

## IN DEFENSE OF DESPAIR: PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF LIFE

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No sane human being lives an entire lifetime without at least once being stopped by the thought—however inarticulate and fleeting—that all human striving is pointless, that all achievement is finally empty, that human life is without meaning. In recent years, it has become respectable even for English-speaking philosophers to devote attention to the question of the meaning of life. To be sure, this attention has largely confined itself to the presentation of distinctions and clarifications aiming to disabuse us of the legitimacy of the question. But the fact that the matter is addressed at all in a tradition so rigorously aloof from questions of common and (still worse) existential concern may be taken, perhaps, as a sign that even philosophers of this tradition are not altogether impervious to the disquietude this question may foster, that even they have asked with a naïveté that must be an acute embarrassment, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ In this paper, a most preliminary approach to this most profound of questions, I, too, should like to clarify matters. But the point of my efforts will not be to assure my readers and myself that only certain confusions may lead us to the dark mood in which human life seems pointless. Rather, the confusions I want to clear away are those that have enabled philosophers to dismiss this dark mood with such haste. I will not argue here that life is indeed without meaning, only that certain arguments that have been advanced to demonstrate the poverty of this claim are themselves quite without worth. I will take no position here on the question of life’s meaning but will confine myself to a narrower propaedeutic task: I will try to exhume from a shallow philosophical grave a question of the first importance.

In this paper, I want to address only the radical assault, the arguments that threaten to cut off all consideration of the matter at the root. These are the arguments that maintain on logical grounds that all discussion of the question of the meaning of life is empty and idle. There are two forms of this argument, and they share besides this common conclusion two other prominent features: First, they share the view that meaningfulness or its negation cannot itself be meaningfully predicated of human life as such. The second characteristic they share is an equally pronounced lack of cogency. Let us take them up in detail.

### I

The first form of the argument involves a familiar strategy. We may certainly say of this or that activity or project in life that it is absurd or mean-

ingless (so the case runs), for in doing so, we are singling out for disapprobation this particular act or engagement from among a vast array of others emphatically *not* absurd. The very condition (so the case goes) of our ability to assert meaningfully the absurdity of a state of affairs is that we identify states of affairs which are without this characteristic. But how can this condition be met by anyone who claims *all of life* and presumably, therefore, everything in it to be absurd? In a single stroke, the philosopher of despair obliterates all contrast to meaningless activity. Unwittingly, however, in the same stroke (the argument now concludes), he obliterates all possible sense to the ascription of meaninglessness.

This strategy has been employed in recent years against a multitude of philosophical problems, its merits being never more elusive than in the present case. I must certainly concede that the condition of the meaningfulness of any predication is the recognition on the part of those doing the ascribing of a clear contrast to that predication. If I am to speak meaningfully of selfish acts, I must know very well what unselfish acts would be. If I am to identify the shadows in the wood, I must at the same time recognize the light. But surely it cannot be required in every case of meaningful ascription that there actually exist a thing or state of affairs bearing the contrasting feature. Surely it cannot be a condition of the meaningful ascription of mortality to men that there actually *be* immortals. All that is necessary in every case is that it be possible to *conceive* of the relevant contrast, so that all that is required of the philosopher of despair is that he define for us in precisely what regards life is lacking, that he be capable of envisioning for us the conditions under which life *would* be meaningful, whether or not these conditions have ever been or could ever be met.

And this last point is worth dwelling on for a moment. If a person asserts factually impossible conditions for the meaningfulness of life, we may try to persuade him that he is being unreasonably demanding, that his extravagance assures him unnecessary despair. If we are to be truly persuasive, of course, we will have to *demonstrate* to him that his demands are indeed extravagant, and it will not be sufficient merely to reiterate that they cannot be met, since impossibly high standards need not be unreasonable ones. (Consider, for example, criteria for purity of heart.) It would be necessary that we establish to his satisfaction that it is of no importance to the question of the meaning of life that his standards cannot be met. But the key point here is that whether or not we succeed in persuading him of the extravagance of his demands, we cannot cite the impossibility of their being met as the ground for dismissing as senseless or as unimportant his conclusion that life is meaningless. In summary, then, it is not the case that the philosopher of despair obliterates all contrast to meaningless activity when he claims that life is itself without meaning. The contrast he has in mind exists as far as he is concerned only in imagination, but this vision of

a meaningful life—even if factually impossible of attainment—is quite sufficient to give sense to his concept of meaninglessness.

I want to make one further point on this first form of the argument from the logic of 'meaninglessness,' and then we will proceed to the second form. The philosopher of despair may believe we have paid too high a price in defending the meaningfulness of his claim from this first attack. He may be uncomfortable with our insistence that he come forward with a clear conception of what a meaningful life would be, and he may argue that the demand for a contrast to an absurd universe as the condition of the meaningfulness of his claim places him under unwarrantable constraint. When he asks with a sigh, "What is the point of it all?" or intones with passionate disillusion, "Life is but a walking shadow . . ." he may insist that he has no clear contrast in mind to this present world, that he could not spell out for us the conditions of a meaningful world, nor even point out to us precisely what it is about this world that persuades him of its emptiness, but that he is, nevertheless, expressing in these words the painfully lucid conviction that life is meaningless. Just as we are often buoyed up, he might say, by an altogether nameless hope, a wholly unspecifiable sense of good things to come, or even a sense of imminent deliverance the nature of which is completely unclear to us, so we may on occasion fall under the swoon of a nameless despair, a wholly unspecifiable sense of the aimlessness of life, and this mood has its correct linguistic expression in the words, "Life is meaningless." In answer to our demand, "What, then, would make life meaningful?" he will say, "I don't know," but nevertheless insist that there is sense in his assertion that life is without meaning. The meaninglessness of life, he would say, consists in its failure to satisfy a wholly unspecifiable striving, not a striving for this or that actual or imaginable good of this world, but for something dimly felt and not clearly conceived. Shall we deny that this is a valid explication of the concept of life's meaninglessness? Or shall we concede that it is and thus be forced to abandon our demand that the philosopher of despair provide for us a clear vision of what a meaningful world would be?

I see no reason to reject this explication of meaninglessness. The reminder of certain common experiences may make it seem quite plausible. Upon achieving a long and ardently coveted goal, we often fall into a mood of despondency. This objective which had filled our life with meaning so long as it remained before us shows itself in our grasp in all its hollow modesty. How could we have been so intent upon having *this*? Confronted repeatedly in this way by the vanity of our ambitions, we may ask whether the achievement of any of our goals will bring us the satisfaction we seek, whether the reality of the achievement will not always mock the fervor of our desire. And these thoughts may bring us to the following

reflections: Perhaps no identifiable good of this world can satisfy our striving. Perhaps the true object of our striving is something elusive to our comprehension, and perhaps the inevitable disappointment of this desire spells the emptiness or meaninglessness of life. Taking this view, one would then argue that he could not possibly provide a clear vision of a meaningful life but that this is due to the nature of the case. As the aim of the striving is unspecifiable, so must be the precise character of its fulfillment. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the lives of the protagonists seem condemned to a twofold absurdity: the identity of the sole object of their hope is completely ambiguous, and the long-awaited redeemer never comes. There are many who believe this play reflects faithfully the futility of the human condition.

I think we must concede the sense in this conception of meaninglessness, but I do not think that in doing so we must abandon the view that a meaningful ascription requires a clear contrast. The philosopher of despair who makes his case in this way cannot, it is true, present a detailed description of the life that he would find meaningful. But in making his case, he has already told us something about that life, and it seems to me that what he has told us is quite enough to provide the necessary contrast. He has told us, after all, that in order for life to be meaningful, it would have to be possible for human beings to satisfy their deepest strivings. Now, it is true that he cannot spell out for us the precise nature of these strivings and hence cannot portray for us the specific features of that life, but he can tell us something about the effects of their fulfillment. If life were meaningful, he could say, it would be possible for human beings to achieve a profound and abiding sense of tranquility, for it is precisely the inevitability of their disillusion that constitutes in his view the absurdity of life. I think we must acknowledge, then, that the statement, "Life is meaningless," may indeed be the expression of a largely ineffable intuition into the whole of human experience. But even when it is this, as I hope now to have shown, it can be given a clear sense.

## II

There is, as I have said, a second form of the argument from the logic of the concept of meaninglessness, and I want to turn to that second form now. Once again the claim will be that the philosopher of despair misunderstands and misuses the concept of meaninglessness. His alleged error this time, however, is not in his supposed failure to provide a contrast to meaninglessness. His error rather is in his failure to understand that there are only certain contexts in which the ascription of meaninglessness can have significance. The argument runs as follows. When we say of an activity or a project in life that it is meaningless, we mean that it is without

point or purpose, or that it is altogether lacking in value. Learning of an energetic performance of a mime before an audience of blind people, I may say that his was a meaningless effort. The word is synonymous with futile, idle, pointless, empty, with some small qualification, absurd. Now, someone may want to argue here that his effort was not pointless, that his audience, though incapable of appreciating his artistry, could, nevertheless, appreciate this sign of his care, and so on. But it is clear what I mean in asserting its meaninglessness, and it is clear how this assertion can be countered. It is clear because I make my statement within a context of well-established values and significances, a context in which certain acts are taken to be profitable because they issue in certain worthy ends.

Now, it is precisely in such contexts, so the argument goes, that I learn what it means to say of an activity that it is meaningful or meaningless. But in such ordinary discourse, the context for all worthy ends—the context within which it is possible to speak of purposeful or pointless activity—is presumed to be life itself. I do not in ordinary discourse doubt the meaningfulness of a project, say the building of a house, because the product of my labor will have no place in the Kingdom of Heaven. Here, it is quite sufficient for me to know that it will shelter me from the weather to preclude my raising any question of the purpose of my building it. But if life is the context for all worthy ends, then while it is perfectly legitimate to ask of projects *in* life whether or not they are meaningful—that is, whether or not they contribute to the achievement of a worthy end—it is not legitimate to ask this question of life itself. Furthermore, while it is possible to say of an *individual* life that it is meaningful, this possibility does not extend to human life *such*. To say of someone's life that it is meaningful is merely to acknowledge the devotion of that life to the achievement of worthy ends: to the amelioration of human suffering, the creation of a just state, and so on. But what could it mean to say of life itself that its point is to help eliminate war or to create a moving image of its time or to lighten the burden of its fellows?

Now, this argument does not deny that we can *fabricate* ends for life itself and hence create a context in which we might then assert life's meaninglessness. The force of the argument does not lie in a denial of this possibility but rather in its supposition that the meaning of an ascription is inseparable from the contexts in which that ascription has its original and proper home. The argument here would be that our fabricated ends for life itself would differ so radically from the ends which provide our point of reference in our normal ascriptions of pointlessness that the claim "life is without meaning" would have almost nothing in common with the claim that some particular project *in* life is meaningless. In short, the two claims would have different meanings. Once this is understood, so the argument

would proceed, we should recognize the futility in attempting to create some sense for the ascription of meaninglessness to life. For after we have done so, what will we have accomplished? We shall still need to make all the old distinctions between meaningful and meaningless gestures, purposeful and pointless activity, rewarding and futile labor, noble and useless passions. We shall still want to say that one person used his or her opportunities well and lived a rich and meaningful life, while another, like the boys of summer, squandered the harvest and died a pointless death. Our new-born conviction that life itself is without meaning can change none of this, and as it cannot affect this, it is dubious what significance this conviction could have. We can fabricate a context within which to condemn the whole of life as meaningless, but this would be a labor of no consequence, for the sense of meaninglessness we would thus create would be fatally remote from any meaninglessness which could ever be of concern to us.

What I find so puzzling about this strategy, which like the previous one has seen considerable service in contemporary philosophy, is the reverence it accords the alleged common usages of a concept. Furthermore, I do not think it is an easy matter in such cases as the present one to determine just what uses qualify as common. Why should I suppose that the use of the word 'meaning' in the phrase, "the meaning of life," is any less a part of the fabric of significances I must master in the learning of this word than is, for example, its use in the phrase "the meaning of Christmas"? And even if its meaning in the phrase "the meaning of life" is something I can understand only upon maturity and then on analogy to its simpler uses, what possible argument can this comprise against the legitimacy of the more sophisticated usage? From our earliest years, as a matter of fact, each of us almost without exception is taught some religious conception of the world, a conception in which human life is viewed in a larger context; and it is this larger context, we are taught at this tender age, that confers a significance and value upon our lives that far transcend the significance and value of any worldly glory. From our earliest years, in other words, we are enured to thinking of a context for the significance of our actions more ultimate than our immediate ends, so that whatever view we may later come to have of this teaching, there are few of us who can fail to understand what is being asked in the question, "What is the meaning of life?" And it would be well now to try to say clearly just what the question means. It is to ask for that ultimate and benign scheme of things in which human life itself has a place. As 'meaning' here means not only sense and direction but also worth, to deny that life has meaning is either to deny that there is any such scheme, any purposeful orchestration of the universe, or to assert that such scheme as there is, is not benign but evil. Even the person we spoke of earlier who believes the deep and inarticulate strivings

of the soul to be unsatisfiable and concludes from this the absurdity of life finally has this in mind. For he takes the inevitability of our discontent as proof that the world is not a moral order, that the universe awaits with profound indifference both our anguish and our triumph.

Even if it were true that the sense of 'futility' in "the futility of life" were radically remote from the sense of the word in, for example, "the futility of war," I do not see how this could be fatal to the significance of the first usage. In fact, however, the point is moot, since the usages in the two cases are very similar. In both phrases what is being denied is that the enterprise in question issues in a worthy end. It is our common practice to measure the worth of any enterprise according to the worth of its projected end. The question, "What is the end of life itself?"—so far from being a senseless aberration from ordinary usage—is in fact a quite natural extension of this common practice.

Finally, I must certainly reject the claim that the conviction that life is meaningless can be of no consequence. It is true that the philosopher of despair, who discerns no purpose to life as such, can nevertheless continue to affirm purposes *within* life. Since the context for the ascription of purpose to life must of necessity be quite different from the context for the ascription of purpose to projects *in* life, the philosopher of despair, bearing this distinction in mind, can conduct himself in much the manner of his more sanguine brothers, continually striving to secure certain ends, judging this to be of value, discarding that as worthless. But the important point here is that this need not be so, and we cannot fault his logic if he recognizes the destructive implications of the purposelessness *of* life for the putative purposes *in* it.

"But what implications are these?" someone will demand. "Shall we say that his conviction of the pointlessness of life must force him to deny the purpose in the medical operation that removes his malignancy? Shall we say it forces him to deny the purpose of the military operation that frees political hostages?" Surely his conviction that life is meaningless does not commit him to indifference to physical pain or to the suffering of others and hence does not commit him to denying the purpose of those acts which aim to remove them. But how can we deny that this conviction of his might *with good reason* poison all his savor for life, that in forcing him to regard all the purposes of this world—however brave, however unselfish—under the aspect of ultimate futility, it might well bring him to see in all his efforts, all his discriminations of worthy ends, only their frailty and fatal limitation? The belief that life is without meaning does not create in one an immunity to pain, and so it does not force him to deny the value of projects aimed at its amelioration, but it does commit him to a recognition of the relativity of this value, to the view that we secure our health only to return

intact and without pain to the pursuit of our empty lives. And so while the philosopher of despair need not dismiss as worthless all purposes in this world, his recognition of the profound modesty of their worth might well be expected to inform his efforts with inconsolable bitterness.

This is not to say that the philosopher of despair *must* live in a state of despondency. For the most part, I suspect, it is in fact otherwise, that he remains in his actions, like the silent knight of faith, indistinguishable from the rest of us. This is what gives initial plausibility to the claim that the view that life is meaningless is without consequence, that it is like a wind that rustles no leaves. It is said with a smile that the philosopher who professes the meaninglessness of life nevertheless shows great concern to publicize this opinion, even with energy and eloquence, and that he can be seen in the next moment laughing heartily at a joke or dancing with abandon. We have already said that the denial of purpose *to* life does not commit one to a denial of all purposes *in* it, only to a recognition of their modesty. But there is another explanation of these seeming paradoxes, and it is instructive.

If the philosopher of despair is for the most part indistinguishable from the rest of us, this is due neither to his insincerity nor to the profound irrelevance of his view, but rather to the fact that our day to day activity is not, except in the rarest cases, directed by our views at all but by the powerful dance of our feelings. It can be said of the belief that life is meaningless, perhaps more than of any other, that it is a thesis borne home to one, if at all, only in a profoundly reflective mood, and it is then one can be expected to feel its grave and disquieting impact. Except with the greatest effort, however, this is not a mood we can sustain. We have, as Hume saw, a natural protection against succumbing irremediably to the force of our reflections, and this is our native and habitual devotion to the immediate ends of our lives. But it would be resting on the frailest reed to cite this habitual devotion as the ground for dismissing the significance of the view that life is without meaning. For it is certainly possible to cite cases in which this devotion has been overwhelmed by the merciless persistence of that view, and it is at best foolishly naive to infer the meaninglessness of a view from our success in evading its force. If we live through long stretches of our lives suffering no anguish over the question of their ultimate meaning, this is not because the question is remote and empty, but because our passions mercifully protect us from the gravity of our profoundest thoughts. I conclude not that life is indeed without meaning, but that the claim that it is remains eminently worthy of our deepest philosophical labors.