

The Meanings of Life

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Apology

I remember being a child, wondering where I would be—wondering *who* I would be—when the year 2000 arrived. I hoped I would live that long. I hoped I'd be in reasonable health.

I would not have guessed I would have a white-collar job, or that I would live in the United States. I would have laughed if you had told me the new millennium would find me giving a public lecture on the meaning of life. But that is life, unfolding as it does, meaning whatever it means. I am grateful to be here. I also am simply amazed.

I am forty-four. Not old, but old enough that friends and family are beginning to provide more occasions for funerals than for weddings. Old enough to love life for what it is. Old enough to see that it has meaning, even while seeing that it has less than I might wish.

I am an analytic philosopher. Analytic philosophers are trained to spot weaknesses in arguments. Unfortunately, that sort of training does not prepare us for questions about life's meaning. A perfect argument, Robert Nozick suggests in jest, would leave readers with no choice but to agree with the conclusion.¹ When we think about life's meaning, though, we are not trying to win a debate. Success in grappling with the question is less like articulating and defending a position and more like growing up.² Perhaps that is why academics have written so little on the meaning of life, despite it being arguably the central topic of philosophy.³ Speaking to analytic philosophers about life's meaning would be like stepping into a boxing ring in search of a dance partner. Or so we fear.

Perhaps there is no excuse for venturing into an area where we cannot meet our usual standards. More likely, one way of respecting philosophical standards is by not trying to

apply them when they are not apt, thus refusing to let them become a straitjacket—a caricature of intellectual rigor. So, I do not here seek the kind of argumentative closure that we normally think of as the hallmark of success in analytic philosophy. This paper is simply an invitation to reflect. I try to get closer to some real (even if inarticulate) sense of life's meaning by reflecting on what it has been like to live one.

What the Sage Knew About the Limits of Meaning

In *Philosophical Explanations*, Nozick says the question of life's meaning is so important to us and leaves us feeling so vulnerable that,

we camouflage our vulnerability with jokes about seeking for the meaning or purpose of life: A person travels for many days to the Himalayas to seek the word of an Indian holy man meditating in an isolated cave. Tired from his journey, but eager and expectant that his quest is about to reach fulfillment, he asks the sage, "What is the meaning of life?" After a long pause, the sage opens his eyes and says, "Life is a fountain." "What do you mean life is a fountain?" barks the questioner. "I have just traveled thousands of miles to hear your words, and all you have to tell me is that? That's ridiculous." The sage then looks up from the floor of the cave and says, "You mean it's not a fountain?" In a variant of the story, he replies, "So it's not a fountain."⁴

The sage feels none of the angst that led the seeker to the cave. So, who's missing something: sage or seeker? The story suggests a contrast of attitudes. I'll call them Existentialist and Zen, meaning only to gesture at the traditions these names evoke. The

Existentialist attitude is that life's meaning, or lack thereof, is of momentous import. We seek meaning. If we don't get it, we choose between stoicism and despair. The Zen attitude is that meaning isn't something to be sought. Meaning comes to us, or not. If it comes, we accept it. If not, we accept that too. To some degree, we choose how much meaning we need. Perhaps the sage achieves peace by learning not to need meaning. Perhaps that's what we're meant to learn from the sage's seemingly meaningless remark that life is a fountain.

The Existentialist insight, in part, is that meaning is something we give to life. We do not find meaning so much as throw ourselves at it. The Zen insight, in part, is that worrying about meaning may itself make life less meaningful than it might have been. Part of the virtue of the Zen attitude lies in learning to not need to be busy: learning there is joy and meaning and peace in simply being mindful, not needing to change or be changed.⁵ Let the moment mean what it will.

Nozick concludes the section with another story.

A man goes to India, consults a sage in a cave and asks him the meaning of life. In three sentences, the sage tells him, the man thanks him and leaves. There are several variants of this story also: In the 1st, the man lives meaningfully ever after; in the 2nd he makes the sentences public so that everyone then knows the meaning of life; in the 3rd, he sets the sentences to rock music, making his fortune and enabling everyone to whistle the meaning of life; and in the 4th variant, his plane crashes as he is flying off from his meeting with the sage. In the 5th version, the person listening to me tell this story eagerly asks what sentences the sage spoke. And in the 6th version, I tell him.⁶

Another joke? What are we meant to imagine happening next? What does Nozick the fictional character say? Nozick the author never tells us, unless we read the book's final seventy pages as Nozick's effort to imagine what we might extract from the sage's three sentences. The story leads us to expect some sort of joke, but it would not be a joke if an analytically trained sage were to say:⁷

“Your ambiguity is a form of self-indulgence. Figure out your real question; then you will have the beginnings of an answer. The ambiguity of the word ‘life’ is a problem. If you ask for the meaning of all “Life” then your question is like asking for the (singular) meaning of all words. There is no such thing. It is particular words and particular lives that have or can have meanings.

“If you seek the meaning of a particular life (yours, say) then I will not tell you life is a fountain. Instead, I will invite you to reflect on what it has been like to live your life, and on what it will be like to carry on from here. You may conclude that meaning comes from spending time with your family rather than at the office.⁸ (On their deathbeds, people often wish they had spent less time at the office; they never wish they had spent more.) Or, you may conclude that if you are to find meaning when you go back to your suburban life, it will be because you create it there—not only in virtue of what you choose but also in virtue of how you attend to what you choose—and no lifestyle ensures you will successfully undertake such creation.

“As with the ambiguity of ‘life,’ the ambiguity of ‘meaning’ is a problem. Questions about life's meaning often are synonymous with questions about life's value. Not always. By analogy, if the subject were an abstract painting, its meaning and its value would be different (though probably related) topics. Or, when you ask about life's meaning, your

question may be less about what makes life good and more about what makes life significant—what purpose is served by living it. You may even feel a need for such purpose to be granted to you by some outside agency. If so, you may want to reconsider, for the life of a cow on a factory farm has that kind of purpose. An externally given purpose is neither necessary nor sufficient for the kind of meaning you appear to want.⁹ What you want is a purpose you can embrace as your own, but also one that will be recognizable as a real purpose independently of the fact that you embraced it as such.

“You would not be satisfied to learn merely that your life serves some outside purpose, so the answer to your question about life’s purpose becomes: What purpose do you want? If there is a certain purpose you want your life to have, then consider whether you can live in a way that serves that purpose. If you can and if you do, then your life’s intended purpose will be the purpose (or at least one of the purposes) your life actually serves. Needless to say, purpose intended and purpose actually served are different things. Part of what makes life interesting is the ongoing challenge of keeping the two in line.

“Finally, if your question about life’s meaning is really an oblique request for advice on what to do with the rest of your life, so as to make it as worthwhile as possible, then the answer is to identify your most fundamental values and dedicate your life to living in a way that tracks (respects, promotes, etc.) those values. There is no key that unlocks the simple secret of how to do that. There is no recipe. There is no guarantee. It is hard work.”

The thing to expect from a sage is sagacity, not revelation. A sage knows how to live well. That is not the same thing as knowing a recipe for living well. The fulfillment we are seeking when we ask about life’s meaning cannot be handed to us in the form of a jingle.

I have achieved the age of mid-life crisis, an age when many begin to feel trapped in a way of life that threatens to waste their remaining years. Although I have no sense of crisis, I still need to make an adjustment, for the struggle of youth is over and something else is taking its place. When I was fifteen, the game was to figure out what I could do with my life that I would be proud of thirty years later. Today, the game somehow is not about the future anymore. It (sometimes) feels as if the world has grown still, as if time is slowing down, and now the point is no longer to prove myself and make my place in the world but to understand the place I've made, respect the meanings it can have, and just live.

I no longer identify with the seeker, and it would be comical if I said I now identify with the sage. Yet, here I am, having agreed to speak on this topic. So, I need to think of something, knowing that if I try too hard to find the answer that will mark me as a true sage, I will look less like a sage and more like a person who is trying too hard to look like a sage.

Limits

There is such a thing as limited meaning. Some lives mean more than others, but the most meaningful lives are limited in their meaning. Consider a few of the ways in which life's meaning might be limited. First, meanings need not last. A life may have a meaning that truly matters but that nevertheless does not matter forever. Or we might say a particular episode—getting the highest grade in high school calculus—truly had meaning, but the meaning did not last.¹⁰ We might accurately say, “It meant a lot at the time.” Why would that not be enough? *When* would that not be enough?

Second, meanings change. Even when meaning lasts a lifetime, it is not constant. Short though life may be, it lasts long enough for its meaning to evolve. To look for meaning

that does not change is to look, I suspect, for something that is at best purely formal, and at worst a mirage.

Third, meanings need not be deep. As some people use the word, a meaning is deep when it leaves no question unanswered, no longing unfulfilled. (We are tempted to scoff at ideas like “deep.” Often, smugness is a mask, a way of coping with fear of uncharted conceptual and emotional terrain. I do not mean to scoff.) If that is what people are longing for when they long for deep meaning, what should they do? Some longings are best handled by getting over them rather than by trying to fulfill them, and this may be an example. I do not know.

Or if deep meaning is possible, maybe life per se is not the kind of thing that can have it. Life is a cosmic accident. It is not here for a purpose. It is simply here, and that is all there is to it. A deeply worthwhile life is simply a series of mostly worthwhile—sometimes deeply worthwhile—episodes. There is meaning in life, we might say, but a life per se is just an allowance of time. Its meaning resides in how we spend it. We might wish we had more to spend, but meaning emerges from how we spend, not how much we spend.

Fourth and finally, life is short. Would it mean more if it lasted longer? Quite possibly. On the other hand, if life truly lacked meaning, making it longer would not help. Nozick asks, “If life were to go on forever, would there then be no problem about its meaning?”¹¹ There would still be a problem, as Richard Taylor shows in his recounting of the myth of Sisyphus.¹² Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to live forever, spending each day pushing the same stone to the top of the same hill only to see it roll back down to the bottom. The life is paradigmatically pointless, and no less so in virtue of lasting forever.

Unlike Sisyphus, of course, we are mortal. We achieve immortality of a kind by having children to carry on after we die, but Taylor says that only makes things worse. Life still

“resembles one of Sisyphus’ climbs to the summit of his hill, and each day of it one of his steps; the difference is that whereas Sisyphus himself returns to push the stone up again, we leave this to our children.”¹³ Having children is as pointless as anything if all we accomplish is to pass the same dreary struggle—the rock of Sisyphus—down through generations.

Ultimately, any impact we have is ephemeral. “Our achievements, even though they are often beautiful, are mostly bubbles; and those that do last, like the sand-swept pyramids, soon become mere curiosities, while around them the rest of Mankind continues its perpetual toting of rocks.”¹⁴ And if we did have a lasting impact? So what? As Woody Allen quips, what he wants is immortality not in the sense of having a lasting impact but rather in the sense of not dying.

So, death and the prospect of death can limit how much a life can mean. Yet, limiting life’s meaning is a long way from making it altogether meaningless. As Kurt Baier observes, “If life can be worthwhile at all, then it can be so even though it is short. . . . It may be sad that we have to leave this beautiful world, but it is only so if and because it is beautiful. And it is no less beautiful for coming to an end.”¹⁵ Moreover, if looming death can affect us in ways that make life mean less, it also can affect us in ways that make life mean more, at least on a per diem basis, for if we are going to die, time becomes precious.¹⁶ People who know they are terminally ill often seem to live more meaningfully. Though dying, they somehow are more alive. They cherish each morning, and are vividly aware of each day’s passing. They see despair as a self-indulgent waste, and they have no time to waste.

I do not know why we are not all like that. I suppose something changes when the doctor actually delivers the prognosis. Our daily schedules are the result of an ongoing war between what is truly important and what is merely urgent, and that latter normally wins. Even rudimentary self-preservation often is lost in the daily blur. Before my brother was

diagnosed with lung cancer, a part of him was gripped by a fantasy that the world would give fair warning: the day would come when a doctor would see a small lump on an X-ray, and Jim would have to quit smoking that very day or else the lump would turn out to be terminal cancer. Jim did quit that very day, too, but the lump was not a warning.

Commentators have treated Taylor's article as a definitive philosophical counsel of despair regarding life's meaning, but near the end of the article, Taylor offers a lovely counterpoint that seems to have gone unnoticed. Taylor says people's lives do resemble that of Sisyphus, and yet, "The things to which they bent their backs day after day, realizing one by one their ephemeral plans, were precisely the things in which their wills were deeply involved, precisely the things in which their interests lay, and there was no need then to ask questions. There is no more need of them now—the day was sufficient to itself, and so was the life."¹⁷

Perhaps therein lies an idea that is as close as we reasonably can come to specifying the nature of a life's meanings. There is more than one sense in which even short lives can have meaning, but for people's lives to have meaning in the sense that concerns us most is for people's wills to be fully engaged in activities that make up their lives.¹⁸

Taylor observes, "On a country road one sometimes comes upon the ruined hulks of a house and once extensive buildings, all in collapse and spread over with weeds. A curious eye can in imagination reconstruct from what is left a once warm and thriving life, filled with purpose. . . . Every small piece of junk fills the mind with what once, not long ago, was utterly real, with children's voices, plans made, and enterprises embarked upon."¹⁹

Where did those families go? Day after day, they bent their backs to the building of lives that appear as mere bubbles in retrospect. Yet, as Taylor goes on to say, it would be no "salvation to the birds who span the globe every year, back and forth, to have a home made for them in a cage with plenty of food and protection, so that they would not have to migrate

any more. It would be their condemnation, for it is the doing that counts for them, and not what they hope to win by it. Flying these prodigious distances, never ending, is what it is in their veins to do . . .”²⁰ The point of human life likewise is to do what it is in our veins to do, knowing we have choices that migratory birds do not. The special glory of being human is precisely that we have choices. The special sadness lies in knowing there is a limit to how right our choices can be, and a limit to how much the rightness of our choices can matter.

Meditations On Meaning

There is something wrong with lists. Lists are boring. They fail to make us stop and think. They fail to illuminate underlying structure. With misgivings, then, this section lists things that tend to go with living a meaningful life. As far as I can tell, there need be no particular feature that all meaningful lives share. Given the term’s ambiguity, there probably is no such thing as the very essence of meaning. Different lives exhibit different features, and the features I discuss need not be compatible. Even features that are in some sense contraries may come together to endow a life with meanings, for a life is not a logically pristine sort of thing. To give a simple example, some things mean what they mean to me partly because of the price I paid for them. Other things mean what they do partly because they are gifts.

The first feature I will mention, though, does seem just about essential, namely that meaningful lives, in one way or another, have an impact. People lying on their death beds want to know that it mattered that they were here. Most crucially, the counsel of despair typically is grounded in an observation that our lives are not of cosmic importance. Therein lies the beginning of a fundamental error. The question is not whether we can identify something (e.g., the cosmos) on which your life has no discernible impact. The question is

whether there is anything (e.g., your family) on which your life *does* have a discernible impact. The counsel of despair typically is grounded in a determination to find some arena in which nothing is happening and to generalize from that to a conclusion that nothing is happening anywhere. This fundamental error seems ubiquitous in the more pessimistic contributions to the literature on life's meaning.

There are innumerable impacts your life could have but does not, and there is nothing very interesting about that. It makes no sense to stipulate that a particular impact is the kind you need to have so as to be living a meaningful life, when other kinds of impact are on their own terms worth having. If you honestly wish to find meaning, don't look where the impact isn't. Look where the impact is. Life's meaning, when it has one, is going to be as big as life, but it cannot be much bigger than that. It will not be of cosmic scope.²¹

Nozick says, "A significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world—it leaves traces."²² I wonder why. Why must the traces we leave be permanent? More generally, is it possible to try too hard to leave traces? One thing you notice about philosophers, at least the productive ones, is that hunger for leaving traces. It must be a good thing, that hunger. It makes people productive, and in producing, they leave traces. And yet, the hunger is insatiable so far as I can tell. No amount of attention is enough. We all know the kind of person—many of us *are* the kind of person—who gets upset because our reputations do not match Robert Nozick's. The few who attain that stature immediately proceed to get upset about Bertrand Russell. And so just as surely as there is something good about the hunger to leave traces, there is something bad too. Even while that hunger fuels our efforts to leave valuable traces, it leads us to overlook the value of the (impermanent) traces we actually leave.

Here are some of the other features meanings can have. Again, think of these as independent meditations. As I was writing, I had to make a choice, and it seemed more important simply to express the thought, not letting it be twisted by an overarching goal of making different thoughts fit neatly together.

1. MEANINGS ARE SYMBOLIC: Taylor recalls his experience seeing Glow Worms in New Zealand. There are caves “whose walls and ceilings are covered with soft light. As one gazes in wonder in the stillness of these caves it seems that the Creator has reproduced there in microcosm the heavens themselves, until one scarcely remembers the enclosing presence of the walls. As one looks more closely, however, the scene is explained. Each dot of light identifies an ugly worm, whose luminous tail is meant to attract insects from the surrounding darkness.”²³ The worms are carnivorous, even cannibalistic. To Taylor, it epitomizes pointlessness.

I was intrigued when I read this because, by coincidence, my wife Elizabeth and I had been to New Zealand’s Glow Worm Grotto. I cherish the memory. We got up at four in the morning so we could get there before the sun came up. We got there in time, and we were the only ones there. The cliff wraps around in a horseshoe and the walls nearly meet overhead, creating the impression of being in a cave. We knew what we were looking at, but still they were a beautiful sight—hundreds of glowing blue dots all around us, alive! Of course we find no meaning in the bare phenomenon. That’s not how meaning works. Meaning is what the phenomenon symbolizes to a viewer. We were there to celebrate our lives together, and that purpose gave the occasion its meaning. That we could be in New Zealand at all, that we could get up long before dawn to see something together, unlike anything we had ever seen before, and that we could be together, alone, in this grotto, thoroughly and peacefully in love, sharing

this silent spectacle of glowing blue life, blown away once again by the thought of the wonders we've seen together—that's meaning. No one needed Glow Worms to be intrinsically meaningful (any more than ink on a page needs intrinsic meaning to be meaningful to readers). No one needed Glow Worm life to be meaningful to Glow Worms, not even Glow Worms themselves. That was never the point. The point was, we were capable of attributing meaning to them and to their home and to our fleeting chance to share it with them.

But perhaps you would have had to be there, or at least have had similar experiences, to understand. That too is meaning. Meaning isn't some measurable quantity. There is something perspectival and contextual and symbolic about it. (How could meaning be otherwise?) Taylor and I could be standing in the same place seeing the same phenomenon and the experience could be meaningful to me but not to him. That's how it works.

Had I been there by myself rather than with Elizabeth, I would have seen the same thing but it would have meant so much less. The experience meant what it did partly because I shared it with her. The day was sufficient to itself, partly because it was a symbolic microcosm of a sufficient life, but neither the day nor the life would have been sufficient without her.

2. MEANINGS AS CHOICES: Life's meaning is contingent. As life takes one direction rather than another, so does its meaning. Does life have enough meaning? Enough for what? No fact of the matter determines whether the meaning a life has is enough. We decide. Is it worth striving to make life mean as much as it turns out lives can mean? We decide. Is it worth getting what is there to be gotten? We decide. We inevitably make up our own minds about how to measure the meanings of our lives.

What is a person? Among other things, persons are beings who choose whether to see their experiences as meaningful. By extension, persons choose whether to see their *lives* as meaningful. The less inspiring corollary is, persons also are capable of seeing their lives, and other lives, as meaningless. We choose whether to exercise this capacity. If we do exercise it, though, we can imagine being told we have made a mistake. If it is meaningless, then so is being hung up about its meaninglessness. We may as well enjoy it.

An incurable pessimist might say that misses the point, because it is not possible to enjoy that which is pointless. But a Zen optimist rightly could respond: That's not quite true. Closer to the truth: we can't enjoy what we *insist* on *seeing* as pointless. Part of what makes life meaningful is that we are able to treat it as meaningful. We are able and willing, if all goes well, to make that Existentialist leap. (Or we simply let it be meaningful, which would be a sort of Zen leap.)

Singer John Cougar Mellencamp once titled a record album, "Nothin' matters, and what if it did?" A funny title, and it is interesting that it is funny. You see the paradox. Someone who was sufficiently depressed would not. Having acknowledged that something matters, the incurable pessimist is the one who would fail to appreciate the paradox in going on to say, "So what?"

3. MEANINGS TRACK RELATIONSHIPS: Meaning ordinarily is not solipsistic. Typically, when our life means something to people around us, it comes to mean something to us as well, in virtue of meaning something to others. Our lives become intrinsically valuable to us by becoming intrinsically valuable to others.

Our lives also become intrinsically valuable to us by becoming *instrumentally* valuable to others. A few years ago, I joined thousands of others in trying to save a small

community in Kansas from rising floodwaters, as we surrounded it with dikes made of sandbags. We failed. Had we known our efforts would have no instrumental value, it would have been pointless to proceed as we did. But so long as we thought we might succeed, the effort had an intrinsic value predicated on its hoped-for instrumental value. The effort meant something—it made a statement—because of what we were trying to accomplish.

The idea that meaning tracks the making of statements suggests we might be able to connect the rather metaphorical idea of life's meaning to meaning in a more literal sense. When we talk about meanings of words, we normally are talking about how they function in an act of communication.²⁴ Maybe life's meaning likewise is tied to what it communicates, to themes people read into it. If so, it seems worth noting that not all communication is intentional. Even if there's nothing we intend our life to symbolize—no statement we intend our life to make—it still can mean something, communicate something, to other people, with or without our knowledge.

The meaning that can emerge from our relationships often is something like an exchange of gifts. If my life means something to people around me, then it means something, period. What if their lives are not meaningful, though? Don't their lives need to have meaning before their lives can have the power to confer meaning on ours? If so, are we not looking at an infinite regress?

No. Not at all. We need not get the meanings of words from something bigger than us. Neither must we look to something bigger for meaning in our lives. We get it partly from communion with each other, just as we get the meanings of words. Meaning can be our gift to each other.²⁵ Or, it may be a consequence of living in a way that does justice to the gift. (No one can simply give us a meaning worth having; there has to be uptake on our part.) In

any case, we need not seek meaning in some outside source. Even if our lives have meaning only because of what we mean to each other, that is still something.

4. MEANINGS TRACK ACTIVITY: The Experience Machine, described in Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, lets us plug our brains into a computer programmed to make us think we are living whatever we take to be the best possible life. The life we think we are living is a computer-induced dream, but we do not know that.²⁶ Whatever would be part of the best possible life for us (the optimal mix of wins and losses, adversities triumphantly overcome, lectures on the meaning of life—anything at all) will in fact be part of our felt experience. “Would you plug in? What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?”²⁷

And yet, most people say they would not plug in, even though by hypothesis their felt experience would be as good as felt experience can be. The lesson appears to be that when we have all we want in terms of felt experience, we may not yet have all we want. Something is missing, and it seems fair to describe the missing something as life's meaning. Meaning is missing because activity is missing. As Nozick puts it, “we want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them.”²⁸ Nozick says we also want to be a certain kind of person, and “there is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has long been in the tank. Is he courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, loving? It's not merely that it's difficult to tell; there is no way he is.”²⁹

A further thought on life in the machine: The Experience Machine provides us with experiences, but not with judgments about what those experiences mean. If you plugged in, would you judge that life had meaning? That would still be up to you. Which raises a question: what experiences would you need to have in order to have *no doubts* about life's meaning? Would the best possible life leave you with time to think? If so, then by that very

fact, it would leave room for doubt. Accordingly, while there is an obvious gap between subjective experience and objective meaning, there also is a more subtle gap between subjective experience and subjective judgment that experience has meaning. Plugging in creates a gap of the former kind; less obviously, it fails to close a gap of the latter kind.

Meaning may also track something related to activity, namely the making of contact with an external reality. Several years ago, my sister visited me in Tucson. I took her to the Sonoran Desert Museum just outside Tucson. At the museum is a cave. As we descended into the cave, my sister marveled at how beautiful it was. After a few minutes, though, her eyes became accustomed to the dark. She took a closer look, and reached out to touch the wall. “It isn’t real. It’s just concrete,” she said, deflated.

Why was she disappointed? Because she thought the cave was a magically wild “other” when in fact it was an Experience Machine. If what we experience is a human artifact, intended to produce a certain experience rather than being some independent miracle of nature, that somehow cheapens the experience, at least in some contexts. Maybe the problem with the Experience Machine is not only that the experience it provides is a mere dream. It is also a dream deliberately scripted.

If you go to zoos, you have probably witnessed little kids ignoring the tigers and zebras and squealing with excitement about a ground squirrel running down the path beside them. The kids know: the squirrel is real in a way zoo animals are not. Somehow, there is more meaning, more reality, in the wild—in experiences that have not been scripted, especially by someone else.

Complications: First, if we were to plug in, we would be deluded about the nature and meaning of our real lives. We would have the subjective feel that goes with what our fantasy life *would* mean, if only it were real. Is that what we want? When people say they would not

plug in, we may hesitate to take their reports at face value, because here and now, lacking the option of plugging in, we *need* to say the subjective feel is not what we are after. Why?

Because if we are not convinced that our objective goals are what really matter, then why have any deep feeling of accomplishment when we achieve them? If we allow ourselves to concede that the subjective feel is what matters, we undercut the very source of the subjective feel.

Second, we may intuitively see something wrong with letting the Experience Machine cut us off from reality. However, as Nozick observes in a later book, the optimal degree of contact with reality need not be one hundred percent.³⁰ A concentration camp prisoner who sometimes imagines he is at a concert is doing something apt for the circumstances.

Evidently, the bare fact of taking a trip into the Experience Machine is not the problem. The problem arises when we fail to return. We would not be troubled to learn that a friend watches television for half an hour per day, but learning that she watches for five hours a day would tell us something has gone wrong.

Meaning as a Personal Touch

Nozick finds it “a puzzle how so many people, including intellectuals and academics, devote enormous energy to work in which nothing of themselves or their important goals shines forth, not even in the way their work is presented. If they were struck down, their children upon growing up and examining their work would never know why they had done it, would never know *who* it was that did it.”³¹

Life is a house. Meaning is what you do to make it home. Giving life meaning is like interior decorating. It is easy to overdo it, so that the walls become too “busy.” But if our walls are bare, the solution is not to spend our days stoically staring at bare walls, or

philosophizing about their meaning, or lack thereof, but to put up a few photographs, making the walls reflect what we do, or care about, or making them reflect our judgment about what is beautiful or worth remembering. We need not fear bare walls. We need not deceive ourselves about their bareness. We need not dwell on the “fundamental underlying” bareness of walls we have filled with pictures. If we do that, we are not being deep. We are pig-headedly ignoring the fact that the walls are *not bare*. We are failing to take our pictures seriously, which is metaphorically to say we are failing to take seriously what we do with our lives. We are saying, what would be the meaning of this life (the wall) if the activities that make it up (the pictures) were not real? But they *are* real.

There are questions we are not good at answering. Or maybe we are not good at accepting answers for what they are. We do what we do. It means what it means. Thomas Nagel says, “justifications come to an end when we are content to have them end . . . What seems to us to confer meaning, justification, significance, does so in virtue of the fact that we need no more reasons after a certain point.”³² After a point, further questions betray something like the willful incomprehension of a child who has no purpose in mind to help him see when it is time to stop asking “Why?” Meaning is in the things we do that make us who we are, the things we remember—not the wall but the pictures that adorn it over the years.

Metamorphosis

Nozick’s *The Examined Life* begins with an observation that we fly through life on a trajectory mostly determined before we reached adulthood. With only minor adjustments, we are directed by a picture of life formed in adolescence or young adulthood.³³ Nozick concludes that book by wondering what the fifteen year old Nozick would think of the person

he grew up to become.³⁴ Interesting question. Why might we want an answer? Consider what Nozick says in an earlier book. “The young live in each of the futures open to them. The poignancy of growing older does not lie in one’s particular path being less satisfying or good than it promised earlier to be—the path may turn out to be all one thought. It lies in traveling only one (or two, or three) of those paths.”³⁵

I believe I understand. Every day, doors click shut behind us, on paths we might have taken, on meanings life might have had. No matter. The Zen insight, in part, is that meaning emerges not from picking the right door so much as from paying attention—the right kind of attention—to whatever path we happen to be on.

Maybe it is easier for me, because the paths I envisioned when I was young were all pretty grim compared to the path I ended up on. In one of the possible worlds closest to this one, the end of the millennium finds me delivering mail in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. The turning point in this actual world occurred almost exactly twenty years ago, when I had been a full-time mailman for nearly five years, and as I was waiting for the Post Office to transfer me from Calgary to Prince Albert. I already had bought a house. While I was waiting, though, I signed up for a night school course on Hume’s *Treatise*. (After nine years of taking courses, I was near a science degree. I hoped to finish before leaving town, so as to have something to show for all those years. I needed a humanities elective, and Hume was the only option on the night school schedule.) By the time the transfer came through, later that semester, I knew I could no longer be a mailman. Had the transfer come through a couple of months earlier, or had that time slot been occupied by some other course, then as far as I know I would still be a mailman today. I would not have gone to night school; Prince Albert had none.

Being a mailman was my “dream job” as I was growing up. It was not a bad life. The only nightmarish thing about that possible world is that, from time to time, that version of me

would have woken up in the middle of the night to the realization that there comes a time to be seeker, not sage, a moment not for Zen acquiescence but for hurling oneself at an unknown future. The Zen way is partly an appreciation of the danger in wanting too much, but this world's mailman saw, just in time, what a terrible thing it can be to want too little. Had I not learned that lesson when I did, I would have let the moment pass, growing old mourning for worlds that might have been, trying to love life for what it is, but not fully succeeding. So, when I contemplate versions of me that might have been, versions quite a bit more probable than the me who actually came to be, to this day there is a fifteen year old inside me that just about faints with gratitude and relief: it so easily could have been me. For a time, it *was* me. Yet, through a series of miracles, I now find myself in that barely possible world where the mailman gives a public lecture on the meaning of life.

On some philosophical topics, we reflect so as to reach a conclusion. On this topic, the reflection itself is the objective. There is no conclusion that would count as stating the meaning of life. The point of the exercise is not to articulate a proposition but to mull things over—the relations and activities and choices that make up a particular life. Peace comes from the process, not from reaching conclusions. On this topic, then, our reflections can never be more than work in progress.

One of the best things I ever did was to coach little league flag football. But if I had to explain how something so mundane could mean so much, I would not know where to begin. I could have told my players they were accidents of natural selection in a quite possibly godless world, but that bit of information was not germane to our shared task of living that part of our lives to the hilt. Year after year, four years altogether, we had a mission, my players and me, a mission that left no void needing to be filled by talk of

meaning. On the contrary, life was, however fleetingly, a riot of meaning. It was as Taylor says. There was no need for questions. The day was sufficient to itself, as was the life.

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¹ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, Cambridge: Belknap Press (1981) p. 4.

² In Nozick's words, "Give us specific problems to solve or paradoxes to resolve, sharp questions with enough angle or spin, an elaborate intellectual structure to move within or modify, and we can sharply etch a theory. . . . However, thinking about life is more like mulling it over, and the more complete understanding this brings does not feel like crossing a finishing line while still managing to hold onto the baton; it feels like growing up more." See Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*, New York: Simon & Schuster (1989) p. 12.

³ As a vague indication of how intimidating a topic this is, consider that the September 1999 *Philosophers Index* on CD-Rom lists only 102 entries under the topic of "meaning of life" since 1940. By way of comparison, the Index lists 3339 works under the topic of "justice."

⁴ *PE*, p. 571.

⁵ I have learned much of what I know about the practice of meditation from Marvin Belzer. I thank him for sharing his experience and insights.

⁶ *PE*, pp. 573-74.

⁷ I thank Wayne Norman and Dorit Bar-On for conversations that led me to write this passage.

⁸ Nozick (*PE*, p. 572) wonders whether this is what we think the seeker expects to hear.

⁹ If Iris Murdoch is correct, "There are properly many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search. We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and chance." See *The Sovereignty of Good*, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul (1970) p. 79.

¹⁰ Months after writing this, not intending the example to be read autobiographically but also thinking it best not to make something up, it suddenly dawns on me what that episode actually meant to me. It was how I met my wife.

Everyone expected Elizabeth to get the highest grade, and so to my adolescent mind, getting the highest grade was my best chance of attracting her attention. A silly idea, but it gave me the courage to ask her for a date.

¹¹ *PE*, p. 579.

¹² Richard Taylor, “The Meaning of Life,” *The Meaning of Life*, edited by E. D. Klemke, 2nd edition, New York: Oxford University Press (1999) 167-75.

¹³ Taylor, p. 172.

¹⁴ Taylor, p. 172.

¹⁵ Kurt Baier, “The Meaning of Life,” *The Meaning of Life*, edited by Steven Sanders and David Cheney, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall (1980) 47-63, at 61.

¹⁶ Nozick (*PE*, p. 579) touches on this theme, attributing the idea to Victor Frankl. Nozick cautions against making too much of this point, though, and more generally against trying too hard to “disarm the fact of death” (*PE*, p. 580).

¹⁷ Taylor, p. 174.

¹⁸ One way in which our lives engage us is by fitting into a larger design. But the Existentialist and Zen attitudes both presuppose that a life’s meaning cannot simply derive from how it fits into a larger plan. The Existentialist attitude is that the plan must be of our own devising, and must be one in which we play an active role. The Zen attitude is that no plan is needed. The Zen way involves learning that there is no deep self that has or needs to have any particular meaning in the grand scheme of things.

In the closing essay of *Socratic Puzzles* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), Nozick wonders whether God’s existence could acquire meaning in virtue of His creating (for no larger purpose?) the larger plan that gives meaning to the lives of His creatures.

¹⁹ Taylor, p. 172.

²⁰ Taylor, p. 174.

²¹ Admittedly, we can imagine the following: Light streaming from here into space will one day fall upon the super-telescopes of civilizations in far-off galaxies and (via a physics unknown to us today) will be used to reconstruct pictures of life on Earth in minute detail, such that in the discussion following this paper, the person who asks the best question will one day be revered as a god in one or more such galaxies. That might confer cosmic significance on that person’s life, but such cosmic meaning would be of no consequence here.

²² *PE*, p. 582.

²³ Taylor, p. 170.

²⁴ Not all meanings can be put into words. (I won’t try to settle whether this is a limit of meanings or of words.) And philosophical arguments are only one vehicle within which words convey meanings. Poetry, for example, will not articulate a sense of life’s meaning, but the function of poetry is to evoke rather than articulate. Poetry gives us a feel for life’s meaning, not a description of it.

²⁵ Do we need a common understanding of the meanings of life? I suppose not. Givers and receivers often have differing understandings of a particular gift's meaning. It may or may not cause a problem.

²⁶ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, (New York: Basic Books, 1974) pp. 42-45.

²⁷ *ASU*, p. 43.

²⁸ *ASU*, p. 43.

²⁹ *ASU*, p. 43.

³⁰ *EL*, p. 121.

³¹ *PE*, p. 578.

³² Nagel, Thomas. "The Absurd," *The Meaning of Life*, edited by E. D. Klemke, 2nd ed., New York: Oxford University Press (1999) 176-85, here p. 180.

³³ *EL*, p. 11.

³⁴ *EL*, p. 303.

³⁵ *PE*, p. 596.