The Meaning of Life: For Each to Decide?

Jeffery Gordon
Southwest Texas State University

> What is the answer? What is the answer?...What is the Question?
> --Gertrude Stein on her deathbed

While on my way to another meeting a couple of years ago, the hotel cabbie who had picked me up from the airport turned to me, his only passenger, with friendly curiosity. He looked at me for a moment, then decided. "You're with the philosophy convention." he said.

"As a matter of fact, I am. How did you know?"

To this, he made no reply, but gestured with his hand to express both secret ways and a certain humility. A minute or so passed before he turned to me again, the mirth unconcealed in his eyes. "It's about a twenty minute drive to the hotel," he said. "Maybe you can tell me the meaning of life."

The special irony of the story is that the paper lying in discreet silence among my baggage, the paper I would be reading to my colleagues the following morning, was on exactly that topic, as is the paper I present to you now.

I begin with this anecdote because, unsurprisingly, it has a moral, and the moral will bring me to the center of my concern with the question of the meaning of life in this paper, the concern expressed in the title.

What is so amusing about the cabbie's request? Would it have been less amusing if he had given me more time, if there had been two hours or even two days? Should I have been able to tell him the meaning of life in a week? And suppose I weren't a career philosopher but only a very sober man, and the cabbie knew this about me. Wouldn't it still have been amusing for one man to seek of another an answer to the question of the meaning of life? And what if the setting had been less humble? What if the discussion were not to take place in a cab, but in a carriage, or in an artists' salon?

None of these changes would have mattered. There is something about the *question itself* that causes amusement--though not just amusement, as each of us knows. Even where the question is raised as a joke, it is greeted with uneasy laughter, as though beneath the joke lay a terrible truth that had best be evaded in levity. This dual character of the question--source of amusement/source of anxiety--interests me greatly, and I will have said something about each of these aspects before I am finished here. But returning to the cabbie's and to our own amusement, how shall we account for it?

The issue of the meaning of life is taken, I think, as a classic example of the sort of huge and unprofitable question a person might raise when given more leisure than he needs. It arouses two suspicions. First, there is the sense of its intractibility, the suspicion that any answer a person might give would have to rest on some unjustifiable choice of ultimate value--the value of love, or contemplation, or creativity, or power, or eternal life, and so on. And second, there is the sense of its pointlessness, the suspicion that even an absolutely authoritative answer to the question would bring no useful enlightenment.

For suppose I were to have the absolute truth on the matter; what should I be expected to *do* with it? If what now gives my life meaning is, for example, the creation of new forms in wood or stone, what should I do with the knowledge, however spodictic, that the purpose of human life is to prepare for eternity? Presented with this news, however dramatically, what could I do but shrug with bemusement? "I certainly seemed to miss the boat on that one." Should I be more impressed with the information I've been given? Should I behave more like an initiate into a distinguished cult? Should this be the occasion of radical reassessments, lofty resolutions, new directions, and do on? Is there, in other words, something *wrong* -- ungrateful or blind, willful or stupid -- about my casual response to the revelation of the meaning of life? The truth is there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it. On the other hand, however, were I to stop in my tracks, withdraw to some introspective cell, then quit my sculpting in favor of more direct paths to eternal glory, a friend would be acting in my best interest if he told me I was taking all this too seriously, that there were things in life more important than this preoccupation with its objective meaning.

In short, I think a certain folk wisdom lies behind the smile that often greets the question of the meaning of life. The humor reflects misgivings about the question itself: the suspicion that there is no way to settle the matter for all time and all eternity, and that even if there were a way, the task would not be worth the effort. The meaning of human life is something the agent must find or create for himself, the common wisdom has it. Once he has done so, any revelation of absolute truth on the question can have no importance to him. And if he has not found or created this personal and subjective meaning, the discovery of the objective truth will not help fill his void. For common wisdom, in other words, there could be no better candidate for a relativistic solution than the problem of the meaning of life. The meaning life has will be relative to the individual choices of the man or woman who lives it.

This is the view I want to examine with you this afternoon, not to draw new amusement from the reservoir of the common man's naivete, since here, for once, I think there is something correct in his instinctive suspicions, nor to celebrate his rough and ready wisdom, since I think there is something less than wise in his

relativistic reduction of this question. Neither to praise nor to bury, then, I want to examine this species of relativism to sort out what is right from what is wrong with it.

I

Let me begin by calling your attention to the extent to which the common view has trickled up to the philosophers. Whether or not life is worth living is one of those issues whose truth, as William James see it, is dependent upon (= relative to) the passional choice of the individual. A passionate affirmation of the meaningfulness of life is enough to make a life meaningful, while the nihilist's view and the view of the sceptic entwined in snarling logicality assure the emptiness of their lives.[1] Richard Taylor discovers that the struggle to fulfill some extrinsic criterion of significance (the creation, for example, of a work of permanent value) results at best in infinite tedium, and that the intrinsic criterion, the idiosyncratic passion of the individual, is the only criterion we should honor: "The meaning of life is from within us, it is not bestowed from without..."[2] Thomas Nagel acknowledges that the meaningfulness of human life is relative to point of view. From the point of view of whatever conscious beings may exist a million years hence, it is probably true that no human life is of the slightest significance. But what constrains us to adopt *their* point of view in the matter? Nagel asks. From *our own* perspective, after all, it is *they* and *their* opinions that are meaningless.[3] Berel Lang urges that we renounce the "silly and obscure question" of the Meaning of Life, since the best our pursuit of it might yield is some large formula we would have no idea how to apply. We should seek instead to know the "meanings of lives," the unique means individuals have employed to order their experience.[4] And recently Robert Nozick, who devotes some eighty pages to this question in the concluding chapter of *Philosophical Explanations*, wonders whether the meaningfulness of human life requires a *will* to meaning, whether, in other words, the meaning of life is not to this extent relative to the will of the individual living it.[5] If we were inclined to smile at the common man's light way with the question, this list (which could easily be extended) should at least turn the smile to a consequential pursing of the lips.

Let me attend now to the sorting out I promised. I ask my listeners to indulge me as I pursue a dialectic. I want first to set out the considerations that seem to urge the "common man's view"; that is, the view that the meaning of life is a matter each must decide for himself. Then I want to set forth the considerations that militate--decisively, as I see it--against the success of this subjectivism. I shall conclude that the question of the meaning of life is one we can never hope to answer, either subjectively or objectively. Unfortunately, however, it is also one we can never hope to dismiss. In the final sections of the paper, I shall try to provide an

explanation of why we must continue to be haunted by a question that has no possible answer.

II

1. Something that can't have escaped your attention even in my use of the phrase these last ten minutes is that "the meaning of life" is not a univocal expression. Our initial bafflement at the question "What is the meaning of life?" surely derives in part from our uncertainty as to just what sense of "meaning" is or should be at issue here. Is it a principle of *intelligibility* we are seeking, or a principle of *value*, or some combination of the two? Are we asking what gives sense, intelligibility to an individual life and/or to the advent of mankind? Are we asking for the criteria of success in a human life, the criteria of optimal use of mortal opportunities, or for the conditions under which (all?) human beings will feel fulfilled, or those under which one ought to have this feeling? Are we asking what goods are ultimately worth pursuing? Are we asking under what conditions it can be said to be important of the race? Is it a question about the ultimate destiny of mankind, a question about the scheme of things and the importance of our place in it? If the relativistic response to the question seems appropriate, perhaps this is because given certain senses of meaning and meaningfulness, this is exactly what the question calls for.

"His son was killed, and from that point on, his life lost all meaning." The meaning of life in this context is clearly relative to the individual: it is the focus of his concerns, what makes life worthwhile *for him*. Here, then, is a common and perfectly acceptable usage of the concept of 'meaning in life' that is unabashedly relativistic. (But the fact that relativism is appropriate here is no assurance it will be appropriate in other contexts. The first order of business would seem to be to decide on each occasion of its being raised just what we hope to learn in pursuing the question of life's meaning.)

2. Is it reasonable to suppose that a life may be quite meaningful while the person living it believes it to be empty? Again, the answer will depend upon what we mean by "meaningful" and "empty" here. But at first sight, anyway, it seems hard to countenance this state of affairs. If a life is felt to be unfulfilled (=empty), how can it be meaningful? The difficulty in countenancing this state of affairs is, I think, one of the principal sources of uneasiness about the objectivistic approaches to the question. If there is some objective truth about what is most worthy of pursuit in a life and the criteria for success in that pursuit, then presumably one might acheive meaningfulness merely by adopting this aim and pursuing it to a successful conclusion -- despite the fact that the aim is one to which the person himself remains indifferent, his heart's truth lying elsewhere, and so despite the fact that he derives no personal fulfillment from his triumph. We may be inclined in face of the oddness of this implication of objectivism merely to reject this sort of approach in

favor of the subjectivist ones. The anomaly of a personally unfulfilling meaninful life suggests the impossibility of a wholly objectivist criterion of meaning. To some extent, at least, the meaningfulness of a human life would seem to be relative to the individual's own attitude or assessment.

3. At any given moment, the felt sense of worth in a life is the consequence of several sources: favored memories, certain intimacies and friendships, progress in one's work, a rich and variegated texture of plans and projects, certain humble aspects of one's daily routine--the half hour in the cafe, gentle moring voices, the aroma of fresh coffee, the twilight drive through the country at the end of the work day. Now, weighed in the scales of world history, to say nothing of cosmic destiny, none of this is of the least importance, and few of us are under any illusion that it is. But this having been said, we will continue to derive our sense of the worth of our lives from these same modest, highly particular, highly idiosyncratic sources, and the realization that we will do this encourages a diminished regard for the larger objectivist sense of the question of life's meaning.

4. Furthermore, a critical examination of these larger senses often proves a healthy exercise in philosophical deflation. Suppose our question is, "What is the ultimate significance of the human odyssey?" We are confronted at once with an unsuperable problem, the problem encountered by all dedicated seekers after ultimates: the mark of our dedication is that nothing is ever ultimate enough. Once I demand as a condition of the meaningfulness of life (and *a fortiori*, of any particular life) a larger scheme within which human life itself has a place, I am obliged to demand a still higher scheme to assure the significance of the first one. What possible candidate for ultimate significance is immune to this relativizing?

5. Here, I want to turn to recent work by Nozick, since he struggles manfully with just this problem of the seeming inescapability of relativization in his chapter on the meaning of life.[6] We can learn from his struggles, I think, though not the lesson he intends. Meaning, he writes, consists in a relation to something of value, and human life is ultimately meaningful if we are connected in some positive way to a reality of ultimate value, a reality that cannot be relativized because it contains within itself all being and all possibility. Nozick declines to enter into the unmistakably "murky metaphysics" of this reality ("the Unlimited"). But that needn't prevent fools from rushing in, particularly when they are interested in tracing out the possible paths of resolution to the cosmic senses of our question.

And so, I put at least three questions: First, in what sense will this reality include within itself all possibility? It is clear why Nozick thinks his supreme being needs this feature: it needs it to escape being relativized by the possible -- "Why is there this rather than some other possiblity?" Nozick's Unlimited will *include* this other possibility. But in what sense? In order to avoid this ultimate sort of relativizing, wouldn't the Unlimited have to <u>be</u> all possibilities, rather than merely

contain them? ("Why are <u>*these*</u> possibilities actualized rather than some others?") In order words, wouldn't the Unlimited have to instantiate all contradictions -- truth and falsehood, good and evil, being and nothingness? What, then, will it mean to say such a being can *exist*?

Second, granting in a moment of delirium that such a being may exist--nay, more, *does* exist,--what must our relation to it be in order that our lives be endowed with meaning from it? What could our relation to it be? And possible sustenance could I derive from it? Aware of the existence of the Unlimited and of the fact of my relation to it, what more could I now say of my life than what I could have said before my epiphany -- namely, that I exist, and that, in virtue of this, I belong to that enormous class of things possible and actual, the only class that would count me as a member even if I did not exist?

Third, once we recognize how literally unlimited the Unlimited must be in order to avoid the relativization Nozick sought to escape, what sense can we make of its having ultimate *value*? Would it not have to contain all evil as well as all good? And even if it were somehow possible to waive this requirement, from what source would it derive its value? Nozick's reply is that the Unlimited, as the mother and fount of all things, is the source also of its own value. But what can this mean? Would it be similar to writing myself my own enthusiastic letter of acceptance: "You have written a truly remarkable paper. I feel honored that you chose to send it to me. When comes such another?"

I could raise other questions of Nozick's Unlimited (and even put half of them in parentheses), but what will I have accomplished? One thing Nozick's book does not need is a set of new perplexities to ponder. Suffice it to say that the higher reaches of speculative metaphysics are what await the quester after life's supreme significance. If he is an intrepid explorer, this will not faze him. But those of us without his taste for altitudes will begin to hear in this arcane discourse the noise of idle chatter. Once again, it seems our question, the question of the meaning of life, is best regarded as an invitation to the living individual to discover and pursue his own heart's truth -- to choose, to commit himself, to create. Once again, it seems whatever useful answer our question is to receive will be relative to each of us.

III

1. And yet, a voice can still be heard asking whether life has a meaning, a voice of one acutely aware of his life choices and content with his memories and friendships, his modest progress, his small routines. Trusting these sources of felt significance, he asks the question still.

2. And yet, recognizing that the 900 at Jonestown regarded their suicide as a sacred act, the crowning sacrifice in a life of supreme devotion, we shake our heads and close our eyes. "The delusion," we say, "the waste."

3. And yet, if we were offered a drug that would give to us within minutes a profound sense of order, purpose, worth, and significance, we would deny resolutely that this would give meaning to our lives. "We would have found fulfillment in the wrong way," we would say. There would be a *right* way, then?

4. There are serious limits to the possibility of a relativistic solution to the problem of the meaning of life. Our troubles with this question are not over when we say that the meaning and meaningfulness of a life are relative to the individual, who must create meaning through his commitments and affirm the worth of his experience. It is not as though we can oppose the alien, objective view of a life (and life) to the hospitable, subjective view the individual himself takes of it. We can oppose the perspective of passionate engagement to the perspective of the dispassionate observer, yes. But the problem is that every human being embodies *both* these perspectives *himself*. And that is why when we tell a person to *make* his life meaningful merely by *affirming* its worth, his doing so cannot silence the question. This will be enough for the enthusiast, the passionate protagonist in one's life, but it was not he, after all, who was ever troubled by this question. This affirmation will not suffice for that more aloof persona within each of us, that dispassionate consciousness without allegiances, that free and neutral regard unfettered by worldly commitments and pragmatic demands, who insists only on maintaining its serene reserve.

I am not speaking here of some obscure sort of transcendental awareness known best by philosophers but experienced only on the rarest of dramatic occasions by everybody else. The consciousness I speak of is known by everyone and the occasions on which it intrudes itself will not be confined to the philosopher's parlor. It may occur in the midst of the most mundane events; it may intervene, unbidden and unwelcome, amid fevered activity. It is that part of us that has never gotten over the initial strangeness of our being in the world, the part that has never learned to confine its thoughts and curiosities to the protocols and exigencies of the worldly task at hand, never thrown in with our worldly commitments or catered to the exorbitantly constricting demands of pursuing a *single* human life. It is the neutral regard that might meet in the mirror one ordinary day a slightly comical stranger, the dispassionate awareness that may innocently note the warm glow of the brass handles on the casket of a loved one or the playful dance of shadows across her dead face. It is the disengaged consciousness that observes in serenity the bowing and tumbling of the man devoted to his small orbit in the world. "Follow your heart's truth: make your own meaning!" the relativist cries. And this we shall do, willy-nilly, with this exhortation or without it. But the doubts will not be silenced, so long as this dispassionate gaze remains to see.

The relativistic answer to the question of life's meaning cannot succeed because we view our lives from both these perspectives, that of the eager

protagonist, the bower and tumbler, pursuing his passions with unstinting devotion, and that of the detached observer, for whom these passions are so many interesting phenomena, so many curiosities, valid only to themselves. If the meaningfulness of our lives is to be relative to our own view of the matter, nothing is settled; for we have no basis for deciding which of these views we should consult, and even after having decided for one arbitrarily, we would not have thus extinguished the other.

From the point of view of the protagonist, the answer is certain, though of no importance, since from his perspective, the question was never raised. But from the point of view of dispassionate consciousness, every answer is another curiosity, another passionate commitment to be observed in neutrality. And this is why the question is unanswerable in principle. Once we step outside the orbit of our life concerns to raise the question of its significance, we have already abandoned the perspective from which a meaning *could* emerge. As it is raised by a consciousness aloof to the passions of this world and unpersuaded by mortal commitments, no possible answer can suffice the one who asks. The question whether our lives have meaning remains nevertheless, however, because it *comes with this consciousness*. 'Does life have a meaning?' may as well be the *name* of this transcendental awareness, so aptly does that question express the neutral wonder of its gaze. But, again, given the nature of this determinedly uncommitted awareness, it is possible to conceive any answer that could silence our doubts. Unanswerable and unrelenting, the question is ours forever.

IV

What is the meaning of life? Our mistake is to take the question too literally, to search out its literal senses, then to apply ourselves to its various resolutions. We are prompted to do this because the question does not go away, because it remains a source of disquietude. Despite our recognition of its intractibility, its elusiveness, its resistence to any possible solution, despite our self-assured laughter whenever it is raised, we continue to be haunted by the question, and so we are convinced of its deep significance, even if we cannot justify the conviction. Hence we search for its literal sense. But perhaps it is of the essence of the import of this question that it remain both ambiguous and unanswerable. Perhaps it should not be regarded as a question at all, but rather as a symbol, a poetic emblem. Perhaps its real import is as a sign of that dispassionate awareness within each of us. Perhaps the question of the meaning of life is symbol of the presence of that implacable consciousness, forever watchful, forever uncommitted, a symbol of its infinite transcendence of the small orbit of our singular lives and of all we might hope to acheive in them.

Notes

1. William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" in *The Will to Believe* (New York:

Dover, 1956), pp. 32-62.

2. Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 141-150.

3. Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 11-23.

4. Berel Lang, "The Meanings of Lives," *The Western Humanities Review*, Vol. XXXV, No. 2 (Summer, 1981), pp. 97-107.

5. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) pp. 571-647.

6. *Ibid.* pp. 600-610.