

WHAT IS LIVING FOR?

Our lives are the most precious resource we possess, and the question of how to spend them is the most important question we face. The lives we actually lead are the more-or-less well-thought-out answers we give to this question. Our answers depend, of course, on what we value and where we find fulfillment. How should I spend my life? That question immediately invites another. What do I most care about and why? For the sake of what—or who—am I living? What is my life for?

But what sort of question is this exactly? There are philosophers who have said it is not a real question at all, but only a mirage that looks like one because it has the same form as other, real questions, like the question of what my job is for, or my bank account, or the clock on the wall in my kitchen.¹ And there are comics who, trading on our instinctive sense that there is, at a minimum, something highly peculiar about the question and that it may indeed be an illusion in the end, poke wonderful fun at those who ask it. Woody Allen, in particular, has made a career of puncturing the balloons of intellectuals who go around pontificating about the meaning of life.

Monty Python has made a brilliant contribution to the deflation of such pretensions as well.² We all laugh at their jokes because there is something ridiculous about the question of the meaning of life. But if it were merely ridiculous, the humor would be shallow. The jokes are funny in a deep way because they touch a nerve and remind us that however absurd the question seems, we cannot get away from or do without it. The question of what living is for is like no other. It is at once fundamental and illusory, urgent and absurd, solitary and shared. At certain moments, it presses on us with a crushing weight. At others, it tickles like a feather. Most of the time, it isn't a question for us at all.

Perhaps the most obvious thing to be said about the question is that it has an unavoidably personal quality. How I answer it depends upon my interests, tastes, and talents, as well as my upbringing and social and economic circumstances—in short, upon a thousand factors that distinguish me from you and everyone else. These differences all have a bearing on what I care about, and hence on how I choose to spend my life. The variety of lives that people lead reflects the variety of endowments—temperamental, cultural, and other—with which they start. These differences of endowment fix the perspective or point of view from which we approach the question of what living is for. In a real and important sense, they “personalize” it. The question looks different to me because I see it from the angle of my own distinctive constitution. And of course the same is true for you and everyone else.

But there is a second, deeper sense in which the question of what my life is for is personal to me. For it is a question that only I can answer. No one else in the world is competent to answer it for me, even if they know as much about my makeup as I do. I may of

course learn from others and take instruction from their example. But however enlightening or inspiring I find what they say and do, the answer I give to the question of life's meaning has validity for me only because it is my answer. My answer may be the same as yours. We may care about the same things and lead lives of a similar kind. We may agree on the standards for judging whether the lives of others have purpose and value. I may take comfort in our agreement and be encouraged by it. But what matters most to me—what is of overriding importance—is not that the question of what living is for have a right answer, which someone else perhaps has already found, but that my answer be the right one, even if others discovered it long ago.

This is not true of all questions. There are many, in fact, of which it is not true. Consider, for example, questions in mathematics. After the seventeenth-century French mathematician Pierre de Fermat died, a book was discovered in his library with a note, written in the margin, that he had discovered a “marvelous proof” for the proposition that there are no non-zero integers x , y , and z such that $x^n + y^n = z^n$ where n is an integer greater than two. Fermat noted that the margins of his book were too narrow to contain the proof he had found. This became known as Fermat’s “last” theorem, last because it was the last to be proved. It was not in fact proved until 1995, when the Princeton mathematician Andrew Wiles published his proof. When he did, the world celebrated and his discovery was the subject of much discussion in the popular press. The cause for celebration was obvious. For though only a handful of specialists could follow Wiles’s reasoning, it appeared that a troubling question in mathematics had now been decisively answered, and others could scratch it off their list. Other questions remained,

but this one, at least, had been settled. There was no longer any reason for other mathematicians to ask themselves whether Fermat's Last Theorem can be proven.³

Some of Wiles's fellow mathematicians were no doubt jealous of his discovery. They wished they had been the one to make it. That is only human. But to the extent they were faithful to their discipline, to the extent they were, as we might say, "true" mathematicians, they had to acknowledge that the important thing was not who made the discovery but that it was made.

There is a distinction between the personal and impersonal views we take of such discoveries. From an impersonal point of view—from the point of view of the world, which we sometimes call the objective point of view—all that matters is the discovery itself, not the fact that it happens to have been made by one person rather than another. By contrast, from a personal point of view, what matters is that I be that person, that I be the one to have answered the question correctly. Thus while it doesn't matter from an impersonal perspective who first discovered the calculus, Leibniz or Newton, it mattered personally to both Leibniz and Newton, and the quarrel between them on this score eventually became quite bitter.⁴ But their quarrel illustrates an important point about the relative priority of these two points of view, the personal and the impersonal, so far as the discovery of the calculus is concerned. For their quarrel seems quite petty and unworthy of the two great geniuses involved. That they quarreled is understandable and forgivable. Like the rest of us, Leibniz and Newton felt the pull of vanity and self-interest. But as mathematicians, they ought to have suppressed these all-too-human instincts in favor of a more "objective" attitude from whose perspective the identity of the discoverer of the calculus

is a matter of indifference. And if we feel they “ought” to have done this, that is because, where discoveries of this sort are concerned, the latter, impersonal point of view takes precedence over the personal one which, though it cannot be extinguished, is subordinate in relevance and importance.

The distinction between these two points of view, and the priority of the impersonal over the personal, is especially clear in disciplines like mathematics where there is an unequivocally right answer to most (if not all) questions one might ask. But the same distinction exists in other fields, where there is more room for debate about the correctness of particular answers. So in history, for example, the question of what caused the Civil War is one that historians have answered in different ways, and that can never have a final and conclusive answer like the answer to the question of whether Fermat’s Last Theorem has a proof. There will always be room for disagreement as to whether the answer that any particular historian gives is the right one. Yet still we can distinguish between a historian’s conviction that his answer is correct, that he has discovered the truth of the matter, and his satisfaction in being the one to discover it. And here, too, as in the field of mathematics, we believe that what ought to matter most to a historian is the soundness of his answer, which should—in principle—matter just as much if someone else has found it (though that is an attitude requiring a suppression of vanity that borders on the heroic). If a historian is asked whether she would prefer to be the author of a famous and well-regarded book containing an account of the Civil War that she alone knows to be wrong, or be proven wrong by another historian whose reputation consequently eclipses her own, and chooses the former, we say that this shows she is not really a historian at heart

because her decision, however understandable in human terms, reverses the order of importance that real historians should attach to their personal and impersonal interests in getting the answer right. And the fact that “right” is here harder (and perhaps impossible) to determine, and that all sorts of subjective elements enter into the answers that historians give to questions of this sort, makes not a whit of difference so far as the priority of the impersonal point of view is concerned.

In my search for an answer to the question of how I should spend my life, of what commitments and pursuits will give it meaning and value, the priority is the reverse. Here what matters most is not that the right answer be found, by someone or other, but that it be me who finds it. This is, indeed, the only thing that matters. To other questions, like those that mathematicians and historians ask, I naturally want to give the right answer, and it is a disappointment to me if I don’t—perhaps even a big disappointment if I’m asked the question on a test. But it is always some consolation that another person has found the right answer even if I haven’t. By contrast, my interest in the question of what living is for is overwhelmingly personal. It is no consolation at all that others answer it correctly (whatever that means) if I don’t. All I care about, all I should care about, is the quality of the answer I give, not that the “truth of the matter” be grasped and brought to light by someone or other, regardless of who that might be. If my answer is a poor one (whatever that means), that is not merely a disappointment, like failing a math exam. It is a disaster unmitigated by the existence of the right answer I happen to miss. With respect to this question, and perhaps only with respect to it, the personal point of view completely trumps the impersonal one in its importance to the person asking the question.

Nor do we think there is anything wrong about according it this priority. Indeed, we would consider it perverse—faithless to the spirit and nature of the question—to do otherwise.

This is what, in a deeper sense, gives the question its personal character. The question of whether Fermat's Last Theorem has a proof is settled for me because Andrew Wiles settled it. But the question of what living is for can never be settled for me just because it is settled for you or anyone else. I may have much to learn from your words and actions. I may benefit from the study of other people's lives, as recorded in books or presented to me in experience. But I can never defer to their judgment in this matter, as I do in so many others. For nothing that anyone else says or does can ever by itself justify my thinking that the question of the meaning of my life has been answered. Deference and delegation, which are appropriate where an impersonal concern for the truth has priority, are out of place here. The question of how to spend my life, of what my life is for, is a question posed only to me, and I can no more delegate the responsibility for answering it than I can delegate the task of dying.



The essentially personal nature of this question is one reason why the meaning of life is such a rich vein of comic fun. For the idea that one can learn the meaning of life in the same way that one learns the names of the kings of England or the periodic table or masters the elements of economic theory is not just mistaken. It is absurd. I can study all these things in an impersonal way. I can go to school to learn the truth about them without taking the slightest interest in

the subject. I can happily acknowledge that the truths of history and chemistry and economics have a value apart from and superior to the value of my own personal knowledge of them. But none of this makes sense if the question is how to spend my life—how to live a life that has purpose and value. It is perverse not to take an interest in the question or to think that the truth of the matter, whatever it might be, has any value at all apart from my recognition of it. The question of what living is for is personal to me in a way the others I study in school are not, and I can't answer it simply by following someone's instructions or reading the right books. This is one source of the humor in Woody Allen's remark that he cheated on his metaphysics exam by looking into the soul of the boy sitting next to him.

A second reason why the question of life's meaning often seems so funny is the rarity with which we ask it. It is not a question that arises with any regularity in the course of everyday life. It is an "eccentric" question and whole periods in our lives can pass without our asking it. And on those rare occasions when we do, we find it a hard question to confront. We find it difficult to get and keep in focus. La Rochefoucauld compared death to the sun.⁵ Just as we cannot stare at the sun for more than a moment, he said, we cannot bear to look death in the eye. The question of the meaning of life is like this too. It seems absurdly disconnected from the questions of everyday living which preoccupy us most of the time, and when we do put it to ourselves in a deliberate way it has a blinding immensity that threatens to blot out all the more familiar landmarks by which we steer our course from day to day. Woody Allen joked that he couldn't understand why some people want to know the secrets of the universe when it's hard enough to find your way around China-

town. He was reminding us how funny the question of the value and purpose of life looks from the standpoint of everyday living.

To be sure, history does record the careers of a few rare individuals, like Socrates and Jesus, who were able to keep this question before themselves with a steadiness the rest of us can never attain. We are drawn to them for this reason, quite apart from the substance of their teachings. We are fascinated by their ability to pursue the question of life's meaning with such unflagging seriousness, and divided between our admiration for them and our wonder at their inhuman remoteness (a source both of pathos and humor). Unlike Socrates and Jesus, we confront this question only at long intervals and obliquely at best. For the most part, we spend our days addressing questions of a humbler kind. Should I take an umbrella to work? Call a friend and make a date? Sometimes we face questions of a larger sort. Should I change jobs? Invite an aging parent to live in my home? And sometimes, though rarely, these questions spiral up to an even higher level of concern. How important is my job, relative to the other things in my life? Am I loved by my children? Am I worthy of their love? And once in a very long while, we ask ourselves the question to which all these others seem to lead and in which they are gathered as a final conundrum, the question of what living is for, of whether and why our lives have a meaning that makes them worth living at all. But this last question emerges only rarely and under exceptional circumstances, and when it does, we glimpse it just for a moment, like a distant peak, before it disappears again behind the fog of everyday life, which only a few extraordinary people seem ever to escape for very long.

Because we confront it so rarely and have such difficulty holding

it in view when we do, the question of the value and purpose of life might therefore seem to be one we need not spend much time preparing to meet. Our time and energy are limited, and the demands of everyday life immense. Each day presents a thousand questions that must be answered just to get to the next. Common sense encourages us to devote ourselves to these. It advises us not to be distracted by a question we face so infrequently and that is so difficult to grasp. Prudence counsels us to economize our mental and spiritual resources by concentrating on the issues at hand, for these are challenging enough, and to let the meaning of life look after itself—or risk pointless distraction and the danger of appearing a fool.



But a nagging thought puts this counsel in doubt. For however eccentric the question of life's meaning may be, however remote from the immediate concerns of everyday life, however sprawling and indefinite, however intimidating, it is always there, hovering in the background, threatening to break through into conscious attention and, when it does, to challenge or upset my established routines and cause a crisis that compels me to consider what I most care about and why.

My life is a pyramid of decisions and commitments. At the wide bottom of the pyramid are the many decisions I make every day about matters of little consequence and the modest commitments these imply. Further up in the pyramid are decisions and commitments of greater importance. These provide the foundation—the

framework and supporting justification—for those nearer the base. And above these, closer to the apex of the pyramid, are decisions and commitments of still greater importance, which in turn provide the foundation for those below them. And so on up to the very top, where my life comes to a point in the deepest and most important commitments I have.

In the pyramid of my commitments, unlike the pyramid paper-weight sitting on my desk, it is the apex that supports the base, not the other way around. The base is broad because it includes so many small commitments. The apex is pointed because it includes so few. But it is these few—my deepest and least changeable attachments—that support and justify all the many, modest ones below them, that hold them in place and secure their purpose and value.

And yet because all my commitments are connected in an ascending hierarchy, each tranche or level depending on those above it, a disturbance at a lower level can always create a disturbance at a higher one, rippling upward in the pyramid of my life. This need not happen and typically doesn't. But the possibility that it might is always there, and it is just this possibility that keeps the question of life's meaning right offstage, waiting to be called into the spotlight at any moment, forcing me to attend to the hierarchy of commitments on which my life depends, or better, of which it consists: a crisis of living whose potential is as permanent as its manifestation is rare.⁶

I have a cold. Shall I take the day off from work and stay home? It's probably best that I go. Why? Because a meeting has been scheduled and I'm expected. So? Others are counting on me being there. Why do I care? Because I want our project to succeed. For what reason? To increase my chances of promotion. And if I don't get it? I may need to look for another job. And what's so bad about

that? I like my job. I like the money and prestige it affords. But wouldn't I be better off if I cared less about these things? Shouldn't I look for a job that would allow me to spend more time with my family and books? Aren't there more important things for me to care about than money and prestige, before I'm dead and can't care about anything at all? Maybe I should take the day off after all.

From the wide bottom of the pyramid of my life, a question spirals up to the apex of my deepest commitments. It becomes a question about them. A head cold turns into a question about the meaning of life. This almost never happens. But it always can. And if it is imprudent to waste too much of my everyday life thinking about this question, it seems imprudent in another way to ignore the possibility of the escalating crisis of meaning with which my life is permanently pregnant.

For the most part, the question of the purpose and value of life lies in the unnoticed background of the many, smaller questions I face and decide each day. But I know it is there. I know that even my smallest decisions are hinged on a set of ascending commitments to increasingly important values, each dependent on commitments and values of still greater importance. I know that the smallest units of meaning in my life are held in place by larger and larger units, reaching up, at their apex, to some conception of what living itself is for—unexpressed, perhaps inexpressible, but foundational. I know that my most ordinary and inconsequential decisions are saved from meaninglessness only because they rest upon this hierarchy of commitments. And I know that however rarely I confront this hierarchy directly, the least significant question—"Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?"⁷—has the power to trigger a crisis that will

force the confrontation on me. I know that the question of life's meaning is with me at every moment, out of view but exerting a pull, and this knowledge is the source of that anxiety, familiar to us all, that enlivens and sustains my belief in the importance of the question, however strange or humorous it seems from the standpoint of common sense.

This anxiety is always with us, from the moment we become reflectively aware of our engagement in the mortal enterprise of living until the enterprise is done. At different points in our lives, the anxiety assumes different forms. When we are young, the question of what living is for is largely prospective. It draws our attention to the choices before us and reminds us that our lives are significantly subject to our own direction and design, though never perfectly so. We ask the question in order to make the right choices and for the sake of the lives we want to lead. When we are old, the question becomes more retrospective. It draws our attention to the choices we have made, which are now embodied in the increasingly finished story of our lives. Near the end of life, we ask the question in order to make sense of the lives we have lived and to know what has made them worth living. This shift in orientation does not happen all at once, of course, nor is it ever complete. For the living, life is never either perfectly open or entirely done. The shift is gradual and follows the natural trajectory that sets the common frame of our lives. As we move forward on this path, which nature prescribes, the question of life's meaning changes direction and form. But its urgency never diminishes. It is no less important at one stage of life than another. It can produce a crisis in youth or old age, for Goethe's Werther or Mann's Aschenbach.⁸ And our anxious

sense that everything else depends on the answer we give to it remains with us as long as we live, however rarely we acknowledge our anxieties or permit them to intrude on the serious business of everyday life.



I care about many things. I care about my health. I care about my wife and children. I care about my garden. I care about my retirement portfolio. I care about my appearance. I care about finishing this book. But not all my cares are of the same caliber. Not all are as important in my life. Some of my cares are more important than others. If I had to, I could arrange them in a rough order of priority by asking which I would retain and which I would let go if forced to choose among them. The idea of a hierarchy of cares is familiar and intuitive.⁹

Perhaps the hierarchy does not come to a head in a single care—one thing (or person) I care more about than any other and for whose sake I am prepared to sacrifice all the rest. Perhaps there is more than one thing (or person) I care about in this way. Perhaps my highest-level cares are connected in some fashion and form a sort of family; perhaps they are disjointed or even conflicting. But whether my highest-level cares are one or many, coordinated or conflicting, the notion that I have such cares, that there are certain things (or persons) that matter more to me than any others, seems obvious, and if I do in fact have certain highest-order cares, it seems especially important that I be confident these are the cares I want to occupy this position in my life.

If the things (or persons) that matter most to me are not the ones that, on reflection, I want to matter most, no adjustment or correction is more important. And if I am uncertain or confused as to what it is that matters most, no clarification is more urgent. For error or ignorance regarding my highest-order cares gives my life as a whole the wrong kind of meaning or none. The question of the meaning of my life can therefore be reframed as the question of what I should ultimately care about and why. A person who says that he cares about many things—the cut of his hair, the size of his bank account, his reputation as a scholar—but, ultimately, about nothing at all, is pathological. And a person who says he has no interest in discovering what he most cares about, or in deciding whether he ought to care about these things, displays a shocking carelessness about his life itself—about the expenditure of the most precious resource he possesses. If the question, “What is the meaning of life?,” strikes us as odd and more than a little funny, its equivalent, “What, in the end, should I care about?,” is more familiar and its urgency easier to see.

This formulation presupposes that I have some choice in the matter, that it is open to me to care about one thing rather than another. It may be doubted whether this is so. In any case, it seems plain that I am not free, at the highest or any other level, to care about whatever I wish. What I care about, both trivially and fundamentally, is a function of my history and makeup. These circumscribe the range of what I am able to care about, realistically and effectively. Still, they do not eliminate all my deliberative freedom to consider some set of options. This is clear at lower levels of caring. Should I care as much as I do about the neatness of my office? Perhaps it is a neurotic habit that I would be better off without. No

matter how deeply entrenched the habit, nothing prevents me from coming to this judgment about it, and I may even be able to make some progress in its practical reform. Even at higher levels of caring—even, indeed, at the highest—I retain the reflective independence that permits me to ask whether my cares are the right ones, the best ones for me, and to conclude that they are not. However high I go in the hierarchy of my cares, it always makes sense to ask this question, and it is always possible for me to answer it in the negative. Of course, if I do, it may be hard or impossible to bring my cares into alignment with my assessment of them—to reform them along the lines my negative judgment requires. My success in this regard depends on a host of factors that have been a subject of philosophical inquiry from Aristotle’s discussion of weakness of the will to Freud’s account of resistance.¹⁰ But even if I fail, or only partially succeed, this does not mean that the inquiry that led to my frustrated effort at reform was itself pointless. For it has at least led to a deepened self-awareness about my highest-order cares and that is not only good in itself but also the most potent source of self-reform I have, the best basis for continuing to hope that the life I want to live will one day approximate more closely the life I am actually living.

When I ask myself what I should do, the question most often has a moral meaning. What should I do? That is, what are my moral responsibilities? But the question of what I should care about is not a moral question in this sense. For even after I have met all my moral responsibilities, the question of how I should spend my life remains. I may decide to spend it in pursuit of some moral objective—for example, eliminating famines or promoting human rights. But that decision is not dictated by the requirements of morality itself, which always leave me some discretionary space to decide what I should

care about. For some, the decision leads to a life organized around moral values at the highest level of care. For others, it leads to a life respectful of morality but devoted, at the highest level, to values of a different kind, to the study of philosophy, for example, or the pursuit of athletic prowess. And for a few, it leads to a life whose highest values conflict with those of morality, like the life of Paul Gauguin, who cared so much about art that he abandoned his family for its sake.¹¹ But whatever answer a person gives, the question of what he ought ultimately to care about is a question that cannot be answered within the boundaries of moral reflection. It is not a moral question. It is a question that in fact arises only at the point at which morality leaves off. And for me to think that I can answer it by identifying my moral and legal responsibilities is to conflate—reassuringly, perhaps, but falsely—a larger issue with a narrower one that can never capture or exhaust the full challenge of deciding what to care about and why.

This way of formulating the question of life's meaning has the further advantage of highlighting a curious but familiar feature that any answer to the question must have. To “care” about something is, in ordinary parlance, to take an interest in its protection or preservation or perfection. It is to be interested in the welfare of who or what one cares about, for that person's or thing's own sake. Thus to care about one's family, or the study of Renaissance art, or the game of baseball is to wish to see these things succeed and flourish, to be protected against what threatens them and to be made happier or more perfect, if possible. The kind of interest involved in caring is thus not a self-interest, as we ordinarily use the term. It is directed away from the caring person at someone or something else—not as a means for promoting, in a circuitous and indirect way, the welfare of the person who cares but that of the person or thing that is the

object of her caring. A person who cares about her parents or children only because it increases her stature in the community or who cares about baseball only because she is betting on the game is someone, we would say, who cares only about herself, and this familiar criticism underscores that real caring is always directed at the welfare of another—that its other-directedness is what gives it the quality of care in the first place.

If the meaning of my life is a function of what I care about at the very highest level, it therefore seems to follow that my life has the meaning it does only on account of something outside of or beyond it that I have an interest in protecting or preserving. For if caring is other-directed, then my ultimate cares, which give my life as a whole its meaning, must be directed at something other than my life itself. That is true regardless of what my ultimate cares are. They must have as their object something other than my own well-being or even my existence, for if they do not, if I have myself as my own object of greatest care, then, though I may be supremely interested in myself, I do not really care about anything at all, and if I don't, and the meaning of my life consists of what I care about, my careless life has no meaning. This sounds like an extravagant conclusion. But it is only a generalization of the very common and very human belief that the willingness of most parents to die for their children gives the parents' lives purpose and value. Others are prepared to die for other things. Their highest-order cares are different. But one cannot live a meaningful life unless there is something one is prepared to give it up for. People's lives are therefore meaningful in proportion to their acknowledgment that there is something more important than the lives that they are leading: something worth caring about in an ultimate way. The question, of course, is what

that something is or ought to be. It is a supremely difficult question. But the difficulty of the question should not be mistaken for its absurdity or irrelevance. It is the question that Socrates (who died for philosophy) and Jesus (who died for humanity) installed at the center of our civilization and that we each face in our individual lives.



The question of what living is for—of what we should care most about and why—seems so urgent because all our lesser attachments appear at times to depend upon it. At certain moments and in certain moods, all these other attachments can seem vulnerable and on the verge of collapse unless they are secured by an answer to the question that frames them and holds them in place. Such moments are rare but never completely out of mind. They hover at the edge of our more mundane concerns, and we are always aware, vaguely at least, of their power to disrupt our otherwise well-organized lives.

And yet it is precisely at these moments, when the question of life's meaning seems most pressing, that it is also likely to appear most strange. For the more pointedly we ask ourselves about the meaning of our lives as a whole, the more we may be inclined to conclude that this is not a real question at all. The more we may see it as a phantom question that has the same form as the ordinary questions we ask every day and whose legitimacy common sense accepts but which, unlike them, lacks all content and purpose. The more we may judge it a mirage and our anxious preoccupation with it the consequence of an illusion or mistake, of the confused belief

that the familiar words we use when we ask what living is for—words that make sense and have an obvious utility in other settings—make similar sense and have the same utility here. In the end, we may conclude that this question is an example of what happens when, in Wittgenstein's famous phrase, "language goes on holiday."¹² And if we do, we are likely to dismiss it as a nonsense question—one that cannot be answered because it has no meaning itself.

The conviction that this is so arises in the following way.

When we are asked what something in our lives is for—an activity, a relationship, or a project of some sort—we generally answer by pointing out its connection to something else. The connection is meant to establish its purpose or value and in this way to explain its significance. The connection can be of different sorts. Sometimes it is instrumental. If, for example, I am asked what my job is for, I may answer that it is for the money I make from it. I may say that I value my job on account of the material benefits it affords. My job is for these other things. It is a means to an end, an instrument for the achievement of some other goal. That of course does not deprive my job of value. It merely identifies the kind of value it has. My job has the value of an instrument, something I explain by pointing out its connection to the end it serves.

Of course, there are many things in my life whose value is, in whole or part, of a non-instrumental kind. Though I value my job for the money it brings, I may also value it because it gives me an opportunity to use skills whose exercise is, for me, a source of pleasure in its own right. And I am likely to value my relationships with my friends mostly or entirely because of the intrinsic satisfactions they afford (though some degree of instrumentalism may be present here as well).

But even the value of these aspects of my life, the ones I find intrinsically rewarding, can only be explained by pointing out their connection to something else. Suppose I am asked what my friendships are for. What purpose do they serve? What value do they have for me? The question is not absurd. I understand it, and can frame an answer. I might say, for example, that my friendships create the occasion for me to love and be loved. They embody, for me, the experience of love. They give love a place in my life. It would be a mistake to say that my friendships are instruments for the attainment of love. They do not exist separately from the love they embody, in the way that an instrument exists apart from the end it serves. And yet the love I feel for my friends, and they for me, is something larger than my friendships themselves. No one of my friendships exhausts it, nor even all of them together. In this sense, my friendships and the love that gives them their vitality and value are not the same, and that makes it possible for me to speak of a relation between the two—between my friendships and the love they embody.¹³

If a word were wanted, we might call this relation one of revelation. My friendships create a place for me to experience—to feel and know—what love is like. They reveal its meaning. Explaining this helps me answer the question of what my friendships are for, and though the answer in this case is non-instrumental, it too depends on my pointing out the connection between one thing (my friendships) and another (the love they allow and display).

There are other possibilities. If I am asked, for example, why I read or exercise or travel—what any of these things are for—I may give an instrumental answer by pointing out their usefulness as means to something else (being well-informed or physically fit or

skilled in another language). But I may also give an answer of a different kind by observing that these activities contribute to a well-balanced life, not in the way an instrument contributes to its goal but in the different way that an ingredient contributes to a dish or the background of a portrait to its subject—in the way that one part of some larger composite contributes to the whole of which it is an element. I may value reading and exercise and travel not because they contribute to some discrete good other than themselves, but because my life would be less interesting or pleasurable without them. They are, for me, intrinsic goods—I find them satisfying in their own right—but they are also parts of a complex whole that would be diminished by their elimination, just as they would be diminished if they were somehow separated from it or expanded to absorb my life completely.

The value of these activities is therefore also explained by their relation to something else—in this case, to a balanced life that includes many different things. This relation is not an instrumental one, nor can it reasonably be described as one of revelation. Again, if a word is needed, we might say that the relation is one of composition, the relation in which a needed part stands to the larger whole that requires it in order to be completed in the best or most fulfilling way. Pointing out that some aspect of my life stands in this relation of composition to my life as a whole is another way of answering the question of what it is for.

There may be still other ways of answering this question than the three I have considered. But it is difficult—in the end, I think it is impossible—to conceive of any answer that does not adopt the general approach these three all do. When we try to explain what something in our lives is for, we always do so by pointing out its

relation to something else, recognizing that these relations may be of different sorts (instrumental, revelatory, compositional, or whatever).

But suppose we now ask what living itself is for—what gives our lives as a whole their value and meaning. Can this question be answered in the way we answer questions about the value and meaning of the different parts of our lives? To do so would seem to require that we place our lives as a whole in relation to something else—which of course is just what is implied by the idea that our lives have meaning only in case we care less about our lives than we do about something outside of or beyond them.

The vast majority of men and women, today as in the past, do in fact hold this belief in one form or another. Patriots committed to their country, believers devoted to their God, parents dedicated to their children, all think of their lives as related to something else of greater value and draw the meaning of their lives from this relation. They place their lives in a wider frame of reference—in the extended, if still mortal, career of their family or country, or in the cosmic pageant of an eternal God. They anchor their lives in this wider frame and derive from it an understanding of the point and purpose of their lives as a whole.

Different people view the relation between their lives and this larger frame of meaning in different ways. Some see themselves in instrumental terms, as tools for the attainment of a greater good; others compositionally, as actors whose participation is needed to make a drama complete; still others, as revelatory presences in whose lives something larger and more lasting comes to light.¹⁴ But however this relation is conceived, it provides an answer to the question of life's meaning that follows the pattern of the answers we give when

it is the meaning of some part of our lives that we are trying to explain. It seems natural to extend the pattern in this way, and to address the question of life's meaning by placing our lives as a whole in some larger context, just as we do when it is the meaning of a particular activity or relationship that is in question.

But natural as the extension seems, it represents in one crucial respect a departure from the pattern. For the judgment that our lives have meaning only in relation to something outside of or beyond them is a judgment that can be rendered only within the limits of life itself. Every claim about the meaning of life is made by the living, hence within the boundaries of the very enterprise whose meaning is in question. Nor can we even conceive of any other possibility, for we have no standpoint outside of life from which to make or assess such a claim.

In this respect, judgments about the meaning of life as a whole differ from judgments about the purpose and value of its various parts. For it is not inevitable that these latter judgments be rendered from within the boundaries of the activity, relationship, or experience they seek to explain—from within what might be called its experiential horizon. In most cases, if not all, I construct an explanation of what this or that part of my life is for from some standpoint outside it. I explain what my job is for from a vantage point outside the job itself. I consider my job from the outside and bring it into a relation with something else that explains its meaning—my hobbies, my talents, my family. If I am asked what my friendships are for, or why I read or travel, I do the same. I take up a position outside these relations and activities and answer the question by describing their connection to something else I value.

I do this in my imagination, but I am also able to do it in fact.

None of the parts of my life occupies it completely. For every part of my life, there is always some other part from which I can survey it, from which I can see the part in question from a point of view beyond its own horizon, and assess its relation to the other things that give it meaning or value, whatever form this relation takes. But I cannot do this when it is the meaning of my life as a whole that is in question. Here, the only point of view I can attain is in imagination. There is no real outside vantage point that corresponds to those from which I can assess and judge the parts of my life, and answer the question of what they are for.

Thus if the question of what the whole of life is for can be answered only by placing it in a context larger than life itself, it can also never be answered from a point of view that we are really (as opposed to imaginatively) able to adopt. In the first respect, the question of life's meaning looks like the question of the meaning of its parts. It follows the same pattern. But in the second, it differs fundamentally, and this difference is one that gives the question its peculiar aura of unreality.

We feel the special importance of the question of life's meaning, however rarely it breaks through the crust of everyday living. Yet at the same time we recognize the unreality that sets this question apart from all the lesser ones that precede and invite it. We express this unreality by saying that claims about the meaning of life can never be proven, that they lie beyond the province of demonstration, that they must be taken on faith and are therefore essentially religious in nature. In saying these things, we acknowledge the discontinuity between questions about the meaning of life, on the one hand, and the meaning of its parts, on the other. For there is no actually attainable point of view from which the relation of our lives

to whatever lies outside them can ever be observed with the same objectivity and detachment to which we at least aspire in reviewing the parts of our lives. There is no real vantage point that we can ever occupy from which our lives can be seen as a whole. And knowing this, we can never escape the disquieting sense that the question of life's meaning is more unreal than all the other questions that point to it as their foundation—yet, just because it is their foundation, more urgent as well.

Unlike questions about the meaning of the various parts of my life, the question of what value and purpose my life as a whole possesses—of what my life is for—cannot be raised except from a point of view that I am able to adopt only in imagination. It is an imaginary question in a way these others are not, and because of this I may be tempted to conclude that despite appearances it is not a real question at all. Some philosophers have drawn this conclusion. But the philosophical judgment that the question of the meaning of life is not a real question can never permanently still the feelings of hope and fear that attend it. Among other things, the persistence of religious belief in the face of such judgments testifies to their impotence to quiet these feelings except, perhaps, for a few rare souls like Spinoza.¹⁵ Despite our philosophical doubts, and the jokes that express in a humorous way our sense of the air of unreality that hovers about the question, few of us can suppress, entirely or for long, our nagging worry that it is both real and supremely important.

But even if it is a real question, and the most important one we ever face, it is a question we face alone, and the answers we give to it can only be our own. No one else can answer for me the question of what I should ultimately care about and why. It is an exquisitely

personal question. And if that is true, one might reasonably wonder whether the meaning of life is a subject that can usefully be studied in school, like myriad others that are listed in the catalogues of our colleges and universities.

In what sense, and in what way, can the question of what living is for be made an appropriate and useful subject of academic instruction? Today, in most of our colleges and universities, it is not, in fact, a subject of organized study, and one might infer from what I have said that this is because the question by its very nature precludes it—that it is too personal to be studied in this way. But the question of life's meaning has not always been neglected as it now is. Once upon a time, and not all that long ago, many college and university teachers, especially in the humanities, believed they had a responsibility to lead their students in an organized examination of this question and felt confident in their authority to do so. They recognized that each student's answer must be his or her own but believed that a disciplined survey of the answers the great writers and artists of the past have given to it can be a helpful aid to students in their own personal encounter with the question of what living is for—indeed, an indispensable aid, without which they must face the question not only alone but in disarray.

The loss of this belief and the collapse of the confidence that attended it is not a consequence of the logic of the question itself. There is nothing in the nature of the question that requires its exclusion from the roster of subjects our colleges and universities teach. The inattention that is paid to it today in most corners of higher education is a consequence of historical developments instead. It is to these that I now turn.

