question is important in determining what might count as an answer to it. In fact, it could be claimed that it is questions, not answers, which are the difficult thing. It is well known what kind of answer a silly question provokes. Posing the right kind of question can open up a whole new continent of knowledge, bringing other vital queries tumbling in its wake. Some philosophers, of a so-called hermeneutical turn of mind, see reality as whatever it is that returns an answer to a question. And reality, which like a veteran criminal does not just spontaneously pipe up without first being interrogated, will only respond to us in accordance with the kinds of inquiries we put to it. Karl Marx once observed somewhat cryptically that human beings only pose such problems as they

³ For a more detailed discussion, see my ‘Wittgenstein’s Friends’, in *Against the Grain* (London, 1986).

can resolve – meaning perhaps that if we have the conceptual apparatus to pose the question, then we already have in principle the means to determine an answer to it.

This is partly because questions are not posed in a vacuum. It is true that they do not have their answers tied conveniently to their tails; but they intimate the kind of response that would at least count as an answer. They point us in a limited range of directions, suggesting where to look for a solution. It would not be hard to write the history of knowledge in terms of the kind of questions men and women have thought it possible or necessary to raise. Not any question is possible at any given time. Rembrandt could not ask whether photography had rendered realist painting redundant.

This is not of course to suggest that all questions are answerable. We tend to assume that where there is a problem there must be a solution, just as we tend rather oddly to imagine that things which are in fragments should always be put back together again. But there are plenty of problems to which we will probably never discover solutions, along with questions which will go eternally unanswered. There is no record of how many hairs adorned Napoleon's head when he died, and now we shall never know. Perhaps the human brain is simply not up to resolving certain questions, such as the origins of intelligence. Perhaps this is because there is no evolutionary need for us to do so, though there is no evolutionary need for us to understand *Finnegans Wake* or the laws of physics either. There are also questions to which we do not know the answers because there are in fact no answers, such as how many children Lady Macbeth had, or whether Sherlock Holmes had a small mole on his inner thigh. We cannot answer this last question in the negative any more than we can reply to it in the affirmative.

It is possible, then, that there is indeed an answer to the meaning-of-life question, but that we shall never know what it

is. If this is so, then we are in something like the situation of the narrator of Henry James's story 'The Figure in the Carpet', who is told by a celebrated author he admires that there is a concealed design in his work, one implicit in every image and turn of phrase. But the author dies before the baffled, frantically curious narrator can discover what it is. Perhaps the author was having him on. Or maybe he thought there was such a design in his work, but there wasn't. Or perhaps the narrator is somehow seeing the design all along without grasping the fact that he has grasped it. Or maybe any design he himself manages to construct will do.

It is even conceivable that not knowing the meaning of life is part of the meaning of life, rather as not counting how many words I am uttering when I give an after-dinner speech helps me to give an after-dinner speech. Perhaps life is kept going by our ignorance of its fundamental meaning, as capitalism is for Karl Marx. The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer thought something of the kind, and so in a sense did Sigmund Freud. For the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the true meaning of life is too terrible for us to cope with, which is why we need our consoling illusions if we are to carry on. What we call 'life' is just a necessary fiction. Without a huge admixture of fantasy, reality would grind to a halt.

There are moral problems, too, to which no solution can be had. Because there are different kinds of moral goods, such as courage, compassion, justice, and so on, and because these values are sometimes incommensurable with one another, it is possible for them to enter into tragic conflict with each other. As the sociologist Max Weber bleakly remarked: 'The ultimately possible attitudes to life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion.'⁴ Isaiah Berlin writes in similar vein that 'the world that we encounter in ordinary

⁴ Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London, 1991), 152.

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