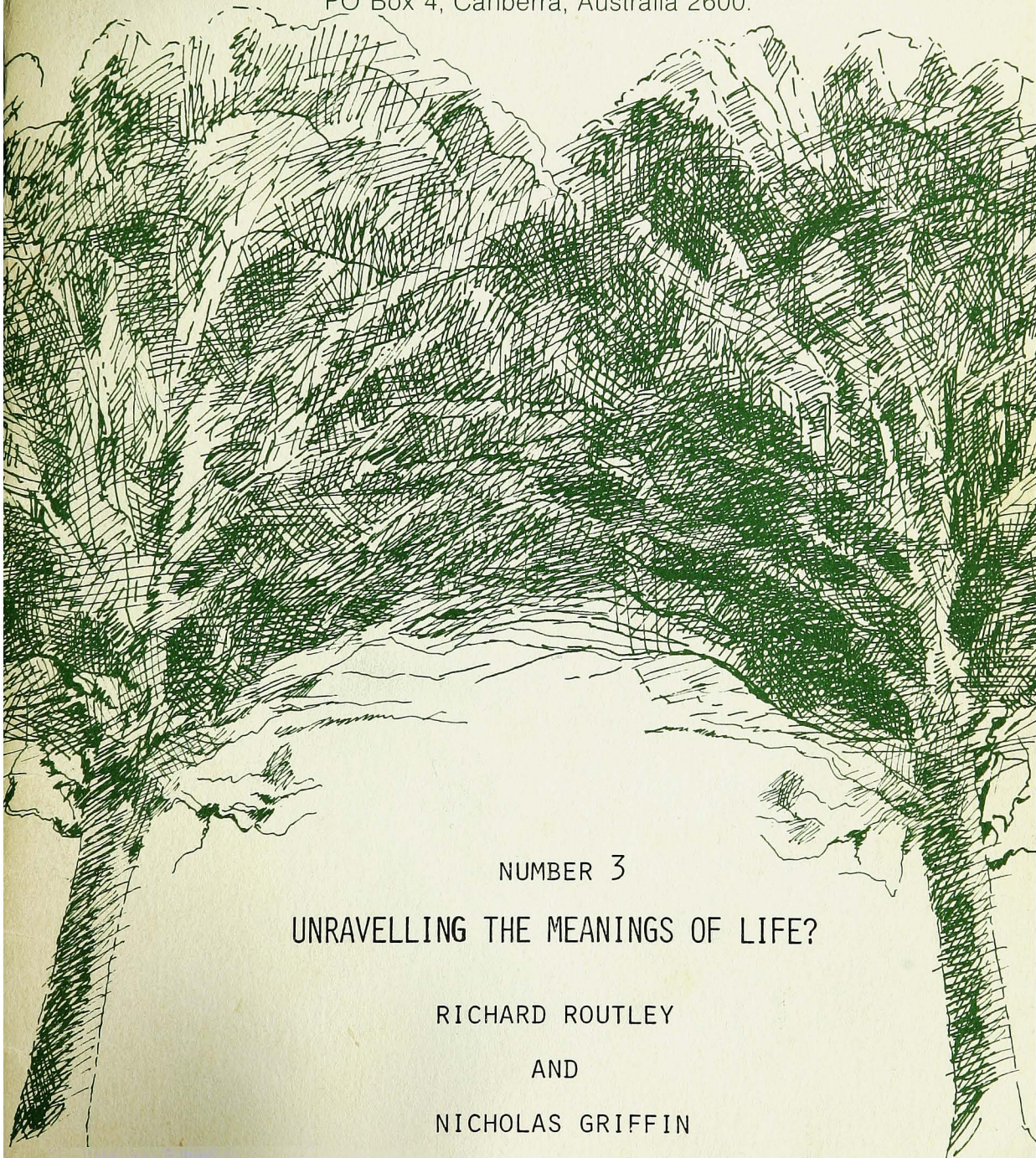




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UNRAVELLING THE MEANINGS OF LIFE?

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## UNRAVELLING THE MEANINGS OF LIFE?

### Abstract.

Despite the immensity of the literature on the topic and the variety of philosophers who have contributed to it, discussion of the meaning of life has been almost entirely restricted to a small corner of the theoretical space available for a solution. If we exclude those who dismiss the matter as meaningless because metaphysical, the vast majority of philosophers who have written on the topic have taken up positions that are human chauvinist, in that the only lives for which meaning is said to be possible are human lives; or monist, in the sense that at most one thing is held to constitute the meaning of all (human) lives; or subjectivist, in that lives are held to have that meaning that they seem to the liver to have; individualist, in that meanings of lives are taken to be independent of the social and environmental conditions under which livers find themselves and a matter just of their own qualities and efforts; indiscriminate, in the sense that all (human) lives are claimed to be meaningful to the same degree: or not infrequently all five. (Indiscriminate positions come in three main forms: those which deny meaning to any life, those which ascribe meanings uniformly to all lives, and sometimes those which deny that any life has objective meaning but assert that all have subjective meaning.) These five positions are often not so much argued for as simply assumed. A further theme for which perfunctory argument is sometimes adduced is a reductionist theme in which values are reduced naturalistically to life itself or to the psychological states of the liver. The reductionist theme exacerbates the problem to insolubility: for if values are so reduced there remains no basis for the evaluation of lives and psychological states themselves.

Once these six views, in their various combinations and varieties, are criticized and rejected, as they are in the present work, the way is open to a more satisfactory solution to the problem. On the view presented in the final section the meaning of a life is a function of the life's meaningful periods (called notabilia), periods when the creature is engaged in activities which, in themselves or on account of their end-product, are of positive or negative value. The value of a life is also a function of the life's notabilia; but the two differ in that the function which gives the meaning is a modulated sum (negative notabilia being positively assessed), whereas that which gives the value is a direct sum (in which negative notabilia can cancel out positive). The resulting position preserves the important linkage between meaning and value, since all overall valuable lives are assessed as meaningful (whether or not they appear that way to the liver), though some meaningful lives may not be valuable. The resulting theory, based on a non-reductionist and non-chauvinist view of values, is pluralist, discriminating and anti-subjectivist. It also offers some insight into other traditional problems in ethics.





## UNRAVELLING THE MEANINGS OF LIFE?

1. Untangling the problems, and setting aside the matter of life and meaning and their semantics, nihilisms, value subjectivisms and ultimate explanation puzzles. The problem of the meaning of life is not a problem as to the semantics of life, as to what is meant by 'life' (difficult problem though this is). Nor is much light cast on the problem by a detour into modern semantical theory of one brand or another, into the theory of (symbol and sentence) meaning - despite recent hopes for the success of a (modified) Davidsonian semantical program in ethics, and in particular as regards the meaning-of-life problem.<sup>1</sup>

For 'meaning' in the frame of the problem has the meaning of (worthwhile) point or, slightly differently, purpose, object, or even goal (though the latter may misleadingly suggest that a life must culminate in something in order to have point): not 'meaning' in the meaning which is supposed to cash out in terms of truth or assertibility conditions. Similarly, for a life to be meaningful, is for it to have point, good or evil, and not be entirely pointless: not for it to be assignable some semantics. But untangling the meanings of 'point', and of its relatives such as 'purpose', like distinguishing point from worthwhile point, definitely falls within the framework of "the problem". In the process it will become clear also that there is little reason to presume that there is only one point that all lives which have point must have, or even that each life can have no more than one point. In fact the standard description, 'the meaning of life', is seriously misleading. For, as we shall argue, there is no one thing, object or activity that answers to the description: rather many help to (it is partly in this way that nihilism is avoided).<sup>2</sup>

To get to grips with the much advertised but poorly delineated problem of "the meaning of life" it is also important to separate two other classes of issues that are often conflated with the problem, nihilist worries and ultimate explanation puzzles. It is not that these issues are in no way connected with the meaning problem. Certain nihilisms, according to which there is nothing of value, positive or negative, imply that life has no meaning, given that meanings for lives imply things of positive or negative value. So, in a perverse way, nihilism solves the problem (negatively), with the answer to 'What is...?'. 'Nothing.' Still nihilism is a separate issue: for the meaning problem remains after nihilism is duly refuted.<sup>3</sup> The reason is that it has somehow to be explained which (worthwhile) things give life point - or at least give the lives that have point the sort of point that they have.

More readily separable are puzzles as to ultimate explanation, commonly presented in such questions 'Why does anything (at all) exist?' and emphasized by the usually-complained-about eventual giving out of answers to repeated 'Why?' questions.<sup>4</sup> For the assignment of meaning or meanings to life is independent of whether "ultimate" explanations can in principle be obtained. On the one hand, meanings may be assigned, and commonly are, when no ultimate explanation is forthcoming; on the other, ultimate explanations may be proffered in purely extensional settings from which meanings (as intensional items) have been eliminated.<sup>5</sup>

Most important, then, answers to questions as to the meaning(s) of life do not require what has often been thought necessary - an all-embracing cosmology or religion which affords deep explanations. However, less devious answers do require rejection of positions which imply a complete elimination of meanings, purposes and intentions from the world (of objects); that is, they require, it will emerge, a rejection of thorough-going empiricism and materialism,<sup>6</sup> and more generally of positions which imply complete extensional (or referential) reduction. The genesis of the largely modern problem of the point of life lies in part, it will be argued, in such reductionistic positions. (It also lies in part in altered socio-environmental circumstances, as will be seen.)

A further way in which the problem is often exacerbated stems from the use of evaluative terms in purely subjective senses. Thus, for example, 'worthwhile' is taken to mean 'subjectively worthwhile' or 'worthwhile to the liver (to me)'. Quite apart from the usual alliance of these usages with theories which reduce values to psychological states, restricting value terminology to purely subjective uses adds further problems. For what seems worthwhile is not stable across individuals, nor even with the same individual across times. Accordingly it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to specify even a broad range of items to which sufficiently many creatures might agree in assigning a high value so that specification of such a range could be held to be an answer to the questions 'What makes life meaningful?' or 'What constitutes a worthwhile life?' Pleasure, happiness or satisfaction are almost the only contenders which even look plausible, but the well-known objections to utilitarian theories of motivation can be easily redeployed against such accounts. If evaluative terminology is used subjectively then questions as to the worthwhileness of a life become questions of individual psychology (answerable, if at all, by introspection) and thus lose most of their force and interest.

2. The theory dependence of the problem. The problem is highly theory sensitive. Change the theory (paradigm, ideology) - most obviously by supplying a different metaphysical, religious, or cultural setting (e.g. that of a primitive, traditional or religious society) - and the problem recedes or vanishes.

It is virtually a platitude ... that the anxieties and despair of the



present age can be traced back to the crumbling of religious institutions, and religious faith following the Enlightenment...<sup>7</sup>

And these anxieties as to the point of life do not surface in the traditional societies that remain. Unlike religious societies the point of a life in such societies is often not the attainment of salvation, but rather the continuance of the tradition. Of course in traditional, as in religious societies, a person's roles, purposes, and the reasons why he or she does the things done are in considerable measure determined for him or her through the cosmological theory. Furthermore, actions are imbued with meaning (ritual significance) through that theory. An action reflects, or is identified with, its mystic archetype, enacted in illo tempore; and so it acquires "meaning" reaching far beyond itself.

Such comfortable ways of injecting meaning into life are no longer easily acceptable.<sup>8</sup> In these enlightened days we know that such cosmologies are unscientific, and do not stand up to empirical testing. Modern cosmologies, by contrast, characteristically assign no such cosmic meaning to human actions.<sup>9</sup> So the problem cannot be transformed away by change of theory back to an alternative cosmology which ascribes significance to certain (human) actions. So much can be more or less granted - with one important qualification. A modern cosmology does not have to be coupled with, and does not entail, a reductionist theory of value or meaning, such as naturalism or materialism or subjectivism. Yet it is precisely such reductionisms, characteristic of positivisms and carried over into modern analytical and linguistic philosophy, that at the very least aggravate the meaning problem and enable its (sharper) modern formulations. That much is evident from the way the problem is characteristically set up. Recent presentations of the problem regularly appeal to - one might be excused for gaining the impression they have to appeal to - a (defective) mechanistic picture of the world. Such is the way, for instance, that Bach sets up the problem:<sup>10</sup> 'there is little [indeed, so it soon appears, no] comfort in a world constituted by the mindless, inexorable workings of matter and nature' (Bp.5). For Russell, also, the problem arose from the fact that the world, including human history, was 'but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms.'<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Taylor backs up his subjectivist case at a crucial point with the claim that 'this life of the world presents itself to our eyes as a vast machine ...' (Tp.262); and Schopenhauer's argument depends on a mechanistic picture to get going:

[Men] are like clockwork that is wound up, and goes without knowing why. Every time a man is begotten and born the clock of human life is wound up anew, to repeat once more the same old tune that has already been played innumerable times, movement by movement and measure by measure, with insignificant variations.<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, Solomon relies upon the theme that 'in a materialist world there are no



meanings' (Sp.30).

It is however unnecessary to appeal to a mechanistic picture to produce (what is usually taken to be) the problem. Mechanistic reduction is only an excellent way of generating the problem, since it removes (for example, by reducing to psychological states) the values in terms of which the problem could be solved or avoided; that is, mechanistic reduction is sufficient, though not necessary, for the problem. The more general source of the problem lies in the reduction of value itself, whether to natural features of the world, as in naturalism, or to psychological states (typically of humans) as in versions of "nonscognitivism". An immediate consequence of the latter reduction is the thesis that the value of life, such as it is, is in us (as psychological states are), so that life can have no nonsubjective value, no value independent, not just of our lives, but of our mental states. And since it is then difficult to explain what value these mental states which "explain" value have, it is difficult to explain what value, if any, life has.<sup>13</sup>

A similar problem-generating reduction is an important and integral part of existentialism as well. Thus Sartre:

As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation.... I do not have nor can I have recourse to any value against the fact that it is I who sustain values in being.<sup>14</sup>

The salient difference in approach is that existentialists are more candid about the effects of the reduction thesis on value itself. An existentialist, one might say, is only a positivist in despair.<sup>15</sup>

All this suggests that it is not necessary to have - discover or invent - a religious, mythological or other like "unscientific" backdrop, which somehow imbues things with meaning, in order to alleviate or remove the problem. It is enough, to substantially reduce (if not to solve) the problem, to dispel the forces of reductionism, and to admit irreducible values. In any case, so long as the reduction of values thesis is retained, the addition of such backdrops is insufficient to imbue things with meaning. For just as questions about the value of everyday objects and activities can be raised, so too can questions about the value of their religious or mythical correlates - and these cannot be answered unless the reduction of values thesis is rejected. For unless values are retained somewhere they cannot be introduced through the addition of religious or mythological doctrines. Nor is it hard to see that other ideals can replace religious ideals and give lives point - as such secular (but unsatisfactory) ideals as that of

progress (as an overall goal), or accumulation of material wealth, seemed, for a time, to be able to do.

But only for a time. The question of meaning is especially a contemporary (not merely modern) problem and now considered so difficult not only because 'we are [now] much more resistant... [to] all attempts to locate meaning...in mystical and metaphysical conceptions' and because reductionism persists, but because of the abandonment of the idea of the 'importance of emancipation or progress (as a correct conception of spiritual advance)' (Wp.335), because more generally of the breakdown of modern secular ideals. In Solomon's view 'The Absurd was born, not of loss of religion, but of gain in humanism' as a result of 'extravagant ... faith in human justice and ... potentialities' (Sp.35). The extraordinary burgeoning of interest in (even obsession with) the problem during the nineteenth century was part and parcel of the (Victorian) crisis of faith - itself engendered partly by the rise of scientific materialism and partly by deteriorating social conditions.

It is not just that the progress and perfectability models emerging from the m Enlightenment have ceased to be persuasive;<sup>16</sup> just as important they have now been seen to fail in crucial respects. The progress model, for example, already severely damaged by the deteriorating living standards in much of the Third World, has been further eroded by the decline of rising expectations even in USA where many parents no longer expect that their children will do better than they did.

The harder one worked or saved the less security one seemed to have. The younger generation...began to experience the rags-to-riches, Horatio Alger myth, from upside down. They were becoming the first generation in American history facing the possibility of doing less well than their parents.<sup>17</sup>

The models have also been experientially undercut by the radical unsatisfactoriness of main features of the modern industrial lifestyle: unsatisfactoriness, and often pointlessness, in both work and leisure. Both are frequently remarked, are quite genuine enough and need little emphasis. (Indeed farmyard animals often lead superior lives to suburban humans.) Work is frequently repetitive, monotonous, and seems (like Sisyphus's activity) to be going nowhere, especially assembly line and absolutely routine work. Hence, for example, '...the meaninglessness, the monotony, which so many Americans feel in their work today'.<sup>18</sup> Work is often bad, 'a Monday through Friday sort of dying...', yet unemployment is considered worse.<sup>19</sup> And leisure is mostly given over to passive spectatorship, whether on television or in the stadium, lecture theatre or concert hall. 'The spectacle is the dominant model of social life', 'modern society is fundamentally...a



society of spectacle' (J. Woodmansee in WGS, setting down the basic observation of the international situationalists). These activities are often viewed as just as meaningless as the work they substitute for or complement.

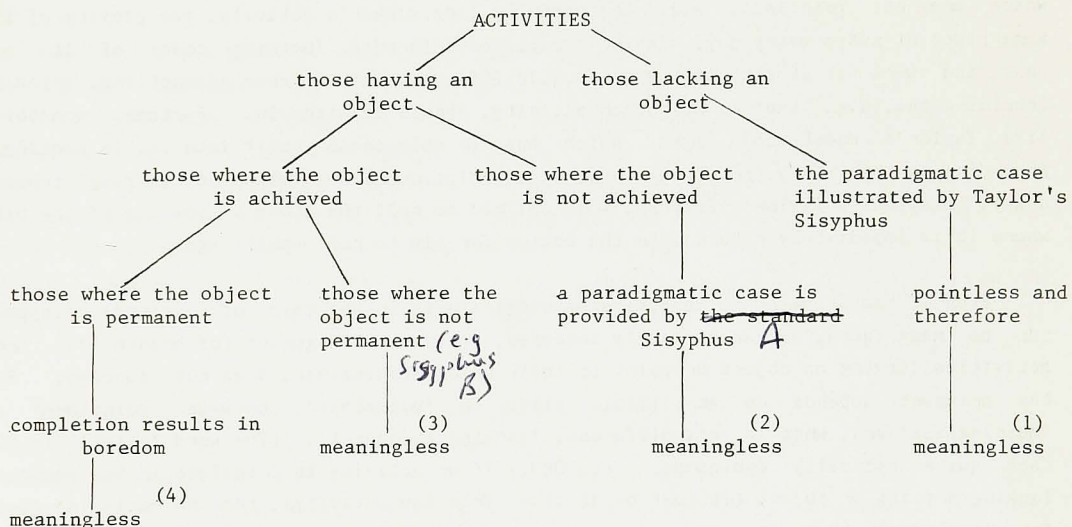
This crucial dimension of social criticism is left out of most philosophical discussions of the meaning of life, which tend (not untypically) to support the status quo, by attributing point to every (human) life or to none. This is a further aspect of the denial of the social and reduction of social life forms to individual life forms (a consequence of the individual reductionism built into western analytical thought, and reflected in capitalist society).<sup>20</sup> What is required instead is a socially more discriminating approach, which allows a point to some lives but not to others, many of which have had their point, or what point they might have had, attenuated or even destroyed by socio-economic arrangements. Even those who recognize that some lives have more point than others often fail to recognize the primarily social nature of this fact. Thus Camus who, in typical subjectivist fashion, uses 'quantity of experience' as his yardstick goes on, in typical individualist fashion, to claim that 'the mistake is thinking that...quantity of experiences depends on the circumstances of our life when it depends solely on us.'<sup>21</sup>

The leading philosophical discussions of the question of meaning in life are conservative, anthropocentric, individual reductionistic, and evade issues of social responsibility. There are two main approaches to the question, that of the European movement (predominantly French) which, on the basis of nihilistic arguments, allows meaning to no lives, and the recent Anglo-American approach, in part a reaction to this, which attributes meaning to every human life.<sup>22</sup> In neither case need anything be done about social or environmental conditions to improve meaningfulness: (human) lives have all the point they can, or need, have. There is, as well, an attempt to amalgamate these approaches, assigning objective meaning to no human lives, but subjective point to every one. All these approaches will be rejected.

3. The two pictures, the route to the theme that life is objectively meaningless, and the argument from permanence. That life is objectively meaningless has been argued by a string of philosophers, perhaps most persuasively by Taylor.<sup>23</sup> However, 'objective' meaningfulness is contrasted with subjective point: 'an existence that is objectively meaningless ... can nevertheless acquire a meaning for him whose existence it is' (Tp.260). And the solution to the problem of the meaning of life is, if Taylor is right, that 'the meaning of life is from within us; not bestowed from without' (Tp.268; cf. also KBp.20). It is important in defending, and in reaching, a more objective account of the meaning of life to see in detail why Taylor's arguments do not sustain his conclusion<sup>25</sup>



The detailed structure of Taylor's argument to objective meaninglessness is encapsulated in the following diagram:-



Taylor's main argument depends, rather like that of Camus before him, upon elaborating a (nonstandard) version of the myth of Sisyphus, (branch (1) of the argument tree) and applying it to all life. Part of the argument is that just as the labours of Sisyphus have no objective point, so, assimilating the cases, the lives and labours of living creatures have no objective point.<sup>26</sup> A further main part of the argument is that much as the life of Sisyphus can be given an inward (or subjective) point, so the lives of humans and other creatures have such an inward point. Neither the arguments concerning Sisyphus nor, more important, the comparisons and assimilations succeed.

Taylor claims to have 'cited' the myth of Sisyphus 'only for the one element it does unmistakably contain, namely, that of a repetitious cyclic activity that never comes to anything' (Tp.257). This is not so; he also needs the picture of the activity as pointless. But in one (the?) standard version of the myth, where Sisyphus is endeavouring to roll the stone to the top of the hill, the activity does have a point, though its achievement is always frustrated (branch (2)). There are many examples of repetitious cyclic activity that (at least in a straightforward sense) never come to anything, but which are not pointless, e.g. the assembly line worker's activity, the playing of the same piece of music every day. Taylor's repeated inference, 'Nothing comes of it, and (so) the work is simply pointless' (e.g.Tp.268), involves further assumptions, which in crucial cases, e.g. that of all human activity, should be withheld. Further, something like Taylor's nonstandard myth, which has pointlessness built into it, is required. According to this story (not to be found in any dictionaries of mythology we have tracked down), Sisyphus - Taylor's Sisyphus - is obliged to roll the stone to the top of the hill where it is immediately returned to the bottom for him to roll uphill again.

Even if the argument to objective meaninglessness in the case of Taylor's Sisyphus can be made good, as can be freely conceded, the general argument (of branch (1)), from activities lacking an object or point to their being meaningless, does not succeed. For the argument depends on an illicit slide on 'pointless', between 'pointless' as 'meaningless' and, what is very different, 'lacking an object'. (The word 'point' is in fact quite radically ambiguous: see OED.) If an activity is pointless in the sense of lacking a point or object (it must be distinct from the activity), then no basis is given for concluding that it is meaningless, i.e. in this sense of 'pointless', pointless therefore meaningless is an invalid argument. The activity may be meaningful because valuable in itself. Possible examples include performances of works of art, e.g. musical performances or 'happenings', and many social and personal activities, e.g. making love or meeting friends. If however the activity is pointless in being meaningless, then the ground for putting the activity in the class of things that lack an object is removed.

Taylor distinguishes two ways (subsequently referred to as 'two pictures') of introducing "point" into Sisyphus's activity 'in which the image of meaninglessness can be altered' (Tp.259):-

p1. The monument, or objective, picture. The activity is changed so that it does have a point (in the ordinary sense) and an end or objective, e.g. Sisyphus assembles the stones rolled up the hill into a temple or other monument.

p2. The obsession, or subjective, picture. The stone rolling activity is not reoriented, but an impulse, or obsession, to be rolling stones is implanted in Sisyphus, e.g. by injecting a substance into his bloodstream or by "rewiring" him. Taylor contends that (a) 'the picture with which we began [of his Sisyphus] has not really been changed in the

least by adding this supposition' (Tp.260), but nonetheless (b) 'his life is now filled with mission and meaning' (Tp.259). If (a) is true then (b) is not since the initial picture was that not just of repetitive but meaningless activity. The activity remains (objectively) meaningless despite the magic substance or the obsession, even if this is not how it appears (subjectively) to the stoneroller. These points are unaffected by the fact that (a) is not entirely true; for the intensional picture has changed. Sisyphus now sees the activity as desirable, what he would even choose to do.

'Which of these pictures does life in fact resemble?' Taylor asks. He is intent upon removing as inadequate the first picture, p1, both in the case of Sisyphus and more generally. His method of disposing of p1 relies upon the old trick of redefinition, of redefining 'real point' or 'real significance' in terms, at least as regards buildings, of 'permanence', with 'permanence' redefined as 'enduring forever.' Hence the (otherwise amazing) claim that for the 'creation of a temple to make any difference, it had to be a temple that would at least endure, adding beauty to the world for the remainder of time' (Tp.213, rearranged). Then follows the more general presentation of all human and creature achievement as 'bubbles', because merely delivering 'transitory' goods (branch (3)).

Even without the redefinition of 'permanence' such claims remain shocking, since it would normally be considered that some items may be of genuine and even considerable value although they might last for only a year or two. The temporary regression of progressive diseases is a case in point. And treatments which delay the onset of blindness, e.g., would normally (and quite properly) be regarded as achieving results of real, though temporary, value. There is no requirement on real value or significance (in the more ordinary sense) of permanence or even endurance. It is entirely false that for picture p1 of Sisyphus to succeed, the temple must endure for ever. If Sisyphus builds a beautiful temple, he has achieved something of (objective) value, even if the temple falls down after some centuries. The stone house one of us has helped build may well last for several hundred years; it will certainly not last forever, but its value is not thereby diminished to zero, or very seriously affected. Secondly, some achievements, e.g. the design of a theory, or proof of a theorem, do have a lasting value, since theories and theorems, unlike buildings and paintings, are not subject to the "ravages" of time. Thirdly, outcomes of positive value may be achieved by the destruction of harmful items which reduce overall value, for example, evil social systems, environmental blights, and diseases like smallpox. Such outcomes may be permanent even in Taylor's sense. Finally, in taking over pictures p1 and p2 to the more general life situation, without due modification, Taylor has presented us with a false choice. There are options not properly allowed for in Taylor's presentation. As Wiggins remarks, it is doubtful that the effects Taylor aims for



could have been contrived if the gradual accumulation of scientific understanding or the multiplication (in a manner accessible to the living) of the sublime utterances of literature or music had been brought into the argument (Wp.337).

Nor are the options exclusive. A building may be built both because of the satisfaction it gives the builder and the value of the product: monuments are not merely 'hostages for the objects of psychological states' (cf.Wp.375). An 'adequate description' of the meaning of life - as of valuable experiences as like those of wilderness - 'must do more than treat our appetitive tastes in would-be isolation from their relations to the things they are directed at' (Wp.395).

The unrealistic and unnecessary requirement of permanence has accentuated the problem of the meaning of life in new ways with the decline of the Christian worldview. The Christian doctrine of an after-life did, in fact, offer one form of permanence which meets even Taylor's standards. Indeed, the permanence, not of objects created during one's life, but of life itself came, mistakenly, to be seen as a necessary condition for life's having a meaning (see KBp.24 for more on this theme). Once the after-life doctrine ceased to be tenable the inevitability of death came to be seen as the main cause of the meaninglessness of life. Thus Tolstoy:

Illness and death would come ..., if not today, then tomorrow, to those whom I loved, to myself, and nothing would remain but stench and worms. All my acts, whatever I did, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself be nowhere.<sup>27</sup>

So, too, Camus:<sup>28</sup> '[M]y way of acting as if everything has a meaning ... is given the lie in vertiginous fashion by the absurdity of a possible death', and Heidegger<sup>29</sup>, and Sartre: 'Thus death is ... that which on principle removes all meaning from life'.<sup>30</sup> Ironically enough, under these specifically post-Christian circumstances, death came to be seen (e.g. by Camus, and also Tolstoy, op. cit., pp.65, 66) as a tempting escape from a life made absurd by death in Bismarck's famous phrase: 'committing suicide for fear of death'. or pretty nearly.

For present purposes, however, the inevitability of (real) death argument is merely one form of the "need-for-permanence" diversion, and not an especially interesting one. Nor, even within the framework of the permanence requirement, does it ensure the meaninglessness of life, since lives might be meaningful even given the permanence requirement if they result in the production of objects of permanent value. Real death becomes decisive only if the permanence requirement is adopted together with either a

psychological reduction view of values, or the view that the purpose of life is life itself. If values are reduced to psychological states which are terminated with death then the world contains nothing of permanent value and thus, on the permanence assumption, is meaningless. And if meaning requires permanence then real death ensures that life itself cannot provide what is required. All three assumptions are rejected here, however; with the result that the fact of death has a negligible impact on the problem of the meaning of life.

4. Taylor's further case against the objective picture. Taylor's more general argument against p1 (Tp.261ff.) is that 'all living things present essentially the same spectacle' as the glowworm, the cicada, the migrating bird, 'of pointless activity.'

And we are part of that life ... None of the differences really cancels the meaninglessness that we found in Sisyphus, and that we find all around, wherever anything lives (Tp.262, rearranged). [Having cancelled the objective point of any life, Taylor will proceed to give subjective point back to every life.]

But the temple building Sisyphus did not present the spectacle of pointless activity. Do other creatures? Do humans? Always?

Taylor's result is obtained by use of very truncated descriptions of the life cycles of the creatures, misleading descriptions which remove requisite social, ecological and intensional settings. Consider the cicada which is simply said to 'emerge for a brief flight, lay its eggs, and die' (Tp.311).<sup>31</sup> But in its brief life a cicada usually does much more than this misleading description conveys. It makes many flights, engages in much calling and singing, often in combination with other cicadas, which emerge about the same time, mates, etc. Nor should the cicada's activities be seen in isolation from those of neighbouring birds, for whom they provide a food festival. More generally, the truncated descriptions neglect the place of the cicada in the larger ecological network. And they also ignore the part that cicadas can play in aesthetic appreciation of the seasons, analogous to the more widely recognised role played by the cuckoo.

Again it is false that migrating birds migrate 'only to ensure that others may follow' the same routes. Birds migrate for other reasons also; e.g. in order to enjoy a sustainable food supply. There is no mention of features of birds' rich social lives, of their nest building, etc. Were there, Taylor would not be able to conclude quite so quickly that 'there is no point at all' in (migrating) birds' lives, that they culminate in nothing and accomplish nothing, repeating themselves through millions of years (Tp.262). The point of birds' lives may be seen in their day-to-day doings, especially in

the breeding season, in their social and cultural activity, in the continuing of lives and distinctive lifestyles (rather as with many tribal peoples). This is not to endorse, but to repudiate, Taylor's claim - seemingly contradicting his assertion that 'there is no point to it at all' - that 'the point of any living thing's life is, evidently, nothing but life itself' (Tp.262). For then divergence of lifestyles of living creatures would simply not affect the point of their respective lives. But, as will further emerge, it does: and some lives have more point than others. Again it is simply untrue that birds accomplish nothing. Some of them, not all, build nests (quite an accomplishment often), raise young, and so on. Nor does the cycle of lives of a species endlessly repeat itself; that is to ignore evolution, the rise, fall and changes in species, etc. Thereby something more sweeping is accomplished, the survival or perhaps enhancement of a species, and also of dependent species, and so perhaps the enrichment of the world through the continued presence of the creatures without whom it would be a vastly poorer place.

Much of what Taylor has to say about the objective pointlessness of the lives of 'we' humans is disputable for the same sorts of reasons. Thus, in particular, the alleged resemblance to Sisyphus:

We toil after goals, most of them - indeed every single one of them - of transitory significance and, having gained one of them, we immediately set forth for the next, as if that one had never been (Tp.262; similarly p.267 bottom).

Again this is not true to experience. Some people do rest, perhaps for a very long time (though the work ethic discourages this), after a major goal has been achieved, and much they do subsequently is influenced by that achievement. They are not to be "condemned" for that. Nor are all such achievements transitory, something that is far from ephemeral may be done or achieved: the low redefinition of 'transitory' deployed, which makes all goals of 'transitory' significance ('bubbles') corresponds to the high redefinition of 'permanent' observed earlier.

So it is also with Taylor's other attempts to remove picture p1 and establish objective pointlessness in the human case. They depend on the following assumptions, all disputable: That the production of further humans, a family, a culture - to which much human effort is bent - is never very worthwhile, because 'each man's life (just) resembles one of Sisyphus's climbs to the summit' (Tp.263). The resemblance breaks down because the human efforts sometimes do have worthwhile results but Sisyphus's do not. It is simply false, in the ordinary as distinct from redefined senses, that no production, such as a temple or a culture or a nation, could be suitably worthwhile, 'could make any difference', unless it was permanent, 'would at least endure - for the remainder of time'.



Such quite excessive requirements on what is worthwhile which are however satisfied in a sort of way by intellectual productions such as theories - need not and should not be accepted. Taylor suggests that if a temple has been built but subsequently falls into ruin, a great civilization founded which eventually declines, then in each case it has been for nothing' (branch (3)). Not so. The only answer he finds to the question 'what for?' asked regarding such a production, the answer he thinks is clear, is that so just that sort of thing 'may go on forever'. What is clear is that, as we have seen, that answer is defective, that a production may be valuable in or for itself whatever its later status.

Taylor wants to deny that even (what he thinks impossible) the production of something of lasting value can give life (an objective) point (branch (4)). He has Sisyphus build a beautiful enduring temple and then rest and enjoy the result (Tp.265; the move is repeated in part for humans, pp.267-9). What emerges, Taylor claims, is 'a picture of infinite boredom.' But this hypothesis is simply imported without argument. Nor is it true: completion does not induce boredom invariably, especially in scientific and artistic cases. Similarly his claim, upon which his argument and his progression to picture p2 depends, that 'what is really worthwhile seems to have slipped away entirely', lacks further substantiation, and certainly appears to be false, since the temple remains.

Taylor's argument for the exclusion of picture p1 and adoption of p2 in its stead accordingly fails. Although picture p2 is inadequate, and not just (as we shall see) because picture p1 must be retained, elements of picture p2 are part of the larger picture. Consider the builders of a bygone civilization who somehow return to see 'the trivial remnants of what they had once accomplished with much effort.' Taylor suggests that there was no objective point to what they did: 'it was just the building, and not what was finally built that gave their life meaning' (Tp.266). But (at least in many cases), it was both, the activity and its fruits, and the second cannot be reduced to the first (or to "inward" things). The two may be interdependent, as in Wiggins' example of a man who helps his neighbour dig a ditch (Wp.374). Here, the end is clearly an important part of making the whole activity meaningful, the activity would be neither undertaken nor worthwhile if its end were incapable of attainment. But the end is not the whole story. Part of the value of the activity comes from the fact that the man enjoys working with his neighbour. Both the product and the process of its production are important: the man would not pay a contractor to come and dig his neighbour's ditch for him, nor would he join his neighbour in the process of digging holes in the backyard and filling them up again simply in order to enjoy the pleasure of wielding a shovel alongside him. Activities that do not culminate may have a point, in the doing; those that culminate may have a point both in the doing and in the culmination, both in the doing and in what is done or achieved.

It is because crucial elements of picture p1 are omitted that Taylor's final theme concerning glowworms, birds and men<sup>32</sup> that 'their endless activity, which gets nowhere, is just what it is their will to pursue. This is its whole justification and meaning' (Tp.267) should be rejected as a travesty. So should its corollary concerning all living creatures: 'the point of his living is simply to be living, in the manner it is his nature to be living' (Tp.267), or more briefly, since it is questionable how many humans live in the manner it is their nature to be living, 'the point of any living thing's life is nothing but life itself' (Tp.262).<sup>33</sup>

This assigns every living creature's life a uniform and trivial point, the same point (life) irrespective of how the life is lived, what experiences had, what objects produced<sup>34</sup> No life has any more, or less, point than any other no matter how well or badly it is lived. This severs point from its usual moorings, e.g. with importance, value, etc. For surely (without any damaging elitism) some lives are more important than others, some are worthwhile, while others have little or no merit, or may be downright evil, and so on. Moreover, Taylor's uniformity view distorts

how it feels for most people from the inside ... in general the larger the obstacles which nature or other men put in our way, the more hopeless the prospect, the less the point most of us will feel anything has ... point is not independent of outcome (Wp.340).

A related, and damaging, consequence of Taylor's very limited reassurances is that even if one's life is unsatisfactory and rather pointless one need, and can, do nothing about it. It has all the point it can have, and as much as richer and more satisfactory lives.

There is, however, on Taylor's account, something that one can do - one can get oneself brainwashed. For in describing the case in which the gods rewire Sisyphus in order to 'make him want precisely what they inflict on him' Taylor says that '[h]owever it may appear to us, Sisyphus' ... life is now filled with mission and meaning' (Tp.259). This claim is inconsistent with the uniformity view without strong, false assumptions. For if the point of a creature's life is 'nothing but' life itself, then every creature's life at least has this point, however minimal it may be. On the desire view, however, it would seem that the life of the rewired Sisyphus has a point which that of the original Sisyphus did not. In fact, the desire view can only be made compatible with the uniformity view on the assumption that the sole desire of all living creatures is for life itself; an assumption which is plainly false and which Taylor, by his example, rejects. In any case, the desire view is hardly a plausible candidate to explain how some lives have more point than others, for it takes no account of how the desires were come by: whether by indoctrination, brainwashing, hypnosis, lobotomy or brain-damage. The



assumption underlying the desire view is that the person whose desires have been moulded to fit the circumstances in which he finds himself always has a more meaningful life than the person who hasn't - a highly counter-intuitive view. Indeed, as the circumstances involved become more severe, we seem to approach more closely paradigms of lives rendered meaningless by external intervention - exactly the reverse of Taylor's desire view, in which the severity of intervention renders the conformity of desire to life-situation more secure.

It is hardly necessary to expand upon the highly conservative, even totalitarian, nature of the desire view, nor on the way in which it totally ignores the role of social and environmental factors in determining whether life is meaningful or not. The incompatibility between Taylor's uniformity view and his desire view may be avoided if we take the uniformity view to be about the objective meaning of life (such as it is, on that view) and the desire view to be about its subjective meaning, namely, the meaning it appears to the liver to have. But this reconciliation is blocked by Taylor himself, who denies that life has objective meaning, and seeks throughout a purely subjective, 'internal' account. Moreover, what the examples surely show is that a person's subjective feeling or conviction about the meaningfulness of his or her life is no more an infallible guide (though it may, of course, be an indication) to its actual meaningfulness, than their subjective feelings of physical well-being are an infallible guide to their state of health.

5. Another recent therapeutic attempt to eliminate the problem, and the galactic dwarfing argument. Another popular recent approach to the meaning problem is represented in Bach's work. In fact, however, Bach offers an even more negative reassurance than Taylor, along still more ramshackle lines. Concerning what he calls the 'roadblock' of 'the demand for meaning' he writes, by way of summary:

There is no way to make the moments of life add up to something, but there is no real need to. For it is at particular moments when this seeming need is felt. There is no possibility of a final endless moment when everything comes together and stops there. Ironically, seeking the meaning of life prevents a person from finding what ends the quest. What ends it is not an answer but the elimination of the question. That happens when you realize that what you're looking for is nowhere to be found - it's here already (Bp.85).

Bach is not offering a superficial elimination of the question, as meaningless because a metaphysical question, in the fashion of the logical positivists. Certainly the question is meaningful, and invites rival answers. Bach's "elimination" derives from two sources,



from an anti-theoretical (and anti-philosophical) theme, not uncommon among philosophers, and from a rather pure experiential picture of life in which only the present really counts or matters. The anti-theoretical theme emerges, for instance, as follows:

Everytime I look at things from a global [more generally, theoretical] perspective, indeed whatever I am doing loses its meaning and fades into a wisp of triviality. But when I am involved in something, my outlook on life as a whole doesn't enter in...(Bp.7).

What one is (supposed to be) 'looking for', present involvement, which may be 'here already', disappears under reflection or analysis. And such reflection prevents one 'finding what ends' the search for meaning, namely such involvement, and so serves, like the philosophical demand for meaning, as a blockage to be eliminated (cf. S & D, p.2).

The contrast upon which Bach's case rests is however a false one. Nothing stops reflection, even from a global standpoint, on whatever one is involved in. Nor does such reflection, whether global or not, always trivialise things. Bach wants to claim that reflection has to be global, and so involves conditions that cannot be met, at least nontrivially: 'to have a view of life as a whole requires assuming a global perspective, [for which] there must be some principles of unity and permanence' (Bp.7). But, firstly, the global perspective does not require principles of permanence - as consideration of Taylor's argument has shown - or of unity - for things of value may not be unified. Secondly, the view does not have to be quite so sweeping: the point of an individual life or of a group of lives can be investigated. A global perspective is not compulsory. The usual context of the problem is more limited: it is set within the space-time scale of (human) life on earth. Moreover, even if adopted, the global context does not lead to triviality. Admittedly a favourite ploy in arguing for nihilism and against non-subjective accounts of the meaning of life is to dwarf all such contributions by setting them against a galactic backdrop. Undoubtedly the relative impermanence of human affairs when set against a geological or galactic time-scale is an important element in the feeling of futility some humans experience. But strictly the ploy should show little. The outline of a tree or an island, tends to vanish when looked at from afar: but that doesn't show they lack outlines. A common trick in dwarfing creatures' lives to insignificance by use of a galactic scale is to employ a measuring device which is not likewise scaled to insignificance. It is as if the same ruler were used to measure a tree's diameter as represented on a photo taken from afar as had been used to measure it close up: the measurements taken do not admit of direct comparison for different scales, or contexts, have been adopted. What should of course happen is that the measuring device is similarly dwarfed in the transformations, so that, for example, an insignificant amount as seen galactically - but nonetheless a discriminable amount - is likewise required to

yield a meaningful life.<sup>35</sup>

What prevents moments of life adding up to something worthwhile - what refutes the (nontrivial, interesting, but ultimately erroneous, as we shall see) Aristotelean thesis that 'a meaningful life is just a sum of activities worthwhile in themselves' (Wp.374) - is not any consequence of the anti-theoretical theme alone. Rather the argument here relies on the live-for-the-present-only-theme, a theme often thought, mistakenly, to derive from an existence-is-existence-now thesis (a thesis of EMJB). A moment is had, lived through, and vanishes, and what has vanished cannot be added up. None of this is entirely true: what no longer exists can still be assessed, and often assessed mathematically, e.g. added in calculations (see EMJB). The living-for-the-present theme has, like connected disengagement themes, deeper roots, namely a (too strong) freedom thesis - asserted by existentialists, especially by Sartre - that one is only free if one has no external constraints imposed upon one, in particular to be free one can have no serious future commitments nor labour under any past constraints. Naturally, it is assumed, one wants to be free (even in this bizarre sense), which requires cutting links with the past and future. Cutting these links at the same time however erodes virtually to zero the notion of involvement (likewise satisfaction), which is supposed to explain subjective point, for involvement requires relationships extending over time.

Meaning is not to be found only in the present moment, it does not contract into present involvement. Projects which extend into the future, and have roots in the past, and especially which have continuing social or communal connections, often help in giving a life meaning. Bach's advice, to live for the moment, while it is occasionally good advice, is often bad advice, and can lead to lives much of whose point has been removed. Similar objections apply against uniform solutions, to life's problems and meaning issues, through individual disengagement (including the quest for emptiness).

The anti-intellectual theme connects with one form of subjective reductionism, namely the view that life is meaningless only when the liver thinks that it is. Active involvement, which (allegedly) blocks out thought beyond what is necessary for the practical task at hand, inhibits, in particular, the thought that life is meaningless. Thus, given the appropriate form of subjective reductionism, life at moments of active involvement is meaningful. But active involvement rarely excludes thought for more than comparatively short periods. A life in which action excluded all thought except that necessary to bring about the action gives us, in fact, a picture of a life of meaningless activity, full of sound and fury, no doubt, but most likely signifying nothing, or at least, very little. Appeal to this form of subjective reductionism does the anti-intellectualist little good, for the required reduction thesis is false. Not only



does it exclude legitimate third-person evaluations of a life's meaning, but also retrospective first-person evaluations. One may look back on a period of involvement in one's own life and conclude, not that one's life is now meaningless, but that it was then. Indeed, the entire picture is faulty. One might as well take a puzzle to consist merely in the sense of puzzlement it gives one (subjective reductionist thesis) and conclude that the best way to resolve it is not to think about it (anti-intellectualist conclusion). The shoe won't pinch if you don't wear it, but that doesn't show that it's the right size.

6. The transcendence move: Nozick and the reborn American transcendentalists. A popular means of trying to resolve "the meaning of life" problem, which can avoid the shoals of subjectivism but often not of individualism,<sup>36</sup> is through some form of self-transcendence. It is argued that a life has whatever meaning it does have through union with, absorption in, or participation in, some larger whole; or, conversely, that lives are meaningless because of the impossibility of such union or participation. Of course, not every larger whole will do for this purpose; it is typically assumed that the whole itself have meaning and be capable of transmitting that meaning downwards. Such views are not uncommonly associated with religious or mystical positions, but secular versions are available, and Nozick's work (N, chapter 6) is a striking recent example of the latter.

The transcendentalist "solution" seems most effective when the problem has been set up - illegitimately, as we've seen - by means of the galactic dwarfing argument. If the problem arises simply because, when viewed against a cosmic background, all activity seems dwarfed to insignificance, then the problem is removed if it can be shown that the cosmic background (or some even broader, more all-embracing, background), so far from revealing the insignificance of life, actually imbues it with meaning. The transcendentalist approach operates by throwing the galactic dwarfing argument into reverse. Nozick sets up the problem primarily in terms of the dwarfing argument (Npp.597-8) which he generalizes into the principle that in general a wider standpoint always undercuts the meaning which a narrower standpoint might have, and 'it seems we always can conceive a context wide enough so that the thing appears insignificant' (Np.604). (It is significant that for Nozick the dwarfing background does not have to be actual, but merely conceivable, in order to remove meaning from narrower concerns.)

For Nozick, 'the problem of meaning is created by limits' (Np.595,p.599). 'The narrower the limits of a life, the less meaningful it is' (Np.594). Accordingly, meaning is to be found by transcending limits. Unfortunately, it is not entirely clear what is meant by limits, nor what it is to transcend them. There is a suggestion, in Nozick's discussion of personal relationships (Np.595), that to be limited in this case is to be insufficiently open or trusting with another person. But, in general, it seems that to be



limited is 'to exclude something' (Np.600), not, as might be expected, in the sense of being incapable of undertaking some task or of cutting off some possible further development, but simply to be less than all encompassing. One is limited 'by being just this, by being merely this' (Np.595). Hence the extraordinary claim that 'to see something's limits, to see it as that particular thing or enterprise, is to question its meaning' (Np.597). Now in ordinary usage, to see something as limited may indeed be to question its meaning (or importance or value) - though it is difficult to concede that this is always so - for to see it as limited is to see it as falling short of the grander or more important thing it might have been. But if 'to see it as limited' means, as it does with Nozick, to see it as itself and not another thing, then there seems no reason to suppose that this involves questioning its meaning (unless, perhaps, one had previously supposed it to be a much more significant thing than it actually was). One can see one's child or one's friend as the particular person they are without in any way coming to question their meaning, and in this case it seems unlikely that even seeing them as limited (in the usual sense) would lead one to question their meaning - unless their limitations were particularly catastrophic.

Yet Nozick plainly needs to use 'limit' in his special wide sense. For if to be limited was merely to fail to live up to one's promise, to fail to achieve all that one might achieve, to have deficiencies in skill, intellect, physical prowess, or whatever, then the way to overcome those limits, and thus to achieve a more meaningful life, would be through a successful attempt to do better. But this would remove the need for Nozick's romantic notion of transcendence to The Unlimited (one feels the need for nineteenth century capitals). It is only if the problem of meaning is generated for an item by the fact that that item is merely itself, one thing among many, and not all encompassing, that the heroic measures of Nozick's transcendentalism are required.

Even supposing that problems of meaning are produced by limits in Nozick's sense, there seems no good reason to suppose that meaning can only be achieved by transcending those limits. Given that life <sup>has limits</sup> ~~is limited~~, it may well be that the meaningful life consists in living well within them. Such views are not without advocates, e.g. Stephen's now trite comparison of life to a game, the good life being one which was played well without breaking the rules.<sup>37</sup> While such views take on a deplorably conservative aspect when the recognized limits include class and other socio-environmental constraints or are purely conventional (as is generally the case with games), if the limits in question are simply those of being a biological organism, doing the best one can within the limits is not an unsatisfactory procedure. While Nozick is not unaware of this damaging alternative to his position (Np.596), he does little directly to show that it is unviable.

If an item's limitations are simply the result of its being the item that it is, the prospect of any genuine transcendence of those limits, of becoming literally a different item, is removed. The best we can hope for is some sort of surrogate transcendence sufficient to invest our lives with meaning. This is to be achieved, according to Nozick, by linkages or connections to items outside the self (Np.595). Unfortunately, it is not clear what linkages or connections are admissible for this purpose. There is a repeated suggestion in Nozick that the more such linkages one's life has the more meaningful it becomes (Np.597). But clearly simple quantity of connections is not to the point: every physical item, for example, has spatio-temporal linkages to every other physical item; if sheer number of connections were all that is required for importance, all physical items would be very important indeed. Obviously, the nature of the connections must be more important than their sheer number. Nozick acknowledges that not 'all ways of connecting need be of interest' (Np.601), but offers little by way of an answer to the question 'which ways of connecting are of interest?' At one point, it seems that Nozick places special emphasis on thought, thereby assigning contemplation (and philosophy) a peak position in the range of human activities (Np.598). The main reason for this, however, seems to be the wide range of items with which one can be connected through thought: 'Via thought, we can be linked to anything and everything.' (Np.598). While thought is undoubtedly (in some cases) an important activity, the range of its objects has little to do with its importance. It is not at all clear that we would assign greater significance to the life of a dilettante who thought (ineffectively, let us suppose) about a wide range of items, than to that of a specialist who made profound and beautiful discoveries in a comparatively limited area. If we consider the case of a bed-ridden philosopher who spends his life reviewing a wide range of objects and activities, lamenting bitterly in each case his inability to understand, appreciate, experience or take part in them, the picture that emerges is not one of a very meaningful life.

Elsewhere Nozick suggests that 'taking account of' is the required form of linkage; again those activities which require one to take account of more items are treated as the more meaningful (Np.597). For this reason, it is claimed, the craftsman's work is more meaningful than that of the assembly line worker: the craftsman 'must take account of more than the assembly line worker' (Np.597). But, first, it is by no means clear that the craftsman must take account of more, for the assembly line worker must (in some sense) take account of maybe several hundred people who work in his factory and with whom he in one way or another comes into contact; and maybe of several hundred duplicated parts, each of which has to be fitted to the product being assembled, in a day's labour. Second, and more important, Nozick's account of why the craftsman's work is more meaningful (characteristically) leaves out entirely the social condition of exploitation and alienation (diagnosed by Marx and others) under which the industrial worker labours, and the routinized and repetitious nature of his work which typically leaves little room for



the exercise of his skills. Indeed if the number of things taken into account is all that matters, a life spent counting grains of sand on a beach would likely prove more meaningful than that of either the industrial worker or the craftsman.

In the end, Nozick's attempts to find meaning through linkages to large numbers of things get replaced by an attempt to secure meaning through linkage to one all-encompassing thing. As we have already noted, Nozick maintains that meaning can, in general, be undercut when attention is shifted from a narrower to a wider context, and that to effect this shift does not require an actual wider context, but merely a conceivable one. Thus the meaning of the entire universe will be undercut if a broader framework is conceived, a framework which includes unrealized possibilities. This process of undercutting can be brought to a stop only by the supposition of some framework which cannot itself be undercut. This framework (for which Nozick adopts the Hebrew term 'Ein Sof') will have to include not just all that is actual, but all possibilities as well. (In this and much else it resembles Bradley's Absolute and so also the supreme spirit of various idealisms and religions.) The apparent need for Ein Sof, however, arises only from the false undercutting principle and its associate, the view that meaning can only be achieved through transcendence to some wider framework. What remains to be shown is that, even if the meaning problem is generated in these ways, Ein Sof can do nothing to alleviate it. So Nozick's account must be considered a failure in its own terms.

If it is true that meaning can only be acquired through a transcendence of limits to some broader framework, then, since Ein Sof has no broader framework, Ein Sof itself must be without meaning. On the other hand, if, as Nozick also requires, meaning can only be acquired when the broader framework which is reached through transcendence itself has meaning, then Ein Sof can only secure meaning at narrower levels if it is meaningful itself. Since Ein Sof fails the first condition for meaningfulness, everything else will fail the second. Nozick wrestles with this problem but comes to no very satisfactory conclusion. That Ein Sof fails the first condition does not imply that Ein Sof is meaningless, but rather that the category of meaning simply doesn't apply to it. Since meaning presupposes a wider framework the absence of such a framework in the case of Ein Sof results in Ein Sof's being neither meaningful or meaningless (Np.601). But this offers scarcely more assurance for Nozick's picture than the claim that Ein Sof is meaningless. If meaning is to flow downwards, from broad to narrow, there seems as little reason to suppose that it will flow from an item which is neither meaningful nor meaningless, than to suppose it will flow from one which is meaningless. Certainly, if the category of meaning doesn't apply to Ein Sof, there is no more reason to suppose that meaning will flow from it than to suppose that meaninglessness will flow from it. In short, attempts to save Nozick's position by amending the second condition on meaning to exclude Ein Sof do not look at all promising.



Instead, Nozick works on an amendment to the first condition (Npp.602-3). It is necessary (though not, as we shall see, sufficient) for the success of Nozick's account that he be able to show that Ein Sof has meaning. But his arguments for this are perfunctory at best. His first argument relies upon an analogy with infinite sets:

Only an infinite set can be mapped onto a proper subset of itself, and only an unlimited being can include itself as a part, only an infinite being can embed itself. Consider mapping as a kind of connection; only an unlimited being can map onto and so connect with something apparently larger and external which turns out to be itself. Only an unlimited being can have its "wider" context be itself, and so be its own meaning (Np.603).

— This is an attempt to have your cake and eat it too. The analogy on which the argument depends is hardly satisfactory, especially since the sort of mapping (or connection) required for the transmission of meaning is unclear. However, if the analogy with infinite number sets is any good, what it should show is that an unlimited or infinite being will not be unique and, more important, that there can be no largest such being; for (paradoxical sets excluded) there is no largest set or number. But Nozick's attempts to ground meaning in Ein Sof will not work if there are numerous Ein Sofs ascending in an endless hierarchy, as, e.g., in the orthodox cumulative hierarchy.

Nozick's second argument restricts the first condition on meaning in such a way as to exclude unlimited beings: 'meaning involves external connections because for a limited and finite being, meaning involves transcending limits' (Np.603). But this leaves us either with the conclusion that the term 'meaning' cannot significantly be applied to unlimited or infinite beings, or else with the task of specifying what meaning involves for infinite and unlimited beings. The furthest that Nozick goes towards the latter is to claim that the meaning relation should be specified so as to yield the result that only Ein Sof stands in the meaning relation to itself (Npp.602-3 n;) . This is mere self-serving stipulation, and, if it works for Ein Sof, it can be made to work for less inclusive items.

In his third argument Nozick leaves the attempt to show that meaning flows down from Ein Sof which provides its own meaning in favour of arguments designed to show that an item only comes to seem meaningless when it is placed in a larger context. Since there is no wider context for Ein Sof, it never comes to seem meaningless, the question of its meaninglessness never arises (Npp.603-4). Even if these arguments were sound, they would not suffice to show that Ein Sof has meaning, a conclusion which does not follow from the supposed fact that it is not meaningless. Nor, just because meaning can be undercut by a wider context, does it follow that meaning can be derived from a wider context. However,

Nozick's arguments are not sound, but are based upon strongly counter-intuitive principles. He starts, reasonably enough, with the claim that 'The typical way to place the meaning of something in question is to discover another standpoint from which it is not meaningful, valuable, or important.' (Np.603). He then goes on to draw attention to two alleged features of such standpoints: (1) they are never narrower than the original item whose meaning is placed in question; and (2) they are never disjoint from it. The non-disjointness condition will be discussed later in connection with the relations which transmit meaning. Nozick supports the first condition by examples:

We do not ask what the importance of our life is for this particular hour, or for these cells it includes. The question always goes in the other direction, toward the wider thing: what is the importance of this hour or of these five cells for my life as a whole (Np.604).

But the examples show little. Which way the question goes surely depends upon where we locate value - in the wider or the narrower thing. Thus the individualist may inquire as to the importance or value of the state for the individual; and the human chauvinist inquires into the importance or value of the ecosystem for humans who form only a part of it. Nozick himself later admits that the value of a process may be explained through its having valuable parts, a situation which could not occur if the value of the parts were derived entirely from that of the whole (Np.616). In fact, Nozick's entire picture of meaning, as something that can only be derived or undercut from what is wider, or even from what is external, is seriously mistaken. There are alternative answers even within the transcendentalist camp; for example, Emerson's view that 'the purpose of life seems to be to acquaint a man with himself' for 'the highest revelation is that God is in every man' (a result obtained apparently by mapping the universe onto man).<sup>38</sup> There is much wrong with Emerson's account, but it does reveal that even a transcendentalist does not have to buy Nozick's version.

Even if we grant that Ein Sof is meaningful of itself, without reference to anything external to it, why suppose that it can convey meaning downward, or at least downward far enough to provide meaning for lives? In the first place, the appropriate relations for the transmission of meaning have to be specified. For this purpose Nozick considers identity (Np.606). This would clearly be sufficient, but the mystical identity of each life with Ein Sof faces enormous obstacles and, after a short discussion, Nozick abandons it. Nozick clearly favours the part-whole relation for the task (Np.602): the parts acquire meaning through being parts of a meaningful whole. The trouble is that the part-whole relation does not transmit meaning in this way: not all parts of meaningful things and processes are themselves meaningful. A life, in particular, may be meaningful though it contains meaningless periods. The same goes, of course, for the transmission of



value. Moreover, even if the part-whole relation did transmit value or meaning downwards there seems no guarantee that any, or enough, will filter downwards to individual lives. Our lives may remain meaningless because we are simply too far away from Ein Sof to get enough.

Finally, even if we grant that sufficient meaning can trickle down from Ein Sof to make our lives meaningful, the outcome is totally indiscriminating. Since all lives are equally part of Ein Sof, all will receive equal meaning. Not only that, but if meaning can travel that far it can presumably travel further: to each cell in our bodies and every atom in the universe. Each is a part of Ein Sof. It turns out, in fact, that there could be no meaningless events or things in the universe. Like the Spaniards in their search for gold, we, having searched so far for meaning, have returned with such quantities of it as to completely undermine the currency. In fact, things are far worse than this, for Ein Sof is to include, not just all actualities, but all possibilities as well. Not only are there no meaningless events in the universe, but none are conceivable either. Imagine a life as meaningless as you like; consisting entirely of alternating periods of impotent rage and apathy; that of a character from a play by Beckett, only worse. Since such a life is conceivable it is a part of Ein Sof, and thus is as meaningful as anyone else's. This result has nothing to do with the supposed features of the life, to conceive of a life as meaningless is to ensure that it has meaning. The concept of meaninglessness has become incoherent on Nozick's account, and that of meaningfulness correspondingly either incoherent too, or else vacuous.

7. The problem is often not an individual (subjective) one but a social one. There has been a concerted attempt by many, both from within and from outside the transcendentalist camp, who properly admit that some lives have more meaning than others - to render the problem of comparative meaninglessness of some lives a purely individual matter, having little or nothing to do with the socio-environmental framework within which individuals are cast or are stuck. This resembles the attempt to write off even such bad news as increasing cancer as due to individual life styles, and as having little or nothing to do with industrial pollution (often generated in the interests of only a few among us), the attempt to pretend, Pogo-wise, that the problem lies in each of us individually, when the problem, like environmental problems, is very different from one that succumbs to such simple individual reduction.

Solomon, for example, like Bach, attempts to restrict the problem of meaning in a life and its setting to an individualistic one, and accordingly seeks an individualistic way out. The problem is always oneself, never a socio-environmental one.<sup>39</sup> Thus, says, Solomon, 'We must change ourselves before we change society; and we must understand ourselves in order to change' (Sp.8); and again '...because these [our] inadequacies are



self-imposed, the corrective for them must begin with self-recognition' (Sp.416). This is a distortion, unfortunately, since the individualistic paradigm is pervasive, a very widespread misrepresentation of the matter, as examples help reveal. Consider, for example, primitive peoples whose lifestyles are entirely disrupted by western industrial activity, e.g. the Dyaks by logging of the forests upon which they depend and by destruction of their longhouses. Their lives are changed, and sometimes rendered rather pointless (especially in comparison to what they might have been), through no fault of their own, but owing to intervention from outside. Their subsequent inadequacies are not self-imposed, and the changes that are called for are not in themselves, but rather in western attitudes (e.g. to the natural world and alternative cultures) and the socio-economic structures that reflect these attitudes. Where change is needed in such cases is in the structures, not in the individuals affected who are largely victims of the framework. So it is also, though showing it requires a little more work, with many very poor or otherwise socially disadvantaged people, not only in the less developed countries, but also in the developed countries, such as the USA. Peoples' lives are sometimes rendered relatively pointless by factors largely beyond their control, of their social environment, certainly not self-imposed factors.

Nor will Solomon's analysis do even for those who can afford to buy his book:

Our passions constitute our lives. It is our passions, and our passions alone, that provide our lives with meaning (Sp.xvi, also a back cover theme).

Not only is this erroneously individualistic at back ('one's own passions'; for each individual x, x's emotions...); it also involves, like Taylor's account, an attempt to internalise value, and further to reduce value (which is what gives point) naturalistically to a matter of the emotions (cf. the reduction of desirability to desire). There are other objections too to such an analysis. For example, reasoning and the search for truth and understanding at least help to provide some lives with meaning. Solomon would try to include all these matters, not all of which are simply emotions, under the passions, e.g. '...there is no ultimate distinction between reason and passion' (Sp.7). He is thus operating with, and requires for several of his theses, an unacceptably low redefinition of 'passion'.

The end result is not the same as Taylor's, since on Solomon's analysis some lives can have more meaning, more (worthwhile?) passions, than others, but the case on which it rests is defective in the same sort of way as Taylor's.<sup>40</sup> The result of a project, for example, is not a passion (short of a serious category mistake), but it may help endow a life with point. Value cannot be internalised in this simple way, or reduced to a matter

of individual emotions.

On the other hand, the individual does not drop out of the account either, as some Marxist approaches claim. Although favourable socio-environmental conditions are important in obtaining a positively meaningful life (and even necessary for it, except perhaps for exceptional creatures), they are not sufficient. A creature may live in a society where the quality of life is high, in the sense that the conditions for the satisfaction of needs (for happiness, for a good life) are adequately met, but still live a rather meaningless life: not because it is a member of a socially or environmentally disadvantaged subgroup, but because it simply fails (through ill-luck, or apathy) to take advantage of the opportunities the society provides for meaningful activity. Thus even a high quality of life is not sufficient for a positively meaningful life (though a modest quality of life may be in general necessary for such a life, to adapt Aristotle).

8. The incoherence objection to internalist accounts, and Wiggins' attempt to escape noncognitivism. Wiggins lodges a general, and if correct, important and decisive, incoherence objection to all internalist accounts of the meaning of life, such as Taylor's and Solomon's - accounts he calls not unreasonably (though the accompanying characterisation is inadequate), noncognitivist. The objection is that

the noncognitive account depends ... upon abandoning at the level of theory that inner perspective which it commends as the only possible perspective upon life's meaning. This is a kind of incoherence; and one which casts some doubt on the...supposed distinction of the inner or participative and the outer, supposedly objective, viewpoints (Wp.340).<sup>41</sup>

Wiggins has three shots at explaining this incoherence, none thoroughly successful. The most elaborate explanation of the crucial point is this:

..for the purposes of the validation of any human concern, the non-cognitive view [theory] must always readdress the problem to the inner perspective without itself adopting that perspective. It cannot adopt the inner perspective because [on the theory] the inner view has to be unaware of the outer one, and has to enjoy essentially illusory notions of objectivity, importance, and significance whereas what the outer view has to hold is that life is objectively meaningless. The noncognitivist mitigates the outrageousness of so categorical a denial of meaning by pointing to the availability of the participant perspective. But the most he can do is point. Otherwise the theorist



will be engulfed by a view which he must maintain to be false (Wp.342).

Put differently, were the internalist to express her position in due detail it would (like many another philosophical position) be self-refuting. It appears, however, that the internalist can draw the familiar (if dubious) object/meta distinction (which other considerations very likely drive her towards), and defeat the objection by contending that the theory is at a meta-level and so does not have to adopt either the inner or outer object perspectives. Thus Wiggins' objection needs to be underpinned - by what is really required, since use of the distinction ultimately does involve cheating, but what takes more work to sustain - a critique of the object/meta distinction, or at least its use in such cases to avoid incoherence. To see the force of this, compare underwriting an inconsistent logic by a consistent metalogic, of a nonclassical theory by a classical metatheory, etc. Ultimately such strategies are unsatisfactory, and involve a double standard - acceptance at the meta and higher levels of what is rejected at the object level, and so should (if the object theory is taken seriously) be rejected at all levels.

Similar underpinning is required for Wiggins' other shots: namely that, second, the inner perspective supplies experience which implies abandonment in the theory of that perspective (cf. Wp.346), and that, third, 'the theory ..is untrue to the actual experience of object-directed states which are the starting-point of that theory' (Wp.348).

Wiggins' own attempt to cast light on "the meaning of life" problem has important similarities with our own positive account (to be outlined in the next section, though already anticipated in several respects).<sup>42</sup> He rejects the view that there is some one thing, in the world or in ourselves, which could count as the meaning of life (Wp.376-7). That is, he rejects (as we do), a monistic account of the meaning of life, in both its naturalist and its internalist forms. But the pluralist account he gives differs from ours in the rather surprising and artificial distinction it urges between values and point and in what seems to be a retreat toward subjectivism with regard to the latter. Unless strong connections are preserved between point and value it will be impossible to avoid decidedly counter-intuitive results: highly valuable lives might nevertheless be pointless, and it would always be legitimate to say, 'Clearly, x's life was one of great value, but what was the point of it?' Surely, however, to understand that an activity is valuable is to understand that there is some point in doing it. Wiggins seems to admit as much when he attributes the failure of naturalist theories of value to the failure to discover something in nature which the vast majority of people 'could find reason to invest with any overwhelming importance.' (Wp.375).



On Wiggins' theory (Wp.272-3), valuational predicates stand for properties in a world, properties which 'impinge upon practical appreciation and judgment'. Ascriptions of such predicates are truth-valued, and thus valuational judgments have truth-values. As regards ascriptions of value, therefore, Wiggins' theory is cognitivist. Ascriptions of point or meaning, however are 'cognitively underdetermined', by which Wiggins means that 'the world impinge[s] upon but [does not] determine the point possessed by individual lives' (Wp.378). 'Individual human lives can have more point or less in a manner partially dependent upon the disposition in the world of [the] value properties' (Wp.372). But this disposition of value properties does not determine the point a life has because 'life's having a point may depend as much upon something invented (not necessarily arbitrarily), or upon something contributed by the liver of the life, as it depends upon something discovered' (Wp.373). A meaning for life is thus, in part, invented and 'whereas discovery is answerable to truth, what involves invention is not' (Wp.369).<sup>43</sup> Thus ascriptions of meanings to lives are not truth-valued (as ascriptions of value are).

Now the two claims (a) that meanings for lives are invented (by the livers), and (b) that invention is not 'answerable' to truth are the two defining features Wiggins gives of non-cognitivism (Wp.369). Where Wiggins' cognitive underdetermination position differs is in the claim that meanings for lives are not completely invented, but depend in part on the disposition of value properties in the world. Is this enough? It seems very doubtful. Unfortunately, Wiggins does not give any recipes for combining the two parts. Would a creature, for which the distribution of value properties was particularly bad, nonetheless be able to give itself a meaningful life (as distinct from deluding itself into believing that it had one) by an appropriate invention? On the other hand, would a creature for which the distribution of value properties was especially propitious have nonetheless to resort to invention in order to obtain a meaningful life? If not, then wouldn't the ascription of a meaningful life to that creature have a truth-value, contra Wiggins? If it would still have to invent a meaning for its life, then what does this requirement amount to if not the (subjectivist) requirement that to be meaningful a life must seem to the liver to be meaningful, that concerning the meaning of life 'the final authority must be the man himself', as Wiggins says apropos Aldous Huxley's non-cognitivism (Wp.369)? This subjectivist strain in Wiggins' account is emphasized by his use of the word 'discovery': 'life's having a point may depend as much upon something invented ... as it depends upon something discovered'(Wp.373). The implication is that even a favourable distribution of value properties cannot help to impart meaning to life unless the distribution is discovered by the liver. Yet it seems quite possible for someone to live a highly meaningful life which nonetheless appears to the liver to be entirely meaningless. Such, e.g., was Tolstoy's later evaluation of the period of his life in which he wrote his great novels. It is not implausible to claim that he was simply wrong.

Subjectivism is given further rein by Wiggins' failure to impose adequate constraints on the degree and scope of invention which may be necessary to impart (a sense of) meaning to life. Wiggins does claim, reasonably enough, that the invention is not necessarily arbitrary, but this is nowhere near strong enough. One form of invention which may be thought to imbue life with meaning is the invention of a cosmic backdrop or myth in which one's activities (or certain of them) take on extra significance. But surely the key point in considering whether this actually makes life meaningful, as distinct from making it appear meaningful, is precisely a matter of whether the invention fits the facts (and that makes the judgment about the point of that life a truth-valued judgment). Clearly, highly inventive individuals may suffer from messianic delusions which make their lives appear to them highly meaningful. Again, a schizophrenic who spends much of her life in a catatonic stupor and believes she's the Virgin Mary and Cliff Richard's wife (to take a case from Laing and Esterson<sup>44</sup>) may gain from her beliefs a sense of meaning, which is not to say that in fact her life is meaningful. At less extreme levels, Walter Mitty's absurd sense of self-importance does not in any way diminish the essential pointlessness of his life. Properly constrained the required degree of invention diminishes to zero.

The subjectivist cast of much of Wiggins' position is reinforced by his (brief) account of what it is to find meaning. To find meaning, we

interest ourselves afresh in what everybody knows about - the set of concerns he actually has, their objects, and the focus he has formed or seeks to bring to bear upon these: also the prospects of purifying, redeploying or extending this set. (Wp.377).<sup>45</sup>

By this stage (near the end of his paper) the problematic distribution of value properties in the world has dropped out of view, and no reference is made to whether a creature's concerns and the objects produced as a result of them are valuable or not. Moreover, since virtually every creature has concerns of some sort, meaning is distributed uniformly, though not to uniform degree, at least across those creatures which 'interest' themselves in their own concerns. Meaning has again been trivialised.

9. Towards a more positive account of the meanings of life. As we have seen, even in putting the question, as 'What is the meaning of life?', we are liable to go wrong. It is better to ask instead 'When does a life have meaning?'. A start on answering this question can be made by simply assembling differences, already brought out, from Taylor's account. His conclusion has been summed up (somewhat inaccurately) as follows:- Taylor

asks whether our lives have any more meaning than [the unobsessed Sisyphus's did]; he says they do, but not in that we produce anything



the existence of which gives our lives meaning, but only in that the tasks we take on for ourselves are tasks we choose for ourselves and want to carry out - this itself makes the difference.<sup>46</sup>

Firstly, some lives do have meaning - and not merely subjective meaning - in part at least because of what they produce. And very many lives have a meaning in part in virtue of what they are, goal-directed enterprises, with worthwhile goals or the opposite. Secondly, some lives which do satisfy the choice and desire requirements have comparatively little or no point. A life devoted entirely to c[ricket], for example, could have this character, in contrast to a life like that of Antisthenes or Gandhi. Suppose C who is not a top-class c[ricket]er, and "contributes nothing to the game" but is enthralled by c[ricket], wants to and chooses to do nothing except what involves c[ricket], devotes all his waking life to c[ricket]: he watches it, plays it, reads about and converses about it, and does little else. In one sense his life has a point, an objective, namely to be always c[ricket]ing. But in the intended sense of point, meaning, it does not. Many everyday human lives are not so very different but are largely humdrum, much of all of them consisting of c-ing in one form or another.<sup>47</sup> For connected reasons the fact that someone finds point in her life, or thinks she does, does not show that it has point.<sup>48</sup> Subjective impressions do not always sustain nonsubjective claims.

The object, then, is to explain when, how, and why a particular creature's life has or may have point, not to try to show, what appears accordingly to be an illusory and mistaken aim, that every life has point. In order to provide such explanation, it is important to introduce some mostly neglected distinctions, gradually infiltrated into the preceding text and now indicated in the following table:-

	<u>Range</u>		
	Negative	Zero	Positive
<u>Item</u>			←valuable boundary <sup>49</sup>
Activity (Process)	Has [evil] point	has no point is pointless	has [good] point
Product	has [negative] worth	has no worth	has [positive] worth,
(Small) Periods of life	is [negatively] meaningful	is meaningless	is [positively] mean- ingful
Life (Overall)	is overall [negatively] meaningful, has overall [negative] worth	is overall mean- ingless <u>or</u> has no overall [neutral] worth	is overall [positively] meaningful, has overall [positive] worth



The table gives only absolute statements: there will also be comparative statements, and so on, e.g. 'is highly meaningful', 'is more meaningful than' etc. In the table activity is construed widely to include active concerns: thus concerns and preoccupations insofar as they are reflected in activities and products are duly taken into account.

Much work in value theory, on the alleged virtues of personhood as well on the meaning of life, neglects the evident fact that activities and products (of a person, for example) may contribute to the growth of evil, may be of negative value or have negative outcome. Likewise often forgotten is the problem of the connection between a life (which may also be evil, despite 'the best of intentions') and its activities and products. A life normally stretches out over time, and so involves very many activities and often many productions. Its overall significance depends on both its processes and products, that is, it is a function (a certain sort of signed and weighted sum, so it will turn out) of the positive and negative rankings of both its activities and its products. Because negatively ranked processes and products can cancel out positive accomplishments, a creature can have an eventful life, with much point in it, of no overall worth. Thus two quite different routes can lead to overall worthlessness of a life (in the first the activities and products lack positive or negative value, in the second those of negative value cancel those of positive value) - an awkward complication that deserves further exploration.

As a first approximation, life consists of periods, is a summation of periods, and each period will also have, or lack, significance; a meaningful life can, for instance, contain meaningless periods. But a life which contains no meaningless periods will not be meaningless if positive periods cancel out negative ones; in that case it will be meaningful, but with neutral overall worth. A life will be meaningless overall only if sufficient periods of it are meaningless, and such periods will be meaningless if they are dominated by zero ranking activities and products. As we have argued, some lives are of this sort, are straightforwardly meaningless, while others are not but have point. A creature's life has meaning in proportion as that creature engages in pointful activities and perhaps sometimes produces in these activities pointful products, and more point insofar as it does more of these things. There is thus only one route to a meaningless life.

To be more explicit about some of the recipes that are starting to emerge:- The significance of a (small) period of a life is a matter of the activities and products of that period; and the procedure in assessing significance may be likened to that of a cost-benefit analysis. In terms of the results two further assessments can be made, the overall worth of a life, and the overall meaningfulness of a life. The first is the (signed, and perhaps weighted) sum of the results for the periods of the life. (This is

the assessment of the 'meaning' of a life built even into colloquial discourse, where the question "What meaning has a's life had?" can often be interchanged with "What does a's life add up to?") A life's meaningfulness is also determined by what components of it sum up to, though here negative periods do not cancel out positive ones. The second assessment may differ from the first, especially where a neutral worth outcome emerges owing to the cancelling out of positive and negative results or where a life has some periods (e.g. in childhood as in the case of Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych) which are meaningful but is dominated by meaningless periods.

The procedure indicated cannot be reversed; the ranking of an activity cannot be determined by the ranking of the life concerned (as Wiggins supposes it can, Wpp.374-5: indeed he erroneously claims that it is the only procedure open to the cognitivist!). For it would in general require an unscrambling of the negative elements that belong to periods of almost any life; but in this process rankings of the elements are already presupposed.

Representing a life as a series of periods is messier and less illuminating than presenting it in terms of the moments that matter for the assessment of significance. For the representation in terms of periods involves both a further analysis in terms effectively of such moments - processes and products - that matter, and a double summation (both that already compared with a cost-benefit analysis, and then a further summation of an analogous sort) where a single sum should suffice. These moments, which are moments (perhaps of quite long duration) of notable deviation from the base line of day-to-day undistinguished humdrum living, in directions which may be either positive or negative (above or below the base line), we shall call notabilia. The initial graph of a life (or a segment of a life) is accordingly like a wave line produced in an oscilloscope, and takes the following schematic form:



The graph represents the life (or segment of the life) of a creature x plotted over time, and depicts notabilia in (or of) that life. We can imagine such a graph produced by an electronic device, what we call a diaitascope (following the Greek διαίτα for way of



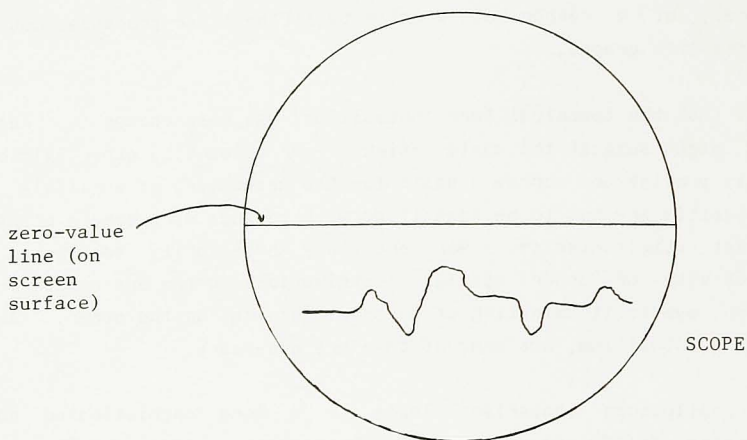
life), which takes as input details of creatures' lives (one at a time, say) and processes these, through a system of operations, into graph form. For the present we treat diaitascopes as devices, of a rather blackboxish type (the inner processes not being presented), for producing life graphs.

It should be noted that the technical term 'notabilium' has been chosen in order to avoid linkages which might suggest the assimilation of our account to other axiological accounts which typically provide too narrow a basis for the assessment of a life's value or meaning. Thus notabilia are not to be identified with periods of pleasure or pain as they would be on hedonist utilitarianism. Nor are they necessarily associated with periods of heroic activity or other special contributions on the one hand, nor with periods of contemplation, mystic illumination or personal 'growth' on the other. Any of these may contribute to a notabilium, but none of them are necessary.

Elaborating the oscilloscope comparison leads to a more sophisticated graphic representation of meaning of life assessments. For both the base line, and the shape of the graph, depend on the socioenvironmental circumstances of x's life. Change these circumstances, change, that is, the situation or world involved, and the graph will change. The device we are envisaging for generating life graphs may be programmed to take into account such alternative socioenvironmental circumstances. Taking account of certain (limited) variations of this sort is standard practice in sociology where equations are redeployed (and programs run again) using different constants which allow for different incomes, education levels, etc. Sophisticated diaitascopes will do at least as much: they will have a world switch or (continuous) control, which enables x's life to be graphed in worlds different from the actual one. Thus a sophisticated diaitascope enables us to see not only what x's life is and has been like in terms of notabilia, but also what it could have been like in alternative situations. These matters, which are often more or less determinable, are important in assessing such things as x's (moral) worth as a creature, as well as indicating, of course, how socioenvironmental arrangements may be changed so in particular that more creatures lead meaningful lives.

In order however to make interworld, and also intercreature, comparisons at least some standard of comparison between base lines is required (as well as, what is likewise far from trivially determined, a common scale). This can be achieved by having the screen of the diaitascope marked with a zero-value line, the same for each world.<sup>50</sup> The base line of a creature x whose social situation is seriously deprived may well fall below the zero-value (or real) line, as is shown in the following sketch of a super-sophisticated diaitascope:-





x's baseline and lifograph

Base-line-determined row

Zero-based row

world changes	+ve sum	-ve sum	direct sum	modulated sum
worth index	real +ve sum	real -ve sum	real direct sum	real modulated

DIALS

Scaling      Δ Horizontal      Δ World reset      Δ Subjectivity switch

CONTROLS

Δ vertical      Δ Vertical drift      Δ Value system setting

In real terms x's life is one of negative worth, since even its positive notabilia lie below the zero-value line, though as seen from x's base line (still not how x may view it) the life contains significant positive and negative moments. The super(sophisticated diaita)scope will have controls which enable the regraphing of x's life, to show for instance how it would have been had circumstances been more propitious. The worlds resetting control (and much less revealingly the vertical shift, which can include a zero-basing setting) facilitates this, with an associated dial printing out the changes involved in a given world shift.

A superscope will have several additional features, some of them fairly trivial and largely for technical nicety, such as horizontal and vertical scaling controls, which allow facets of the lives' of creatures to be accentuated, etc. More important, a superscope can store graphs in its memory system, and thus can upon request produce additional graphs to that, or those, showing at any given time. In this way we can, for instance, compare x's life-graph with y's, or x's graph with what her graph would have been like under other circumstances, e.g. had she lived longer, not grown up in the Sao Paulo favelas.

A superscope will have dials which separately show the positive and negative sums of the life whose input is being considered. The positive sum is the sum (perhaps weighted) of positive notabilia of that life, the negative of negative notabilia, the sums being assessed basically in terms of areas (as given by integrals) enclosed by notabilia and perhaps weighted in terms of vertical or horizontal extent. From these sums two further innovations result, a direct sum comprising the sum of the positive and (signed) negative sum, and a modulated sum which is the positive sum less the (signed) negative sum, that is negative memorabilia are positively assessed. The direct sum gives the relative net worth of the life (net worth that is relative to the individual's base line), while the modulated sum affords a measure of the meaningfulness, positive or negative, of a life. As observed, an eventful life may have a large modulated sum and a small or zero direct sum.

To obtain an assessment in real terms instead of, as hitherto, in terms of lives' base lines, a similar set of summations, but using the zero-value line as base, is required. In these assessments, ~~components of~~ notabilia will be accounted positive or negative according as they lie above or below the zero-value line. The summations resulting are real as opposed to base-relative sums. Base-relative lifegraphs are not to be confused with subjective lifegraphs. A subjective lifegraph shows how the subject whose life it is sees that life in terms of notabilia. The relativity of base-relative assessments is often minor compared with that of subjective assessments, which a superscope also depicts upon turning on the subjectivity switch. A subjective lifegraph may bear comparatively little resemblance to that of the subject's lifegraph as normally shown (i.e. when the subjectivity switch is off). As noted, subjective assessments are generally of little use in assessing the net worth and meaningfulness of a life.

Both the separable issues of when a life is worthwhile and when it has quality (perhaps of such and such a degree) concern, or should concern, real assessments. A worthwhile life, like (what is closely associated) a life of quality, is one of (sufficient) real net worth. Since, put differently, if a particular life is worthwhile overall then it has (had) real point, because it has yielded something of real net worth.

A valuable life is always a meaningful one (no matter how it appears to the liver). The converse does not hold. A meaningful life is not always a de facto valuable one. It is not so much, or just, that valuable tends to suggest sufficiently or particularly meaningful as in 'making valuable contributions' (thus, e.g. the acceptable claim that x had a meaningful but not valuable life - the level of value which suffices for a valuable life is set by the valuable boundary in the table on p.42), as that a negatively meaningful one, one full of evil processes and products, is the opposite of a valuable life. Thus, while having a valuable life, a life which contributes enough of net positive worth, is a sufficient condition for having a meaningful life, it is not a necessary one.

A separate issue is then: when is a particular life worthwhile? At a minimum it must be positively meaningful overall. It seems clear that a sufficient condition for worthwhileness is the contribution of enough of net positive worth. As before it has to be net worth: otherwise an evil life which incidentally contributed something of real worth could be accounted worthwhile. The condition is of course not necessary for a meaningful life, else creatures that lead lives without special contributions would lead pointless lives! For example, this would apply against many of those engaged in continuing or fostering worthwhile parts of a cultural or rural or race function; as for instance in raising and educating more Plumwood Mountain scrubwrens. On the other hand, special contributions of some sort are required if the life is to count as valuable.

Evidently how rankings are assigned and weightings determined, in working out both the (degree of) meaningfulness and the worthwhileness of a particular life will depend heavily on the underlying value theory adopted, and will vary with it, as the superscope will show graphically on altering the value setting control. Lives may be assessed differently under different value systems as the diaitascope model reveals. The availability of different value systems does not however imply subjectivism. Indeed a nonsubjective account of value is crucial in avoiding both the shoals of reductionism and a main source of the meaning problem. Point is tied to worth, which is connected to net value, which is accounted for nonsubjectively.<sup>51</sup>

It is also important to remove other erroneous pictures of value, not only reductionism. One such picture is that of the explanation of value as by way of ever enlarging systems, as in certain transcendentalisms, e.g. through terrestrial ecosystems to a universal system, value being transmitted from the larger system to the smaller: but then there is no way of explaining the meaning or value of the bigger systems, because there is nothing outside them. The picture is defective: for explanation may proceed inward also.<sup>52</sup> A system may be valuable because of the valuable things it contains, the valuable things some parts of it are or produce.



Another faulty picture of value is that which tries to restrict worth to human activities and products, to impose human chauvinism.<sup>53</sup> In a particularly glaring example of a human chauvinist approach to the problem of meaning, Edwards moves immediately from the questions of whether life has meaning or value to the questions 'Is human life ever worthwhile?' and 'Does (or can) human life have any meaning?' without any argument and apparently without even realizing that the question has been changed.<sup>54</sup> The human chauvinist restriction exacerbates the problem often to the point of insolubility. For the usual assumption on which human chauvinism is based is that value is restricted exclusively to human actions, mental states, products or human life itself. This often takes the form of a reductionist account of value which, as already noted, serves to make a solution of the problem of the meaning of life impossible. Even without reductionism, however, the restriction of values exclusively to human concerns will make questions about the value of human concerns themselves vacuous. The fact that such questions are not vacuous, but may and often are quite seriously raised and felt, is prima facie evidence against the human chauvinist restriction. In any case, on human chauvinist assumptions, if the questions of the meaning of human life are still raised there is very little that can be done to answer them, beyond blanket assertions that all human life is valuable (or none is) and exhortations to 'invest' one's life with meaning, responses already criticized above.

Yet another faulty picture of value, already criticised, is that which tries to detach value from its social connections, and to reduce all value to that of independent individuals. Such a picture has, however, played an important part in setting up the meaning problem, and in indicating wrong directions for its resolution, in particular highly individualised directions, whereas often social and political changes are what are really required. For the extent of point in a creature's life is only partly a matter under that creature's control, and in some cases a life may have reduced point or largely lack point because of social or environmental factors beyond that creature's control (including some largely uncontrollable factors such as luck, both good luck and fortune, and bad luck and tragedy). So, in particular, inducing a point, or further point, in creatures' lives is often not a matter of individual change, but of social and structural change.

Since some lives do have [a] meaning, so life has meaning.<sup>55</sup>

FOOTNOTES

1. See especially D. Wiggins, 'Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life,' Proceedings of the British Academy, 62 (1976), 331-378. All page references prefixed by 'W' are to this important article.

Undoubtedly there are linkages between meaning (or significance) as semantics and meaning as point, especially in symbolic mythic settings; but they appear of little relevance to the philosophical problems at hand. Dilman has claimed however, to the contrary, that

As Wittgenstein has shown us, there are far reaching connections between what makes discourse possible [intelligible and meaningful] and what makes possible the kind of life that has a meaning, the kind of life that can lose its meaning (I. Dilman and D.Z. Phillips, Sense and Delusion, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971 (hereafter S & D), p.7).

But the argument, where correct, only shows certain parallels.

Much of what strength Dilman's repeated comparison of the meaning of life, of a life, with the meaning of discourse, of a word, has, derives from an unwarranted anthropocentrism: thus, for example the first move of restricting the question of meaning to that of human life and insisting that [human] 'life is not even conceivable in the absence of ... language' (S & D, p.7) and the related strategy, backed up by appeal to Wittgenstein, of tying intentionality, and so meaning, to the mastery of language, which only humans are taken to have. The inadequacy of such strategies is explained in detail in R. Routley, 'Alleged problems in attributing beliefs, and intentionality, to animals'. Inquiry 24 (1981) 385-417.

Dilman's later moves point out that the comparison holds good for such notions associated with meaning as that of understanding and failing to understand: just as we speak of understanding a word so we 'speak of understanding a person's actions'. But the comparison is again severely limited: it does not sustain what Dilman proceeds to, that 'having no purpose and interests ... and having nothing to say - these go together' (p.9). These are neither necessary nor sufficient for each other.

2. This Russellian point, that in even putting such a question as 'What is the meaning of life?' we are liable to go wrong, is spectacularly developed by Wiggins:

We bewitch ourselves to think that we are looking for some one thing like the Garden of Hesperides, the Holy Grail ... Then finding nothing like that in the

world, no one thing from which all values can be derived and no one focus by which all other concerns can be organised, we console ourselves by looking inwards, but again for some one substitute thing, one thing in us now instead of the world. Of course if the search is conducted in this way it is more or less inevitable that the one consolation will be dignity or nobility or commitment: or more spectatorially irony, resignation, scorn...(Wp.377).

3. As it may be, like other forms of scepticism: see R.Routley, 'Nihilisms and Nihilist Logics', American Philosophical Quarterly, to appear (hereafter NNL).
  4. Whether explanation must always give out, or may at some stage terminate or become self-elucidatory or else invert (outward proceeding explanation giving way to explanation from within), thus breaking the apparent regress, is another question, considered in a preliminary way in R. Nozick, Philosophical Explanation, Harvard University Press, 1981 (henceforth N) and in R. Routley 'Light on the Why does anything exist? question?', typescript, Australian National University, 1980. A clever resolution of the explanation puzzle, in terms of a distinction (ultimately unsustainable) between unvexing explanation and model-explanation, is proposed by K. Baier, The Meaning of Life, Commonwealth Government Printer, 1957 (hereafter KB): see especially p.11ff.
- For one example of the conflation of value questions with explanation questions, see K. Britton, Philosophy and the Meaning of Life, Cambridge University Press, 1979 (hereafter Br), chapter 1. The meaning-of-life literature is rich in such examples.
5. Presumably these distinctions may be confirmed, and in the course thereof sharpened, by descriptions of appropriate worlds.
  6. The rejection can be independently argued for, as for instance in R. Routley, Exploring Meinong's Jungle and Beyond, RSSS, Australian National University, 1979 (hereafter referred to as EMJB), chapter 9, where too referential reduction is severely criticised.
  7. R.C. Solomon, The Passions, Anchor Books, New York, 1977, p.35 (hereafter page references to this work are prefixed by 'S'). Similarly Baier: 'A Christian living in the Middle Ages would not have felt any serious doubts about Tolstoy's questions. To him it would have seemed quite certain that life had a meaning and quite clear what it was' (p.3). Similarly many other authors. The thesis is compatible with the further point, made for instance by Baier (p.29), that Christianity has aggravated the modern problem by its low evaluation of earthly life and use of unjustifiably



high standards for meaningfulness.

A useful discussion of traditional religious answers to the meaning question (seen in terms of (1) an externally set goal which (2) one can accept as intrinsically worthwhile; Br p.17) may be found in Britton, chapter 2. The answers considered presuppose an after-life and, in all but one case, the existence of God.

8. This is not to imply that such ways are not still proposed, even in textbooks assigned for philosophy courses, such as M. Eliade, Cosmos and History, Harper and Row, New York, 1959: for example

..it is only by presupposing the existence of God that he [man] conquers...freedom...and...the certainty that historical tragedies have a trans-historical meaning, even if that meaning is not always visible... . Any other situation of modern man leads, in the end, to despair (p.162; similarly p.161).

But not by any valid argument: see NNL.

9. A recent exception is the Anthropic Principle of Dicke and Carter, uncritically presented in J.A. Wheeler, 'Genesis and observership', Foundational Problems in the Special Sciences, R.F.Rutts and J. Hintikka eds., Reidel, Dordrecht, 1977, pp.18-9, according to which (roughly) the universe evolved as it has because humans are here. It would take us too far afield to discuss this rather unfounded piece of human hubris. In fact, however, the principle can be amended to avoid objections to such human chauvinism indicated below, by replacing (as Wheeler in effect sometimes does) 'human life' by 'life' or 'consciousness'.

10. K. Bach, Exit-Existentialism, Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, California, 1973, pp.2ff. Page References prefixed by 'B' are to this work.

11. B. Russell, 'A Free Man's Worship', Mysticism and Logic Allen and Unwin, London, 1963, p.41.

12. A. Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, transl. E.F.J. Payne, Dover, New York, 1966, Vol. I, p.322. Schopenhauer then switches immediately to a parallel idealist picture, with parallel unsatisfactoriness.

The trivial repetition theme is brought out even more eloquently by the author of Ecclesiastes (especially, Chap. I, v.4-10).

13. Wiggins' basis for his point against naturalistic theories - that their failure is

bound up with their inadequacy in coping with the question of meaning - may be enlarged to apply against reductionism more generally, namely that they fail to provide

anything which the generality of untheoretical man could find reason to invest with overwhelming importance. These theories offered nothing which could engage in the right way with human concerns or give point or focus to anyone's life (Wp.375).

14. J.-P. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, transl. H.E. Barnes, Philosophical Library, New York, 1956, pp.38-9.

15. Note also Wittgenstein: 'In the world there is no value, and if there were it would be of no value', Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Ogden translation) Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1922, 6.41.

16. There are in fact different determinate progress models to be distinguished. For example, while the idea of progress by natural development goes back through mediaeval times,

the idea of progress; [as a] march towards greater perfection..., is a peculiarly modern one. It is scarcely to be met with, if at all, before the first decades of the eighteenth century... (J. Passmore, The Perfectibility of Man, Duckworth, London 1970; p.195, rearranged).

What did emerge much emphasised from the Enlightenment was the more determinable (generic) idea of human progress as endless improvement (what is left undetermined is improvement how). Thus the English and French Enlighteners, as well as others such as geneticists,

often write as if they had established...that man can in fact look forward to an endless history of constant improvement (Passmore, p.190, emphasis added).

Contemporary events have at least indicated that their arguments far from being sound, were built on sand.

The failure of the progress and perfectibility models (both personal and social) to provide satisfaction in at least one nineteenth century case is brought out strongly by Tolstoy in the early chapters of My Confession, Walter Scott, London, n.d.

17. T. Hayden 'The decline of the American frontier', Social Alternatives 1 (8) (1980) pp.41-2.

18. J. Woodmansee and others, The World of a Giant Corporation. A Report from the GE

Project, North Country Press, Seattle, 1975 (hereafter WGS).

19. See, e.g., M.Eliot and T.Harris, 'A Monday through Friday sort of dying...', Social Alternatives, 1(8) (1980) 8-11.
20. On the extent and basis of the denial of the social in Western analytical thought, see V. and R. Routley, 'Social theories, self management, and environmental problems' in Environmental Philosophy (edited D. Mannison, M. McRobbie and R. Routley), RISS, Australian National University, 1980.
21. A. Camus, 'The myth of Sisyphus' in The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, transl. J. O'Brien, Knopf, New York, 1969, p.62.
22. Thus, on the one side, Sartre: 'It is absurd that we are born; it is absurd that we die' (Being and Nothingness, op cit., p.547). And, on the other, Britton: 'I am saying that the life of any man does have meaning' (Brp.192). But (1) Britton's argument for this claim involves a modal fallacy; and (2) he also makes assertions inconsistent with the claim. As to (1) the argument is 'that it is possible that a man's life may matter to him' (e.g. p.193), so it 'may matter to him', so it does matter, so it is his life has meaning. As to (2) Britton admits that a person's 'life may lose its meaning' (p.194), implying that the lives of some may come to lack a meaning.
23. R. Taylor, 'The meaning of life,' Chapter 18 of his Good and Evil, Macmillan, London, 1970. All page references prefixed by 'T' are to this article. Taylor states his theme, for example as follows:

..if the philosopher is apt to see in this (the pattern of human history) a pattern similar to the endless cycles in the existence of Sisyphus and to despair, then it is indeed because the meaning and point he is seeking is not there - but mercifully (Tp.268).

Similar themes to Taylor's are advanced in Bach, op.cit.

24. In some cases at least it is 'the inner compulsion to be doing just what we were put here to do, and to go on doing it forever...this is the nearest we may hope to get to heaven' (Tp.266, italics added: the italicized terms, in particular, beg some large questions). More generally, for any creature (of whatever gender), 'the point of his living is simply to be living, in the manner it is his nature to be living' (Tp.267).



25. Taylor elaborates some of his themes in a very recent paper 'The meaning of human existence' in Values in Conflict, yet to be published. It is, for the most part, more of the same, the same moves and arguments over again, 'with only insignificant variations' (as both Taylor and Schopenhauer might put it), in the emphasis on zest for life as a sheer escape from (that 'great evil') boredom, in the false Freudian stress on human culture as repressed or substitute sexuality, in the more detailed description of life as an endless pursuit (branch (2)), and in the shape of more and different illustrations (especially the chanting nuns who often stand in for Sisyphus).

For the most part, but by no means entirely. There is a crucial change. We are now offered in the end - what is inconsistent with the earlier paper - an account of the (objectively) meaningful life which some gods attain, and which talented (= creative) persons, but no other animals, can approximate or even (in cases such as Plato) achieve. The high redefinition (its height posted by the modifiers 'truly' and 'genuinely') Taylor now proposes is this: 'life is truly meaningful only if it is directed to goals of one's own creation and choice and if those goals are genuinely noble, beautiful, or otherwise lastingly worthwhile and attained'. The creative element is, Taylor argues an essential ingredient, its absence being what disqualifies the 'vast majority' of human lives from meaningfulness: 'the only genuinely meaningful existence is one that is creative'. There are, it will emerge in the text, good reasons for not buying this redefinition, and in particular for rejecting the creativity requirement. The reasons include the failure of Taylor's arguments to exclude other sorts of lives (e.g. certain less creative but nonetheless worthwhile lives) as meaningful.

But the new Taylor paper is not explicitly considered in the text. Nor, for that matter, is more than a small proportion of the extensive philosophical literature on the topic. Very much of it is however criticised by implication.

26. Thus Tp.264: 'The two pictures - of Sisyphus and our own lives, if we look at them from a distance - are in outline the same.' Similarly Tp.263: 'If we think that unlike Sisyphus, these labours [of humans] do have a point, that they culminate in something lasting and independently...worthwhile, then we simply have not considered the thing closely enough.'
27. Tolstoy, My Confession, op cit., p.32.
28. Camus, 'The Myth of Sisyphus' op cit., p.57.

29. The more unveiledly [death as possibility] gets understood, the more purely does the understanding penetrate into it as the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all. Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be 'actualized', nothing which Dasein, as actual, could itself be. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself towards anything, of every way of existing. In the anticipation of this possibility it becomes 'greater and greater'; that is to say, the possibility reveals itself to be such that it knows no measure at all, no more or less, but signifies the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence. M. Heidegger. Being and Time, transl. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper, New York, 1962, p.307 (p.262 in late German editions).

R.F. Beerling summarizes Heidegger's view of man thus:

All that remains is man in the scaffolding of his essential finitude, with no possibility of refuge in any metaphysical context of meaning and no interior shelter in any order of society, liberated but at the same time robbed of all illusory ties to 'here' and 'hereafter', a spiritual being sunk in the abyss of nihilism, but, without a trace of pessimistic apathy, responding to the summons of his lot through the acceptance of his own possibilities, which he clearly recognizes as negativized, in an attitude of, literally speaking, deadly realism. (Moderne doodsproblematik: een vergelijkende studie over Simmel, Heidegger en Jaspers (Delft, 1945), p.223; q. J.M. Damske, Being, Man, and Death, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky, 1970, p.58.)

30. Being and Nothingness, op cit., p.539.
31. Taylor says, inaccurately, that the larva of the cicada does these things.
32. The assimilation of species has other serious weaknesses. Contrary to Taylor (Tp.247), some humans do eventually ask whether their living is 'worthwhile or whether anything of significance will come of it.' Nor are the differences between members of different species merely invented: creatures of different sorts differ markedly in their abilities to formulate and accomplish projects, in their contributions to their communities, etc. - in short, in value-relevant respects.
33. A similar answer, 'Living in order to live...The whole meaning of life is life itself, and the process of living'. is presented elsewhere as the only answer to the problem: see S & D, p.1.
34. As Wiggins observes (in a different context),

..surely [not]...just any old set of concerns and beliefs will do, provided one could live a life by them. Surely if any old set would do, that is the same as life's being meaningless? (Wp.335)

Well, not quite, but almost.

In assigning a uniform point to all (human) life, the Taylor position continues and extends the tradition of what Nietzsche asserts are "nihilistic" religions, namely those that deny any ultimate difference of value between one person and another: such, according to Nietzsche, are both Christianity and Buddhism. (See Nietzsche, The Complete Works, ed. by O. Levy, Russell and Russell, New York, 1964, Vol. XIV, pp.19, 21, Vol. XVI, pp.130-3, 147.)

Our position, however, differs importantly from Nietzsche's. For, from the fact that different lives are of different value, it does not follow, as Nietzsche seems to have supposed, that the range of morally permissible action with respect to a creature will vary according to the value of the creature's life. Once this is recognized, the damaging aspects of Nietzsche's elitism - in particular, the distinction between master and slave moralities - can be eliminated. It is desirable, for independent reasons, to place activities in pursuit of axiological ends (such as the maximization of value) within deontic constraints, to ensure that only certain methods of value maximization are morally permissible. While it is clear that such deontic constraints are not uniform across the entire domain of items of moral concern, their variation does not depend exclusively upon the differential values of items in that domain. This is sufficient to block the derivation of Nietzsche's pernicious deontic system.

35. The galactic backdrop is often used (e.g. by Russell, op cit.) not just to dwarf the value of lives by a change of scale, but to show that life can have no value because the universe as a whole has none. A detailed refutation of this claim would have to take account of the relation which was claimed to hold between creatures and the universe they inhabit. (Russell himself avoids the nihilistic consequence essentially by transferring values to a realm beyond the physical universe to which humans alone have access.) However, it is clear that if the relation is that of part to whole nihilism by no means follows, even if the universe as a whole is without value (which we dispute). The triviality of much Tin Pan Alley music does not reduce at all, much less reduce to zero, the value of compositions which are masterpieces of Tin Pan Alley style. Indeed, in certain cases, a setting of zero or negative value may enhance the value of certain items, e.g. of minor acts of kindness or courtesy in prevailing conditions of great brutality.



36. This holds also of some positions which appear at first to escape the charge. Although, for example, in attaining Buddhist nirvana, individuality is supposed to be extinguished, and the self absorbed into something larger. Still the enterprise involved in trying to attain this (rainbow-end) state of tranquillity is a decidedly individualistic one.
37. 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps'. Freethinking and Plainspeaking, London, 1908.
38. Emerson, journal entry of 3 September. 1833 in Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. W.H. Gilman et al., Cambridge, Mass., 1960-63, IV, p.84.
39. Nor would such a problem reduce, except under a strong and implausible reductionism, to a matter of problems of individuals.
40. This shows that non-cognitivist positions are not all the same: Huxley's position, which Wiggins presents as a remarkable anticipation of the noncognitivist's principal point, is different again. According to A. Huxley in Do as You Will, London, 1929, p.101

The purpose of life, outside the mere continuance of living (already a most noble and beautiful end), is the purpose we put into it. Its meaning is whatever we choose to call meaning... .

This Humpty-Dumptyism is inessential to noncognitivism. Nor is what Wiggins wants to add to Huxley's (upon reflection, murky) account - that 'concerning what "living most fully" is for each man, the final authority must be the man himself.' (Wp.369fn) - a part of Taylor's noncognitivism.

41. The familiar objective/subjective contrasts are earlier criticised by R.M. Hare, Applications of Moral Philosophy, Macmillan, London, 1972, but on such verificationist grounds as to be unpersuasive.
42. Our understanding of Wiggins' position has been aided by a number of explanatory letters from him. If we still misrepresent his view it is from no lack of attempts on our part to understand it, nor on his to explain it.
43. Wiggins points out, however, that this is a position he ascribes to the non-cognitivist, that he never felt happy with the 'invention' terminology (though it is integral to several of his main themes), and that he nowhere takes up the question

of whether ascriptions of meanings to lives have truth-values. If so his position is seriously incomplete (and simply incomplete also as regards the correctness or otherwise of the two defining features he gives for non-cognitivism on p.369).

44. R.D. Laing and A. Esterson, Sanity, Madness and the Family, Penguin, 1964.
45. Wiggins here quotes approvingly from Williams, but the passage cited appears to be astray on several points: first, in linking meaning of life with categorical desires; secondly, in taking a life to have point if its propelling concerns provide grounds of happiness (happiness, where it is relevant, has itself to be worthwhile); third, in the (very dubious) thesis that 'one good testimony of one's existence having a point is that the question of its point does not arise'. In particular, as against Dilman also, finding a meaning in life is not (just like that) developing a 'concern for things' (S & D, p.37).

Tolstoy's trite Christian answer to the meaning problem given towards the end of his revealing story, The Death of Ivan Illych, that meaning consists in care and concern for (some) other humans, is defective in the first and second of these ways. Such care and concern is neither necessary nor sufficient for a meaningful life.

46. J.J.Thomson, Review of Taylor op cit., Philosophical Review, 81 (1972), p.116. Observe that for the summary to be at all accurate, 'our' has to be construed very liberally: to include all life.
47. Should you think that cricketing is an intrinsically valuable activity then choose something else for c, e.g. noughts and crosses, chess, horse racing, whist... . Some human activities, in particular watching games or sports (e.g. on television), have in general no valuable product and no valuable lived-through experience. Another good example is "time killed."
48. This indicates part of what is wrong with Dilman's astonishing thesis that

When we claim a person's life to be meaningless we are not claiming that we find that sort of life meaningless but that he finds it so, although it may appear to him otherwise (S & D, p.20).

We are normally claiming neither of these things; nor could we be claiming either without serious damage to what we do say. This is brought out by Phillips, who demolishes Dilman's thesis: see S & D, especially pp.59-60, and also pp.96ff.

49. The presence of the valuable boundary indicates the presence of a threshold beyond which positive worth or point has to accumulate in order for an activity, product or life to be counted as valuable. The boundary is important, as it places a lower limit on the value of these products and processes of positive worth which may count as valuable (see below).
50. It is important to note that the zero-value line is a purely normative line, it does not represent anything like the average hum-drum life in x's world or society. Baier, for instance, would, quite mistakenly, assess the worthwhileness of a life in terms of how far it fell above or below the average for that society (KBp.27), irrespective of the worth of the society. Moreover, unless the average is determined normatively this will have the result of making the average life of zero worth. (Baier does, it is true, admit normative features in determining the average: his phrase is 'the range of worthwhileness which ordinary lives normally cover'. But this does not remove the objections.)
51. That is, either objectively, or better nonjectively. Details of such a theory of value are given in R. and V. Routley, 'Human chauvinism and environmental ethics' in Environmental Philosophy, op. cit.

There is another potential difficulty for the Aristotelian extensional sum suggestion, namely that a creature's worth (especially e.g. moral worth) depends not only on what it does but what it would do. However whether a life is (de facto) meaningful seems, interestingly, to depend just on the extensional part.

This suggests an important distinction between the worth of a creature (which takes account also of what the creature would do were it able) and the worth of a creature's life (which takes account only of what it actually does). The distinction can be captured through the world-switch on the superscope, since the value of the creature can be defined in terms of its life in some alternative world; that is, we evaluate the creature by evaluating its life in a world like the actual one except that certain barriers to the creature's activities (e.g. ill-health, disability, etc.) are removed. The problem is, of course, defining the range of impediments which may be removed for this purpose (of specifying in which alternative world the evaluation of the creature's life will yield the value of the creature in the actual world). Clearly we would want to include the removal of impediments such as accidents which incapacitate or kill a well-intentioned creature before it can accomplish much of worth. Such creatures are valuable creatures, though they may lack (through no fault of their own) valuable lives. On the other hand, we obviously would not want to define the range of impediments so widely as to assign high



positive values to creatures on the ground that they would make large positive contributions were they not the vindictive, bigoted slobs that they have proved to be.

52. See also footnote 4.
53. Human chauvinism is rife in discussions of the meaning of life. Bach, to consider just one of the more extravagant examples, supposes that there is a sharp contrast between humans and the rest of nature: the rest is 'merely combinations of particles' (p.2). He dismisses respect for the world, nature, etc. immediately, without any argument, and puts up instead a reductionist, mechanistic picture (p.3). The natural world is a mechanism built extensionally from particles, and both the social world and its history reduce to constructions from individual humans: 'societies, cities, institutions, and organisations are composites of people...and nothing more' and 'history is nothing but the cumulation of people's acts' (p.2, cf. similarly Wiggins). None of these chauvinistic reductions can succeed (see EMJB); none are at all adequate to the data to be reflected.
54. P.Edwards, 'Life, Meaning and Value of', The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. by P. Edwards, Macmillan, New York, 1967, IV, p.467.
55. The authors are indebted to several members of the Philosophy Department at McMaster University, where an early version of this paper was read. They are also indebted to members of the Philosophy Departments of La Trobe University and the University of Western Australia, where slightly revised versions of the paper were read.



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