

Life Without Meaning?

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The Alpha Course, a well-known evangelical Christian programme, advertises itself with posters displaying the words THE MEANING OF LIFE IS _____, followed by the invitation ‘Fill in the blanks at alpha.org’. Followers of the course will discover that ‘Men and women were created to live in a relationship with God’, and that ‘without that relationship there will always be a hunger, an emptiness, a feeling that something is missing’.¹ We all have that need because we are all sinners, we are told, and the truth which will fill the need is that Jesus Christ died to save us from our sins. Not all Christian or other religious views about the meaning of life are as simplistic as this, but they typically share the assumptions that the meaning of life is to be found in some belief whose truth we need to recognize, and that this is a belief about the purpose for which we exist. A further implication is that this purpose is the purpose intended by the God who created us, and that if we fail to identify and live in accordance with that purpose, our lives will lack meaning. The assumption is echoed in the question many humanists will have encountered: if you don’t believe in a God, what’s the point of it all? And many people who don’t share the answer still accept the legitimacy of the question – ‘What is the meaning of life?’ – and assume that what we need is a correct belief, religious or non-religious, which will fill the blank in the sentence ‘The meaning of life is ...’. Are they right?

Finding the Right Beliefs?

Asking for ‘the meaning of life’ is, on the face of it, an odd question. Requests for meaning are usually questions about *language*, seeking to know the meaning of a word or a sentence – for example, ‘What is the meaning of the word

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“jeune”)?² So we can properly ask ‘What is the meaning of the word “life”?’, but that is not the same as asking ‘What is the meaning of life?’ Perhaps the usage draws on the older sense of the word ‘meaning’ as ‘intention’ or ‘purpose’, as in ‘I mean to get to the top of my profession’. But sceptics might suggest that asking for the meaning of life is an ill-formed question to which there can be no answer.

Not only is it an odd question, it is also a relatively modern one. Not until the nineteenth century does talk of the meaning of life, and of life as meaningful or meaningless, become a recurrent phenomenon. Here is one example from a prominent nineteenth-century thinker:

My view of life is utterly meaningless. I suppose an evil spirit has set a pair of spectacles upon my nose, of which one lens is a tremendously powerful magnifying glass, the other an equally powerful reducing glass.³

Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* is one of his pseudonymous works and these words are attributed to a young man created by Kierkegaard to epitomize an aesthetic view of life, dedicated to the savouring of each passing moment and each intense experience, but we can assume that the young man’s search for meaning is seen by Kierkegaard as one which can properly be satisfied by his own religious view of life. Here is another remark in the same vein.

Life is so empty and meaningless. – We bury a man; we follow him to the grave, we throw three spadefuls of earth over him; we ride out to the cemetery in a carriage, we ride home in a carriage; we take comfort in thinking that a long life lies before us. How long is seven times ten years? Why do we not finish it at once, why do we not stay and step down into the grave with him, and draw lots to see who shall be the last unhappy living being to throw the last three spadefuls of earth over the last of the dead?⁴

Of course expressions of world-weariness and futility pre-date the nineteenth century, as in the famous soliloquy which Shakespeare gives to Macbeth, beginning ‘To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow...’:

Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.⁵

It is a theme which goes back to the writer of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes: ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’ But not until the nineteenth century is the question of the meaning of life regularly taken seriously as a philosophical question to which there might be an answer.

An obvious explanation for this phenomenon is the general crisis of religious faith in that century. Philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche see their task as being to offer a philosophy of life which can replace discredited Christian beliefs and provide a meaning and an interpretation of experience which can guide our lives. Tolstoy in his novels presents characters such as Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace* and Levin in *Anna Karenina* who are searching for the meaning of life, and in his autobiographical work *A Confession* Tolstoy describes his own crisis of meaning.

Then these moments of perplexity began to recur oftener and oftener, and always in the same form. They were always expressed by the questions: What is it for? What does it lead to? ...

My life came to a standstill ... I could not even wish to know the truth, for I guessed of what it consisted. The truth was that life is meaningless. I had as it were lived, lived, and walked, walked, till I had come to a precipice and saw clearly that there was nothing ahead of me but destruction. It was impossible to stop, impossible to go back, and impossible to close my eyes or avoid seeing that there was nothing ahead but suffering and real death – complete annihilation.⁶

He recounts how he could find no answer to his tormenting questions in science, or in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, and the answers offered by traditional religion seem to him to be rationally untenable.

Rational knowledge, presented by the learned and wise, denies the meaning of life, but the enormous masses of men, the whole of mankind, receive that meaning in irrational knowledge. And that irrational knowledge is faith, that very thing which I could not but reject. It is God, One in Three; the creation in six days; the devils and angels, and all the rest that I cannot accept as long as I retain my reason.⁷

To understand why the religious crisis of the nineteenth century partly takes this form, of a loss of meaning, we should see it in a larger context – the loss of a teleological worldview, one which views the universe as intrinsically purposive. The most comprehensive and explicit formulation of such a worldview is the pre-Christian philosophy of Aristotle. He sees purpose as built into the world and central to our understanding of it. The primary explanation of why living things are as they are is an account of what they are for – how they grow towards their fully realized form, and how their various organs and characteristics function in order to enable them to live and to realize their being. Human beings are a part of this purposive universe. To understand how human beings should live, Aristotle maintains, we have to recognize what human beings are for. Our distinctive function, that which makes us human, is the exercise of reason, and the good human life is therefore one in which we employ that capacity to the full, developing the characteristically

human virtues or excellences and thereby achieving happiness or fulfilment, *eudaimonia*. Because human beings are components of a purposive universe, then, meaning in the sense of purpose is built into our existence.

This teleological worldview was not unchallenged in the ancient world, but it was taken over by Christianity and formed the dominant explanatory framework for the best part of two millennia. It has an obvious plausibility as a way of understanding living things, how they grow and behave and why they are organized as they are. Its most vulnerable aspect, however, is its application to inanimate objects. We can explain the existence and nature of physical artefacts such as a house or a statue in terms of purposes, by referring to the purposive activity of a human creator, a builder or sculptor. But what about the natural movements of physical things? Why does water run downhill, why do stones sink in water, why do air bubbles rise in water? Aristotle's answer is framed in terms of a theory of the four elements of which all natural bodies are composed: earth, water, air, and fire. Each element naturally moves towards its natural position in the universe, with earth at the centre, water above the earth, air above the water, and fire in the highest position. Though the movement of each element is not *consciously* purposive, it is, like all other movement and change, goal-directed.

This conception of the movements of physical bodies was increasingly displaced with the growth of the science of ballistics – the study of projectiles – from the fifteenth century onwards. When a cannonball is fired from a cannon, why does it conveniently continue towards the enemy's ramparts, rather than immediately moving towards its natural position on the earth? The observed facts could be reconciled with a teleological framework by means of ad hoc additions, but the study of the movement of projectiles led to the emergence of the modern science of mechanics, as developed by scientists such as Galileo and Newton, and to the formulation of laws of motion which explain movement in terms not of an internal directedness towards a goal but of the operation of external forces. This in turn has philosophical ramifications. A comprehensive teleological worldview is no longer available. A distinction has to be drawn between purposive agency on the one hand and the mechanical behaviour of physical bodies on the other, and there are then questions about what goes on each side of the divide. Descartes famously articulated one version of this philosophical dualism. Animals and plants – all non-human living things – are essentially machines, and their behaviour is to be explained by mechanical causes in the same way as that of all physical bodies. The same is true of the behaviour of our own human bodies, but we are capable of purposive agency because we are not just 'corporeal things', we are also minds, 'thinking things'. The ultimate 'thinking thing' is the divine mind, God, 'the true cause of everything which is or can be', but because God is infinite and our human minds are finite, we should not seek for God's purposes in nature.

We should endeavour to understand the natural world by looking not for ‘final causes’ – purposive explanations – but for ‘efficient causes’ – mechanistic explanations.

When dealing with natural things we will, then, never derive any explanations from the purposes which God or nature may have had in view when creating them <and we shall entirely banish from our philosophy the search for final causes>. For we should not be so arrogant as to suppose that we can share in God’s plans. We should, instead, consider him as the efficient cause of all things; and starting from the divine attributes which by God’s will we have some knowledge of, we shall see, with the aid of our God-given natural light, what conclusions should be drawn concerning those effects which are apparent to our senses.⁸

For Descartes, then, we can no longer understand our own purposes as embedded in and sustained by a purposive universe.

Not everyone drew the dividing line between purposes and mechanistic explanations in the same place as Descartes. The idea that we can see God’s purposes in the natural world and especially in living things enjoyed a continuing popularity in the ‘argument from design’. The eye of a fish, for example, perfectly designed for seeing in water, or the colour of a flower, perfectly designed for attracting pollinating insects, were still popularly regarded as evidence for a purposive creator. Such arguments were, however, in the first half of the nineteenth century, increasingly eroded by evolutionary explanations of the nature and origin of living things, and were dealt their death-blow in 1859 by Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Of course many people hang on to the idea of divine creation, but the idea that we can find ourselves at home in an unambiguously purposive universe is now deeply problematic.

Why should this matter? Why might it threaten to deprive our lives of meaning? Having our purposes laid down for us by an all-powerful being could, from one point of view, be regarded as the very opposite of a meaningful existence. If we were placed in a society where our functions were assigned to us by a ruling power, or if we were to discover that our brains had been designed by a powerful computer programmer who had decided for us what goals we should pursue, we should hardly feel that our lives had suddenly become charged with meaning. We – most of us – want to be free to adopt our own purposes and decide for ourselves how to live, and we may well feel that if we were not able to shape our own lives they could have no meaning for us. So can’t we say that the meaning of life consists simply in that – in choosing and pursuing our own goals and finding satisfaction in the achievement of them? Isn’t that enough? Why do we need to derive our purposes from an external source?

From some of the writers previously referred to we can get some inkling of why they, at any rate, might see it as not enough. There is, first, a sense of disparity between our autonomously chosen purposes and an indifferent

universe. This is what Kierkegaard means, I suspect, by his analogy of a pair of spectacles with one powerfully magnifying lens and one powerfully reducing lens. Our chosen activities, when we are immersed in them, can seem all-important, but when we step back from them and consider the vanishingly small places which they occupy in the vastness of the universe, they may come to seem trivial and pointless. It might be otherwise if we could regard our purposes as in some way endorsed by something outside ourselves, in tune with a purposive universe.

There is also the sense, reflected in the second Kierkegaard quotation, that our purposes are rendered pointless by the inevitability of death. Humanists are often inclined to retort that if our activities seem pointless because they are pursued within a limited life-span, they would not be rendered any less so by being continued for longer, or even for eternity. But perhaps the retort is too glib. The thought that mortality robs our lives of meaning has been strikingly persistent and cannot be dismissed. It is the thought that tortured Tolstoy and made him long to share the simple Christian faith of the peasants.

We can see, then, the appeal of religious belief as a source of meaning. It can offer the assurance that our own humanly chosen purposes are in tune with a larger purpose. And it can offer the prospect that this overarching purpose will endure beyond our own limited lifetimes. If death is not the end, then our purposes will not come to nothing.

Similar themes are to be found in a book by the contemporary philosopher John Cottingham, arguing for a religious perspective on the meaning of life. A life built solely around our own human purposes, he says, is confronted with 'the sense of possible failure and futility that haunts our quest for meaning'.⁹ Since 'nothing much in the natural world endures for very long', we know for a fact that anything we may achieve will eventually crumble to dust. And this futility on a large scale is matched by the fragility of our more particular projects. Our devotion to worthwhile aims and ambitions, however admirable, may come to nothing. Cottingham invites us to imagine the example of an architect 'who makes it his life's work to build a hospital in an area where medical facilities are sorely needed', only for the hospital to be destroyed by a fire on the day it is due to open. This fragility pervades all our projects. Only a religious perspective can offer a deeply rooted hope in 'the buoyancy of goodness' and the redemptive power of suffering and failure. This is how Cottingham sums up his case.

Our argument so far has been that the pursuit of meaning for beings whose existence is inherently fragile requires more than the rational engagement in worthwhile projects; it requires a certain sort of religious or quasi-religious mindset. Involved in this mindset is a turning away from evaluations based solely on external success, and the cultivation of an outlook that is affirming of the power of goodness, trusting and hopeful, and which is focused on the mystery and wonder of existence.¹⁰

Here, then, is the challenge for humanism. There is no denying that we can engage in activities and pursue purposes which we find inherently worthwhile but, it is said, they have to *add up* to something, they need to be located within a framework of meaning which goes deeper than our individual commitments to the particular activities. For that, it is said, we need the right *beliefs*, and the compelling candidate for that role is a religious belief or set of beliefs. If we find such beliefs rationally untenable, are we then condemned to a life without meaning?

This was the challenge which faced Tolstoy. He could not rationally accept Christian beliefs, but he saw that the simple faith of the peasants gave their lives a meaning which he lacked. His only recourse, he decided, was to embrace in an act of faith the Christian belief which he could not rationally defend. In this he was echoing Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith', religious faith as an irrational commitment. But it is not clear how this can be genuinely possible. How can you will yourself to believe something which you know to be rationally unacceptable? It is significant that Tolstoy himself had to reinterpret Christian belief in ethical terms, as a commitment to a life of Christian love, and the religious doctrines receded into the background. If it is the beliefs that do the work of combating the perception that life is meaningless, however, then we are back with the same problem. Cottingham goes part of the way in Tolstoy's direction; what are central to the Christian religion, and to other religions also, are not *doctrines* but *practices* – 'techniques of meditation and prayer, techniques for self-examination and greater self-awareness'.¹¹ But he also thinks that engagement in such practices is itself a way of inducing the requisite beliefs. The spiritual practices yield 'experiences in which ... we have intimations of a transcendent world of meaning'. A belief in this higher order of reality is needed in order to sustain a hope and a faith in 'the ultimate resilience of the good' – and that is a path down which humanists cannot follow him.¹²

If Christian beliefs are untenable, and if the appropriate beliefs are needed to give meaning to life, should we look for some alternative meaning-conferring system of beliefs? That was the impulse behind Schopenhauer's philosophical system. The appeal of religions, he thought, is that they have catered for 'the ineradicable metaphysical need of man', and it is the task of philosophy to meet that need in a more rational manner.¹³ The need stems from our sense of 'the vanity of existence'. For Schopenhauer this is partly a matter of the familiar fact of human mortality, but also more generally an awareness of the transience of every present moment. And to the futility of human endeavours Schopenhauer adds an extra edge; we are caught up in the ceaseless striving to achieve our goals and preserve our life, but if this is achieved, 'there then appears a second task: that of doing something with it so as to ward off boredom'.¹⁴ We are thus trapped by the combination of the frustration of unfulfilled desires and the boredom of satisfied desires.

The way out, according to Schopenhauer, is to recognize that the separation between individuals is illusory. Because space and time are human constructs,

so also are the distinctions which we make between individuals whom we suppose to be separated in space and time. The will to live, the will which drives me, is identical with one and the same will in every living thing. This timeless universal will is the ‘thing in itself’ which lies behind the illusory veil of appearances. Recognition of this truth is the basis of morality – awareness of oneself in others. It is also the road to an escape from ceaseless striving. It is the path to resignation and denial of the will. This then is the set of beliefs which he regards as the true meaning of life.

Schopenhauer’s philosophy is heavily influenced by Eastern religions. He draws on the Buddhist teaching of the need to escape from the tyranny of desires, and he sees in the doctrine of reincarnation an allegory of the oneness of all living things. In this he is the precursor of all those who, unable to accept Christian religious doctrines, think that they can find in Hindu and Buddhist ideas a truth and a meaning which are more sustaining and intellectually more sustainable. Schopenhauer’s philosophical claim, however, that the ‘thing in itself’ is a single undifferentiated will is no more defensible than any traditional religious doctrine. It rests on a misappropriation of Kant’s philosophy. Kant argued that the framework of space and time is what we contribute to our experience, but it does not follow that we can subtract space and time from experience and arrive at an understanding of reality as in itself timeless, non-spatial, and indivisible. And when once that claim is removed, the intended appeal of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics collapses.

The search for that elusive set of beliefs which will somehow unlock the mystery of the meaning of life will no doubt go on. Claims will be made for Scientology or astrology or the latest ‘New Age’ fad. None of them will be credible, and none will do the job if they involve a denial of the brute facts of the human condition – that we are all mortal, our lives are finite, our hopes are inescapably fragile, our projects may fail, and our purposes are not endorsed by the universe in which we find ourselves.

Meaning: Not Discovered but Made?

If the beliefs which are supposed to constitute the meaning of life are intellectually untenable, where are humanists to turn? A familiar move at this point is to say that the meaning of life is not something which we can discover, but something which we *create*. We *make* meaning for ourselves. This is a stronger claim than the assertion that we choose our own projects and purposes, with the implication that those are enough. It starts from the recognition that the decline of religious belief and the demise of the teleological worldview represent a loss of meaning, and it looks to human creativity to replace it. A seminal figure here is Nietzsche, who, in the late nineteenth century, saw the ‘death of God’ as a momentous event. In contrast to those of his contemporaries who

thought it possible to jettison the metaphysics of Christianity but retain the Christian conception of moral values and a good life, Nietzsche insisted that things could not go on as before. The adjustment to life without God would be a long and arduous task. He dramatizes this idea in a famous image of the madman who runs into the marketplace crying ‘Where has God gone? We have killed him.’

‘God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him ... Is not the greatness of this deed too much for us. Must we not ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? ... This tremendous event is still on its way, is still travelling – it has not yet reached the ears of men.’¹⁵

For those who grasp its significance, however, the event opens up a whole new world of creative possibilities.

We philosophers and ‘free spirits’ in fact feel at the news that the ‘old God is dead’ as if illumined by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, astonishment, presentiment, expectation – at last the horizon seems to us again free, even if it is not bright, at last our ships can put out again, no matter what the danger, every daring venture of knowledge is again permitted, the sea, *our* sea again lies open before us, perhaps there has never yet been such an ‘open sea’.¹⁶

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche introduces the figure of the ‘superman’ (‘superhuman’ might be a better translation) as the embodiment of this creative free spirit.

The superman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the superman *shall be* the meaning of the earth! ...

Once you said ‘God’ when you gazed upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say ‘superman’.

God is a supposition; but I want your supposing to reach no further than your creating will.

Could you *create* a god? – So be silent about all gods! But you could surely create the superman.¹⁷

The ‘meaning of the earth’, then, is not something to be discovered as a hypothesis or belief, but is the product of a creating will. The superman is he who will create this meaning, will shape these new human possibilities. And what is the meaning which he creates? The meaning, it seems, *is* the superman. Human creativity both *creates* meaning and *is* that meaning. This leaves things remarkably open – and is therefore perhaps not very illuminating. Does it imply that anything goes – that absolutely anything can be made the meaning of life? Truly, as Nietzsche says, ‘there has never been such an open sea’.

Another iconic figure to match Nietzsche's superman as the maker of meaning is French writer Albert Camus's Sisyphus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published in 1942, Camus surveys a familiar litany of experiences which make human life 'absurd' – the monotony of a mechanical life; the passing of time and the fact that 'we live on the future'; 'the primitive hostility of the world'; and the inevitability of death.¹⁸ Given these inexorable facts of the human condition, the only meaning we can give to life is to embrace the absurdity, to go on living despite the fact that life has no meaning.

It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear on the contrary that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning.¹⁹

Like Nietzsche, Camus sees this openness as a liberation – an opportunity to live life to the full and savour every experience.

But what does life mean in such a universe? Nothing else for the moment but indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given. Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary ... What counts is not the best living but the most living.²⁰

Camus uses the classical myth of Sisyphus to epitomize the 'absurd man'. Sisyphus, for his misdeeds during his lifetime, was condemned by the gods to spend the whole of eternity pushing a rock to the top of a mountain, whereupon the rock would roll back to the bottom and Sisyphus would have to begin again. The fact that, each time, Sisyphus returns to persist with his supremely pointless task is what makes him the absurd hero.

All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing ... Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling ... Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods ...²¹

Camus's words have an immediate appeal for humanists – the denial of the gods, the acceptance that the fate of human beings is in their own hands. But his position raises similar questions to Nietzsche's. If we create our own meaning, is everything possible? To say that what counts is 'the most living' is liable to sound as empty as Nietzsche's 'open sea'. Suppose that someone were to devote his life to counting the grains of sand on the seashore. Suppose that this was not just one eccentric project among other activities, but something around which he built his whole life and to which all his other activities were geared. Would that make his life meaningful? However committed he might be to the

project, would it not still be pointless? And for that matter, isn't Sisyphus's endlessly repeated rolling of his rock meaningless, however heroic his embrace of the absurdity may be?

Camus himself perhaps recognizes that not just anything goes. He seems to say that the absurd hero's response to the absurdity of the human condition is the *right* response – right because it honestly acknowledges the facts of repetitiveness and isolation and death. In contrast, he says, the opposite response, the refusal of an absurd life, suicide, would be a *wrong* response, because it would be a capitulation to the absurd. Whether or not we agree that Camus's two options are the only ones available, we should perhaps agree that the attempt to create meaning has to deal with those aspects of human life which, as Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer and Tolstoy and Camus all recognize, threaten to make life meaningless. And this must surely set limits to what can count as a successful creation of meaning.

Are we then returned to the need for the right *beliefs*? And once again, what are humanists to do if the beliefs which would most obviously counter the threats to meaning are unsustainable?

Agnosticism and Mystery

A way out of this impasse is proposed by Mark Vernon in *How To Be an Agnostic*. A central message of his book is the importance of the search for meaning.

What is missing is meaning. A materialistic humanism finds it hard to address questions of morality, values and spirit. Following the scientific rationalism it holds in high regard, it tends to boil it all down to a discussion of mechanisms, rules and laws. This may create an illusion of understanding and a sense of purpose. But meaninglessness keeps rearing its head because, well, mechanisms, rules and laws are actually not very meaningful.²²

It is a mistake, he suggests, to suppose that we can make meaning for ourselves. We do not make meaning, we discover it.²³ And this search for meaning turns out, on his account, to be something very like the traditional search for God.

If the fundamental mystery in life is existence itself, why there is something rather than nothing – and one does not share the non-belief of the atheist, that existence itself is just brute fact – then the quest for God is potentially provoked every waking moment of the day.²⁴

So we seem to be back with the idea that the attempt to discover the meaning of life is a search for the right set of beliefs, the correct answer to the

question ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ But what is distinctive in Vernon’s agnostic position is that he does not think that we will find an answer. We will be left with a sense of mystery, a sense of ‘transcendence’, of something beyond ourselves which we can never fully grasp – and it is this sense of mystery, of unanswered questions, which is the real source of meaning.

Agnosticism offers another possibility: meaning as mystery ... It is not unless one is prepared to ‘step out into the unknown’ that one’s life expands ... The mystery is not simply an impasse. It is a quest ... Paradoxically, perhaps, the desire for meaning is satisfied by dwelling on the thresholds of ignorance.²⁵

This is Vernon’s attempt to have it both ways. To discover the meaning of life is to reach the right beliefs, something akin to traditional religious beliefs. We have to accept that those traditional beliefs are not actually true, but the sense of mystery with which we are left turns out after all to be the meaning which we were looking for.

Like any attempt to square the circle, Vernon’s answer is not going to work. He takes the question ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ to be a legitimate and important question to which we need to find the answer. But if we were to find the right answer, the correct explanation of why anything exists, then presumably the sense of mystery would be dissipated, and we would lose the very thing which, according to Vernon, gives meaning to life. What this shows, I suggest, is that it is not really beliefs, and the search for the right beliefs, that is doing the important work in Vernon’s account. The appeal of a ‘sense of mystery’ is not that it is a quest for beliefs which will answer our explanatory questions, but that it is a certain kind of *experience*. This is the idea which we need to pursue, then – that meaning in life is neither *discovered* nor *made* but *experienced*.

Beliefs are important. Of course we need to understand the world and to try to make sense of it, and we need the right framework of beliefs to guide our lives. We need also to examine and confront honestly those beliefs which might threaten to rob our lives of meaning – beliefs about our relationship to the rest of the universe, the presence or absence of purpose in the universe, and the facts of human mortality (or immortality). But beliefs are not enough, and this is demonstrated by the fact that, even for those who have religious beliefs which might seem to sustain them, life can come to seem meaningless despite the beliefs. This might, for example, be a result of the experience of bereavement, the loss of a loved one, or the experience of some other terrible personal tragedy. A religious person’s beliefs might carry them through, but they might not. The belief that all is for the best, that our lives are guided by the purposes of a benevolent deity, might come to seem a hollow mockery, and this might be not so much an intellectual change of belief but rather an *experience* of meaninglessness.

I suggest, then, that we should follow the clue from Vernon and look at the kinds of experience which might sustain us, and might help us to deal with the thoughts of the fragility of our projects and the inevitability of death. We need to take seriously the fact that people have thought that these ‘brute facts’ make our lives meaningless. But then the question to which we should be led in response is not ‘What is the meaning of life?’ but ‘*What makes life meaningful?*’ What are the kinds of experience which can make life meaningful and can give a point to life in the absence of a cosmic purpose and in the face of our own mortality?

What Makes Life Meaningful?

Vernon provides a further useful pointer with his emphasis on the idea of ‘transcendence’, but, like the word ‘spiritual’ which he is also keen on, it suffers from a characteristic ambiguity. Here is a typical example of one way in which he and many other people use such terms. He discusses sympathetically the Buddhist idea of ‘mindfulness’, comparing it to

a Socratic form of spirituality ... Mindfulness needs to go along with other forms of agnostic questioning, and together they’ll take on the character of waiting. What’s admitted is that you yourself are not up to the task of fixing your own life. That’s let go of. And instead of just giving yourself to yourself, you aim to give yourself to the transcendent. You have no power to determine how it will arise within you ... But you are prepared to wait, driven by an intuited conviction that there is more to life. It’s a kind of letting go that is not nihilistic because it is also an attempt at letting in – by a glimpse, by what might be revealed.²⁶

What is it that we are to be ‘prepared to wait’ for? In such passages the term ‘transcendent’ seems to carry many of its traditional religious connotations, as something (or someone) otherworldly, a higher power which may reveal itself to us. As Vernon goes on to say, a few pages later, we are close to the traditional concept of God.

But there’s that ‘G’ word again: God ... It’s forced its way back into the quest, if you buy the recognition that to be serious about the spiritual is ultimately to let go and wait on the transcendent.²⁷

The equation of ‘the transcendent’ with ‘God’ is repeated in another passage which can also, however, point us in a different direction.

But what of the soul – the facet that needs to reach out to concerns aside from the material business of life, in order to connect with what is called the spiritual,

the transcendent, God? There's this sense that human beings are the creature for whom our own lives are too small for us. We need something bigger than ourselves to be ourselves.²⁸

Why might we need 'something bigger than ourselves'? Perhaps because of those features of the human condition which I have referred to as bringing the threat of a sense of meaninglessness – the feeling of being alone in an indifferent universe and confined to the limited span of our mortal lives. But this 'something bigger than ourselves' need not be an otherworldly higher power. Vernon offers a more worldly and more attainable version when he talks, for instance, of the appeal of the countryside and the experience that 'nature forces you out of yourself – takes you out of your immediate concerns'.²⁹ It is this idea of a *secular* or *worldly transcendence*, in contrast to a metaphysical or otherworldly transcendence, that I want now to explore. What are the kinds of experience which take us out of ourselves and enable us to locate our lives in a wider context, to see ourselves as part of something larger which makes more meaningful our own limited individual purposes and activities?

Here is one writer on one kind of experience.

This is something anyone can experience by looking up at the night sky ... If the sky is very dark and clear, and you are in the country rather than the city, and you turn out all the lights, look up, and take the time to contemplate in silence ... Darkness, which separates us from what is close at hand, brings us near to what is far away. You cannot see the far side of your own back garden, but you can see billions of kilometres away with the naked eye ... At night, everything changes scale. As long as the sun was shining, it locked us into the prison of light that is the world – our world. Now, provided there are no clouds, darkness reveals to us the light of the sky, which is the universe. I can barely see the ground beneath my feet, and yet, far better than in broad daylight, I can see the unfathomable that contains me ... The universe is our home; the celestial vault is our horizon; eternity is here and now.³⁰

André Comte-Sponville prefers not to call this an experience of transcendence, 'since we are inside of it'. I take it that he wants to avoid the metaphysical connotations of 'transcendence'. He prefers to talk of a combination of immanence and immensity, for which he uses the word 'immanensity', but the dimension of immensity is one aspect of what I am calling worldly transcendence. The response to the awe-inspiring vastness of the night sky forces us out of ourselves in a way which is directly experienced.

Virtually all my worries ... are egotistical, or at least egocentric ones: I fear only for myself and for those I love; only for myself, my family and friends. This is why the faraway reassures me: it puts my anxieties into perspective. When I contemplate immensity, the ego seems laughable by comparison. It makes my egocentricity, and thus my worries, a little less intense, a little less powerful.

Occasionally, it even manages to obliterate them for a few seconds ... Nothing remains but the All, with the body, marvellously, inside of it, as if restored to the world and to itself.³¹

By itself this might be felt as a negative experience – Kierkegaard’s binocular vision, the absurd disparity between our own all-engaging concerns and the vast indifference of the universe. Comte-Sponville presents it as positive – the universe is our home. What also helps us to experience it in that way is that our relationship with the world around us is more directly mediated by our involvement with the natural environment and other living things. Recall Vernon’s remarks about the rural landscape which, as he says, ‘forces you out of yourself’, but which we can at the same time experience as a place where we belong. The hills and mountains and woods are a reminder of a world that goes on without us, but a world which unfolds and reveals itself to us as we walk in it and explore it. Think of our relationship to other living things. I remember walking in the woods and meeting a young fox, which stopped and stood completely still, looking directly at me in the way that foxes do. We stared into one another’s eyes for half a minute or so before it suddenly turned and bounded off into the undergrowth. In that kind of encounter with another living being, one whose world is strangely other but with which we also have a kinship and a connection, we can experience the natural world as something which both takes us out of ourselves and in which we can feel at home – another experience of worldly transcendence.

A third dimension of our experience of being positively related to something larger than our individual lives is the fact of being rooted in an ongoing human community. Our own finite lives and our personal projects build on a shared past, and get their significance in part at least from the fact that others will continue where we leave off. For this reason our work to build or enhance the places where we live, our intellectual or artistic or cultural activities which are part of a living tradition, or our struggles for social justice and a better world, are not condemned to futility by the fact of our own mortality. Our faith that others will continue the work is grounded in our own sense of building on the endeavours of those who have gone before. Vernon finds in our sense of history the same combination of otherness and connectedness which characterizes our relationship with the natural world.

History fulfils some of the functions performed by religion. At one level, it provides a narrative within which people can situate themselves: the way history is recalled, researched and related is as much a story of the present as of the past. But where history’s religious shape is seen most clearly is in the way it takes one out of oneself. It achieves this sense of personal perspective by retelling events that are simultaneously familiar and distant. The familiar aspects allow us to empathise with the past, to see ourselves in it. The distant aspects stem from the radical differences of experience and existence that separate times and places. The combination of the two aspects means that we become strangers to ourselves in the process of learning about it.³²

That same combination of the close and the distant can be found in our relation to future generations. In a poem 'To Those Born Later', Bertolt Brecht says:

I came to the cities in a time of disorder
 When hunger reigned there.
 I came among men in a time of revolt
 And I rebelled with them.
 So passed my time
 Which had been given to me on earth ...

All roads led into the mire in my time.
 My tongue betrayed me to the butchers.
 There was little I could do. But those in power
 Sat safer without me: that was my hope.
 So passed my time
 Which had been given to me on earth.

Our forces were slight. Our goal
 Lay far in the distance
 It was clearly visible, though I myself
 Was unlikely to reach it.
 So passed my time
 Which had been given to me on earth.

You who will emerge from the flood
 In which we have gone under
 Remember
 When you speak of our failings
 The dark time too
 Which you have escaped.

... When the time comes at last
 And man is a helper to man
 Think of us
 With forbearance.³³

Here Brecht feels the need to explain himself and justify the political struggles of his generation to those in the future whose experience will be different and who will see things from a different perspective. But the need to explain and justify is rooted in the awareness of continuity, the knowledge that those born later will inherit a world which he has played a part in shaping.

Some of us, perhaps, have a stronger sense of being part of history than others do. But we all have some sense of the ties that bind us to other human beings, and especially the more intimate relationships of kinship, of friendship, and of love in all its forms. These many and various kinds of emotional attachment can all take us out of ourselves, our private preoccupations can fall into perspective when we talk to and spend time with and share activities with

others, and we are reminded of the things that matter to us and the other lives which matter to us and which are not bounded by our own individual lives.

I have briefly described four aspects of what I am calling ‘worldly transcendence’:

- being at home in a universe which dwarfs our mundane concerns;
- being connected to the natural world and other living things;
- being rooted in a human community with an ongoing history in which we share;
- our more intimate emotional relationships and attachments.

Our experience of these things is, I am suggesting, the proper response to what might otherwise threaten to render our lives meaningless – the fragility of our own personal projects, of which Cottingham reminds us, and the fact of our mortality, which Tolstoy sees as making our endeavours futile and pointless. The experiences which take us out of ourselves, which put our private preoccupations into perspective, are also a reminder that not everything dies with my own individual death. There is a world larger than me which will go on without me and which can matter to me because there are things and people in it which matter to me. Talk of ‘transcendence’ may sound pretentious, and saying that ‘love is what saves us’ may sound trite, but these ways of putting it can between them point us to the recognition that our lives derive their meaning from their place within a network of relations to other people, to a larger human community, and to the non-human world.

These things are not an infallible guarantee against fragility. One’s close relationships may fall apart. The shared life of one’s community may be so corrupted and debased as to offer no prospect of any meaningful orientation to a positive future. If one’s physical environment is degraded and one has no access to an unspoiled natural world, one may be left with nothing but an indifferent universe. Religious systems can offer belief and trust in a God whose plans will never fail, so that if your own life falls apart and you can see no hope and no point in going on, you can tell yourself that this all has its place in the bigger picture, if only you could see it. Humanism can offer no such unconditional guarantees or consolations. We may reach the point where all we can say is that we have to face that truth honestly and without illusions. But though our hopes may be vulnerable to fragility, they are not inherently futile, and the possibility of a meaningful life is real.

Meaning and Stories

But why use the word ‘meaning’? I have suggested that instead of asking ‘What is the meaning of life?’ we should ask ‘What makes our lives meaningful?’ But why not simply talk about what makes for a good life, or a fulfilling life? Why

persist with talk of ‘meaning’? If, as I said earlier, it is *language* that has meaning, why talk about *lives* as ‘meaningful’?

One reason for persisting with that word is, I suggest, to reflect the need to tell a coherent *story* about one’s life, in which things hang together and make sense. I have argued that having a meaningful life is not primarily a matter of having the right *beliefs*, at least not in the sense of accepting certain kinds of religious or quasi-religious doctrines about the nature and purpose of the universe; but it does involve a certain kind of *understanding*, and the relevant kind is a form of *self-understanding*. We need to be able to see our lives in the right way. We need to see our relations to the non-human world, to our community and its history, and to other people, as more than just a bundle of unrelated experiences and attachments. They need to add up to a life about which we can tell an intelligible story.

The emphasis on ‘stories’ and ‘narratives’ as a form of understanding has been very popular in recent years. It has embraced not only claims about our need to tell stories about our own lives, but also claims about the insights conveyed by myths and stories in religious traditions, and about what we can learn from literary fictions (to which I’ll return shortly). The idea that we can, and want to, tell stories about our own lives has also been challenged.³⁴ We should therefore be clear about what is being claimed here. It is not the claim that most people are constantly engaged in the intellectual activity of constructing an explicitly articulated autobiography for themselves. It is not the claim that people either do or should follow a consistent life-plan which they keep constantly in view. Of course people’s lives may be more or less episodic, they may involve unexpected and unplanned changes of direction, and they may include a range of diverse interests and pursuits which are not obviously connected. Someone might, say, spend their first sixteen years as a model child, obedient offspring, and conscientious school pupil, then ‘drop out’ and drift through a series of unrewarding occupations and relationships for the next ten years, then form a new and fulfilling relationship, discover the intellectual challenge of philosophy and the fun of flying model aeroplanes and pursue these unrelated enthusiasms, only to abandon them and devote the rest of her life to children and grandchildren.

Nevertheless people’s felt need to place the different phases and aspects of their lives within an intelligible story is real. It is attested to by humanist celebrants who conduct non-religious funeral ceremonies. Typically at the centre of such a ceremony will be a narrative of the dead person’s life. Family members and friends typically find it important to piece that story together, to share memories and fit them into a narrative sequence. What makes such a ceremony particularly moving is that those who attend are able to look back at the life of the deceased, often discover facets of it which they were never aware of, and recognize perhaps for the first time what it added up to – a unique individual life about which a unique story can be told. Some celebrants also become involved in end-of-life care and know the need which dying people themselves

feel to look back on their lives and tell the story of them. And telling the story of one's own or another person's life in this way is, in an important sense, seeing it as a meaningful life.

Our ability to tell a story about our own or other people's lives is enhanced by our acquaintance with creative literature and other narrative art forms – novels, plays, films, and the like. Fictional narratives, though not 'true' in a literal sense, can foster a kind of understanding and a kind of knowledge. There is a tendency on the part of some humanists to suppose that the only kind of knowledge we need is scientific knowledge. It is indeed important to recognize the power of scientific enquiry. Questions about the origins of the physical universe, the origins of life forms, and the causal connections between events are properly addressed by the application of the scientific method. It is to the growth of science that we owe the slow progress from superstition to greater enlightenment, and we need to stand up for the achievements of science in contrast to the pseudo-explanations which invoke supernatural causes. However, science cannot answer all our questions, and this is not because it is too limited, not because it has to yield to some higher source of mystical insight, but because not all our questions are scientific questions.

The question 'What is the meaning of life?' is not a scientific question. I have also suggested that it is not the right question, not well formulated as it stands, but behind it there lurk genuine questions about our own and other people's lives, which are likewise not scientific questions. 'What does my life add up to?' is a real question, and we can be helped to answer it by reading or watching or listening to fictional lives. In one sense they do not give us new knowledge, but a well-told fiction, through its use of telling description and convincing detail, can remind us of things which at one level we already knew, can enable us to recognize, in the fictional life, features of our own and other people's lives and perhaps see them in new ways and see new patterns in them. One might say that creative fictions give us 'templates' with which to understand our own lives, except that the word suggests a generalized stereotype, whereas it is precisely the uniquely imagined detail of a good fiction that makes it convincing and thereby sharpens our awareness of our own experience.

Here is an example – one of the greatest novels in English literature, *Middlemarch*, written by a great humanist, George Eliot. The two central characters, Dr Lydgate and Dorothea, when we are introduced to them, have great and noble ambitions, to do good in the world. We follow them through the vicissitudes of their mistakes and their disappointed hopes. By the end of the novel, Lydgate's ambition to build up a fine new hospital in Middlemarch and use it to make new medical discoveries has been thwarted by his unwise choice of an ally and his unwise choice of a wife, and he and his family have left the town.

He died when he was only fifty, leaving his wife and children provided for by a heavy insurance on his life. He had gained an excellent practice, alternating, according to the season, between London and a Continental bathing-place;

having written a treatise on Gout, a disease which has a good deal of wealth on its side. His skill was relied on by many paying patients, but he always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do.³⁵

George Eliot's accomplished use of irony helps us to see that his view of his life as a failure is less than the truth. Dorothea's fine hopes have also been diverted, but we are left with a strongly positive sense of what her life has been.

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature ... spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive ...³⁶

The insight conveyed here, if stated as a general truth – a belief about the meaning of life, perhaps – may appear trite: 'We can all make a difference.' What makes it convincing in the novel is George Eliot's supreme narrative skill in conveying the details of this imagined life. And seeing how this can be true of Dorothea's life helps us to see how it can be true of our lives also. Although our hopes may not all be realized, and although we do not know what may come of our endeavours after we die, this does not make our lives pointless. Like Dorothea we are parts of a larger world, and our lives are made meaningful by our trust that our contributions to it will, like hers, be 'incalculably diffusive'.

Notes

- 1 Nicky Gumbel, *Questions of Life* (London: Alpha International, 2010) – the book version of the Alpha Course – p. 13.
- 2 Most people get it wrong.
- 3 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (1843), trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), vol. 1, p. 24.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.
- 5 *Macbeth*, V.v.
- 6 Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession* (1882), in *A Confession, The Gospel in Brief, and What I Believe*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 15 and 17–18.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 8 René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), paras. 24 and 28, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), vol. 1, pp. 201–202. The words between the angle brackets were added in 1647 to the French version approved by Descartes.
- 9 John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 67.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

- 11 Ibid., p. 88.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 100–104.
- 13 Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* (a selection from *Parerga und Paralipomena*, 1851), trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 104, 181.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 51–54.
- 15 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882), section 125, in *The Nietzsche Reader*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 203.
- 16 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1887 addition), section 343, *ibid.*, pp. 209–210.
- 17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), *ibid.*, pp. 238 and 242.
- 18 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), pp. 18–20.
- 19 Ibid., p. 47.
- 20 Ibid., p. 52.
- 21 Ibid., pp. 98–99. The delightful phrase ‘the rock is still rolling’ perhaps helps to account for Camus’s popularity in the culture of the 1950s!
- 22 Mark Vernon, *How To Be an Agnostic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 10.
- 23 Ibid., p. 120.
- 24 Ibid., p. 198. Cf. p. 136.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 259–260.
- 26 Ibid., p. 133.
- 27 Ibid., p. 136.
- 28 Ibid., p. 200.
- 29 Ibid., p. 120.
- 30 André Comte-Sponville, *The Book of Atheist Spirituality*, trans. Nancy Huston (London: Bantam Press, 2008), pp. 145–146.
- 31 Ibid., p. 149.
- 32 Vernon, *How To Be an Agnostic*, p. 235.
- 33 Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London: Methuen, 1976), pp. 319–320.
- 34 See for instance Galen Strawson, ‘Against Narrativity’, *Ratio* 17 (2004), pp. 428–452.
- 35 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–1872; Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1998), p. 781.
- 36 Ibid., p. 785.

Further Reading

An engaging and amusing introduction to the topic is Terry Eagleton’s *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Eagleton eventually settles on the serious proposal that the meaning of life is to be found in *agapé*, love in the sense of a way of life in which ‘the flourishing of one individual comes about through the flourishing of others’.

Of the nineteenth-century thinkers discussed in the text, Schopenhauer’s *magnum opus* *The World as Will and Idea*, also translated as *The World as Will and Representation*,

available in various English translations and editions, e.g. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969). This is very readable but also very long. A shorter and very accessible introduction to Schopenhauer's thought is Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* (a selection from his *Parerga und Paralipomena*), trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970). See especially the sections 'On the Vanity of Existence', 'On the Affirmation and Denial of the Will to Live', 'On the Indestructibility of Our Essential Being by Death', 'On Ethics', and the two sections 'On Religion'.

The most relevant work by Nietzsche is his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961). This is Nietzsche in the style of an Old Testament prophet, and in my view a little of *Zarathustra* goes a long way. An alternative, which includes extracts from *Zarathustra*, is *A Nietzsche Reader*, ed. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), especially the sections 'Nihilism' and 'Anti-Nihilism'.

Tolstoy's *Confession* is available in various editions including Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, trans. Aylmer Maude (New York: Dover Publications, 2005) and Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987). There is an interesting discussion of Tolstoy by the humanist philosopher Antony Flew at: <http://facultypages.morris.umn.edu/~mcollier/Intro%20to%20Philosophy/flew.pdf> (accessed 15 October 2014).

For Albert Camus's broadly existentialist approach see his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), especially the sections 'Absurdity and Suicide', 'Absurd Walls', 'Absurd Freedom', and 'The Myth of Sisyphus'.

A seminal discussion from a humanist perspective, by the first executive director of the British Humanist Association, is H. J. Blackham's 'The Pointlessness of It All', in edited H. J. Blackham (ed.), *Objections to Humanism* (London: Constable, 1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

Two more recent humanist approaches are by A. C. Grayling and Julian Baggini. Grayling's is an example of the view that we *create* meaning for our own lives; see his 'The Meaning of Life', in A. C. Grayling, *Thinking of Answers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010). Grayling's position merges into the deflationary position taken by Baggini that once we identify the various activities which are worth engaging in for their own sake and make our lives worthwhile, the question of the meaning of life evaporates. See the chapter 'Meaning and Purpose', in Julian Baggini, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and the more extended treatment in Julian Baggini, *What's It All About: Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (London: Granta Books, 2004). For succinct statements from Grayling, Baggini, and two other philosophers, Victoria Harrison and John Haldane, who approach the question from a religious perspective, see 'What Is the Meaning of Life?' (3 January 2010), at: <http://www.heraldscotland.com/comment/guest-commentary/what-is-the-meaning-of-life-1.995702> (accessed 15 October 2014).

The discussion from a Christian perspective referred to in the text above, which poses some serious questions for humanists, is John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Similarly thought-provoking is the agnostic approach referred to above: Mark Vernon, *How To Be an Agnostic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).