

CHAPTER 11
What is (Human) Life (About)?

Chapter Outline:

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Chapter Objectives:

In this chapter you will survey a wide range of philosophical reflections for the most part about what it means to be human. You will look inside the “parts” of human existence: mind, emotions, memory, and so on. You will consider the whole question of freedom and “free will,”

and how to decide whether humans are responsible (or the “cause”) for their lives. You will evaluate the debates regarding whether human beings are basically good or basically evil. You will ponder the question of what happens after we die? You will explore not merely individual human life, but human life as essentially *related*. And finally, you will answer the question of the meaning of life (I bet you always wanted to know this). After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- identify three primary faculties characteristic of human beings.
- argue for or against the existence of a human “soul.”
- summarize the key points in the debate regarding free will and determinism.
- define a few primary positions regarding what happens to humans after they die.
- describe something of how our relationships make us what we are.
- tell your own version of the meaning of life.

Do you get upset about a violation of human rights? How would you feel if you saw a gang of thugs beat up an old lady leaving the grocery store and take both her purse and groceries? How would you feel if a good friend was not chosen for a job for which he or she was well-qualified and you knew it was just because of religious belief? How would you feel if your country decided to allow only music and arts which advanced the cause of the State? We think of human beings as possessing certain “rights” or freedoms: the right to private property, the freedom of religious belief, the right of personal expression. But where do these “rights” come from?

We hear the news of a person we knew who committed suicide. And we grieve--we grieve differently than when people die from other causes. But what is it that ends in suicide? Is it not the same for all? The ceasing of a heart-beat. A last breath. We grieve the lost connection with another. We miss the song that each person offers to the world. Yet a suicide suggests that perhaps the song was not alive even during life. Perhaps we grieve a suicide because we have this sense that life should mean something, should be worth living. But why?

How will you use your time this week? Will you spend your time in pleasurable pursuits, as Epicurus would recommend? Will you spend your time contemplating the idea of the Good, as Plato would recommend? Will you spend your time uniting in political activity against the bourgeois capitalist powers, as Karl Marx might recommend? Will you spend you time in responsible education and employment, as Benjamin Franklin might recommend? Why would you choose one of these options over another?

Underneath our sense of wrath when someone's rights are violated, underneath our grief over a suicide, underneath our simple choice of the activities of the day lies the question of what we humans live for, of what we are "about." Is there some grand purpose within which human life finds direction and meaning? Do we endlessly transmigrate from lifetime to lifetime, stuck on the wheel of illusion until we happen to discover enlightenment? Do we create our own meaning by investing in our relationships here and now: this friend, this event, *this* life and the pleasures of this life? Or is it that there is simply no meaning at all? We are merely the evolutionary development from the previous moment. What we call "life" and "death" or "purpose" and "purposelessness" are simply constructs we humans currently use to describe the facts of a random, accidental, biological existence. Our wraths, our griefs, our daily preferences point to these kinds of questions.

And the questions go still deeper. Our thoughts and feelings about death, purpose, development, randomness, and enlightenment all suggest further questions. Just who *are* we? What *is* a human being, anyway? Or--if we see ourselves as living many human or non human lives over the eons of time--what is *life*? What is (human) Life (about)?

Philosophers have probed human life from a number of different perspectives. Even the ways of dividing up the questions about life, humanity, and purpose differ somewhat among the different philosophical traditions of the world. Nevertheless, the following questions are common to philosophical reflection about human life:

- What are people made of? Are we merely bodies or are our bodies merely illusions distracting us from the “really real” Soul? Or perhaps humans are made of both body and soul?
- What differentiates humans from other animals, or from machines? Are we merely advanced forms of animal life, or complex computers? Which brings up the complementary question: can computers (or insects) *think*?
- In what sense are human beings *free*? Are our choices real and self-determined, or are they the necessary outcome of a divine plan or an evolutionary and bio-social conditioning? In what sense are we the “cause” of our own actions?
- What happens to us after we die? Does our body simply decay, our brain, hormones and “life” decaying along with it? Is there a cycle of reincarnation, life after life after life, until some factor permits final and eternal extinction or final and eternal union? Do we somehow wait in a disembodied form for a final “resurrection” when our bodies will be restored to a different kind of life or death? And what difference does it make what we think of these?
- Are humans basically “good” or basically “evil”? Left to ourselves will humans naturally get along with each other and nature and will we promote the fullness of life on earth, or rather are we selfish brutes, resorting to violence and harm whenever and wherever we go? Or is it some combination of the two (and if so, why?). And how are we to deal with our intrinsic “nature” as human beings?
- Is there a “meaning” to human life? Is there some value outside of ourselves that provides a framework within which our lives “fit”? Or perhaps we have evolved to establish those values from within ourselves and there is no real meaning “out there.” We make our own meaning out of the life we lead. Or maybe there is simply no “meaning” to life at all. What is is what is. Our effort to create “meaning” out of life is a futile and false effort to make some order or sense out of a reality that is just a random set of circumstances. Or worse.

As with other subdivisions of philosophical discourse, questions from one category lead to questions of another and back. This is especially true of the philosophy of human life. How can you speak of human action without speaking of ethics? How can you speak of corporate life without speaking of politics? How can you speak of the meaning of life or life after death without talking about religion? How can you talk of “body” and “soul” without talking about reality and metaphysics? And so on. Various philosophers employ different methods of exploring the questions of life. Some “observe and compare,” looking, for example, at the behavior of humans as it might differ from that of apes (Aristotle was a careful observer of the patterns of human existence). Others reflect on their inner life exploring human experience “from the inside” (*The Essays of Montaigne* are a classic expression of such reflection). Still others examine the character of human life through logical analysis, determining the features of the human mind through careful, step-by-step deduction from mutually agreeable premises to more or less certain conclusions about the human mind, freedom, and life. In this text we will explore what (human) life is (about) by investigating human life “in terms of” different things, or “as” different things:

- human life *as* a composition of parts - seeing life in terms of its structure
- human life *as* a manifestation of choices or actions - seeing life in terms of its cause
- human life *as* an embodiment of values - seeing life in terms of its character
- human life *as* a participation in relationships - seeing life in terms of its connections

Parts and Structure

One way of looking at human life is to think of it in terms of the functions of human living. We can look at human existence in terms of our various capacities. Many philosophers have evaluated human life in just such a fashion, seeing human life as a composition of parts or “faculties.” Some have explored human life in terms of our *functional* parts (thinking, feeling,

imagining and such). Others have sought to define the human in terms of a more fundamental essential “part”: the existence of a “soul.”

Functional Parts

As I mentioned above, one way of looking at human experience is to consider our basic functions. If we look at plants, animals, human beings, what do we humans do that other life does not do? Perhaps what makes us distinctly *human* is the combination of these functions or “faculties” that we have (head, heart, hand). Perhaps these faculties not only distinguish us as human beings, but also provide a clue to our purpose on earth.

This was precisely the approach of Aristotle (384-322 bce), student of Plato and tutor of Alexander the Great. Aristotle paid attention to the characteristics of nature. He noticed that living things had certain characteristics in common, certain “faculties” of the soul or life in them, faculties which exhibited a hierarchy. According to Aristotle, all living things (plants, animals, humans) have a “nutritive” faculty: taking in nourishment. Only animals and humans, however, have the ability to perceive with their senses. But only humans possess a rational intellect: taking what is perceived through the imagination, comprehending its essence through an intellectual vision of reality, the whole process itself being moved by desire (though for the self-controlled, desire defers to the intellect). For Aristotle, what human life was “about,” then, was our use of the distinctively human faculty, reason, in an interactive relationship with our other faculties.¹

This way of seeing human life--that is, as a set of distinct but interactive functional faculties--is common in East and West. The Vaisesikan school of Indian (Hindu) philosophy identified a number of functions characteristic of “selves” and “minds.” Early Buddhism named five central “aggregates” of function which constitute a “self” (matter, sensation, perception, mental formation, consciousness), which were further developed into elaborate taxonomies of human function. North African Christian philosopher Augustine of Hippo (354-430 ce)

1. For Aristotle’s view on these matters see his *De Anima* (On the Soul), available in a number of editions.

distinguished between memory, understanding and will. Immanuel Kant (1724-1808) labeled the central human faculties as intellect, emotions, and will. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) spoke of the human being as a conflicted struggle between id, ego, and superego. Each school of thought has their own way of understanding how the categorization system of human faculties points to those functions which most clearly exhibit what human being is “about” (hence we are rational beings, striving wills, conflicted egos, trapped aggregates, and so on). In some cases, a philosophical school will inform us how to transcend these characteristically human faculties through some kind of enlightening intuition or experience.

Body and Soul

Another way of seeing human experience in terms of parts is to focus not upon our functional parts, but rather to identify a more fundamental division of human characteristics. What I mean here is the approach to human being as “body” and “soul” (or “mind,” or “spirit”). We often distinguish between a more tangible aspect of human existence (our bodies) and a less tangible aspect (our mind, soul, or spirit). Needless to say, the distinction between body and soul becomes very important when we consider what happens to a human life after death. Frequently in these considerations, the intangible part is taken for the most important part of human existence.

But is this thing we call a “soul” (or “spirit” or “mind”) really *real*? Are human beings really a combination of body and soul? Perhaps, as Epicurus suggested, we are only particles and void (see chapter 2). But then again perhaps, as Shankara suggested, humans are ultimately non-different from Ultimate *Brahman*, our bodies being mere names we use to describe modifications of absolute Being (see chapter 3). And here is where the philosophy of humanity meets the philosophy of reality (metaphysics). What *is* real? Are souls or bodies real? What *are* human beings? Those who argue that both the tangible and the intangible are in some sense real are called *dualists*. Those who argue that there is basically only one kind of reality are called *monists* (matter only = *materialists* or *physicalists*; mind-only = *idealists*). Among the various schools of

classical Hindu philosophy we can distinguish between dualist (Samkhya), idealist (Advaita Vedanta) and materialist (Carvaka) schools of thought. Likewise, a survey of the Western “mind-body” debate we can distinguish those who are dualists (Descartes), idealists (Berkeley), and physicalists (Hobbes). Often the debate centers around reasons for or against believing in an intangible component of human existence.

The physicalists want to argue that what we call “mind” or “soul” or “spirit” can be accounted for best within a purely physical framework. When we lose a sock we do not assume that an invisible demon stole the sock. So why assume when we have thoughts and feelings that it is caused by some invisible “mind”? Physicalists argue that there is no empirical proof of such a thing as a “mind.” They point to the fact that damage done to the brain results in personality changes. Perhaps the phenomena we perceive as intangible “mind” is merely an emergent property of evolutionary biological development, like our ability to walk on two feet.

The dualists and idealists, on the other hand, argue that the properties of minds are not at all like the properties of bodies (or even brains), and consequently, that they should not be identified. The body is spatially extended. It can be divided into parts (members). Mind cannot be divided. It is one mind per person, argues the dualist or idealist [although some idealists, like Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) might suggest that there are separate particular *individual* minds for each person while a there is a single *ultimate* mind expressed through each of the individual minds]. We can cut off an arm and the person is still present. We damage a brain, and something else is altered. The continuity of mental events over time is integrated within a single subject. And then there is the evidence of paranormal experience, not commonly accepted in the West, but assumed in the East. For those who believe in the intangible, it is simply inattentive reductionism to reject the obvious unique characteristics of mind. Is reality mind or matter? We shall address this question more closely in the following chapter.

And then there is the question of cause. When I choose the dark, square chocolate out of the box (rather than the lighter, round chocolate), what “caused” the action? Physicalists might argue that the action was a mere conditioning of predispositions of brain activity. Dualists would

argue that this is a weak explanation. It does not describe our experience. “I” chose the dark chocolate. My mind--yes, a mind full of history and preferences, but still an intangible mind--caused the hand to move. Sometimes I choose the light chocolate.

Choice and Cause

And this brings us to the issues of choice and cause. Perhaps what is most human about us--perhaps what human life is about--is not so much one or another “faculty” of human functioning or some invisible “soul” (however difficult to prove its existence or non-existence). Perhaps, whether mental or physical, whether emotional or intellectual, what we are (or are about) has more to do with simple human action, initiation, or production. Perhaps it is not the faculty itself, but the character of the faculty that is most human. It is not that we think, that we exhibit some mental events (interpreted either as physicalist or dualist or idealist), but rather that we *initiate* thought. Humans stand outside our thought. We decide what to think, what to choose, how to act. We reflect on ourselves, evaluating our own mental activities, and in so doing we become a “cause” of our own being.

And so we discover another way of exploring what (human) life is (about). Perhaps what is characteristic of life is the way it perpetuates its own motion, the way it initiates its own existence. And here the focus is not so much one of different functions, but of how those functions--any function--operates from a single being. Here the question is not one of function, but of freedom.

Freedom

Perhaps it is not the presence of faculties, but our *use* of them that makes us truly human. But to speak of “our use” of these faculties gives the impression that we have a certain distance from them, that our own faculties are, to some extent, at our disposal, that we have some free exercise “over” them. But is this truly the case? On the one hand it would seem so. We assume personal freedom and responsibility for choice and action whenever we express blame or

gratitude. The hero is acclaimed because she or he made the difficult choices, going beyond what mere background might have allowed. The criminal is sentenced because she or he could have chosen otherwise. A teacher holds students responsible for choosing to do their homework. Yes, there are extenuating circumstances at times, but the blame for unfinished work falls generally upon the student. Responsibility suggests that human life is about freedom to initiate, to create, our own life.

But *are* we really free? What characteristics, habits, patterns, or events in our life are we actually “in charge of”? This is the question of “free-will” versus “determinism,” an issue which has been much-debated over the millennia.

Take, for example, the doctrine of *karma* in Indian philosophy. Remember, much of Indian philosophy assumes that a human life does not begin at birth and end in death. A human life passes through many, many lifetimes. The notion of *karma* simply states that actions have consequences. All actions have consequences. Actions produce their consequences when the situation ripens for their effect (much as the consequences of a planted seed ripen through the year until the fruit is ready to fall). Some consequences might not ripen for many lifetimes. The consequences of actions vary with each act and each individual (as the configuration of accumulated *karma* varies for each). Some features of human life (such as birth, length of life, death, human suffering) are determined not so much through present action but are rather the consequences of past *karma*. Some Indian philosophical schools, such as the Sikhs, deny all manner of human liberty. Others argue that “in some cases human effort may remain ineffective due to past *karmas* while in others human effort may be essential to realize the fruit of past *karmas* which otherwise may remain sterile.”²

Philosophers in the West--apart from any doctrine of multiple lifetimes--have struggled with this issue, just as in the East. *Determinists* argue that human actions are determined. If it were possible to know your past, your biochemical makeup, and all the causes acting on you,

2. Yuvraj Krishan, *The Doctrine of Karma: Its Origin and Development in Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina Traditions* (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1997), 471–72.

determinists would argue that they could theoretically predict your behavior with perfect accuracy. Philosophical *libertarians* (not the same as a political libertarian) believe that spontaneous, uncaused, events happen and that some of the choices a human makes are precisely those type of events. When we regret making a particular choice, we actually *could* have made a different one (a determinist would argue that we could not). Philosophical *compatibilists* on this issue argue that our choices are indeed determined, but that the notion of “freedom” does not depend on the possibility of a choice being different, but rather whether our choices flow from our desires, values and inclinations. Compatibilists would argue, for example, that a variety of factors govern the state of our inclinations at any point in time and that human choice naturally flows from the strongest inclination. Human freedom is simply the possibility to act as we want, without restraint. Our “want” may be shaped by our past history or biochemistry, but we are still responsible for our actions so performed, so long as we were not forced in some unusual fashion. Needless to say, the debates over these issues can get pretty tense (and very complicated), for our sense of human responsibility is at stake.

Many European philosophers in the twentieth century considered questions of humanity--and more particularly, human freedom--from a somewhat different approach.³ Rather than trying to sort out empirically and logically what are the essential characteristics of a human being (such as whether or not humans “have” free-will), they sought to explore, from the inside, what human be-ing (think of “be-ing” as a verb, not a noun) is like. Their aim is not to debate the characteristics of human essence, but rather to explore the apparent character of human existence (hence the term “existentialist,” used to describe many of these philosophers). The question that philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre sought to explore was more like, “How do we experience our own freedom?” The answer to this question for Heidegger and

3. The philosophy originating largely from the continent of Europe, especially in Germany and France, who approached philosophy somewhat differently in the twentieth century and who make a unique contribution to philosophical discussion today is often called “Continental” philosophy. For a review of this approach to philosophy see Richard Kerney and Mara Rainwater, *The Continental Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Sartre, for example, is that we find ourselves in-a-world, in the midst of a swirl of influences and things that make up the stuff which surrounds our be-ing, but also that we choose ourselves in that world. As Jean Paul Sartre writes, “Without any help whatsoever, it [human reality] is entirely abandoned to the intolerable necessity of making itself be--down to the slightest detail.”⁴ Continental philosophy looks at human experience and sees ourselves enmeshed, moment by moment in an act of be-ing in the midst of a world of possibilities.⁵

Let’s consider an example. You have been struggling with alcoholism and have joined Alcoholics Anonymous. What do you learn? “I am powerless to alcohol and my life has become unmanageable.” Your life is not free. Alcohol controls your life when you least wish it would. But you keep going to the meetings. You cry out to a Higher Power. Why? Because you know (or at least you hope) that this powerlessness is broken by dealing with it every hour of every day. Freedom comes through making space for a new kind of choice. So, is freedom something we “have” or something we “gain”? Perhaps a little of both.

Causality

As you might have noticed, the question of human freedom is all tied up in the further question of cause. To ask whether we are free or not is to ask about our choices (or thoughts or feelings), “What *caused* that event?” Do minds cause bodies to move? Does the past cause the future? And what do we mean by “cause” anyway? When a fire burns down an apartment building, what “causes” the destruction? The faulty wiring? The electrician that incorrectly installed the wiring? The hot day that put a strain on the electrical system? The spark that ignited the oil can in the basement? The flames from the ignited oil can? The person who put the oil can near the electrical panel? In what way does the event of human be-ing “cause” itself?

4. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 569.

5. The North American philosophical tradition also tends to look at human experience as an exercise of making oneself (an emphasis on acting, pragmatic be-ing) in the midst of real and not merely logical possibilities. See John E. Smith, *America’s Philosophical Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 53–70.

Perhaps what is most human about us is that we are self-causing creatures. Perhaps not. That is precisely what much of Buddhist philosophy would argue against. For the Buddhist, what is primary is the network of mutually interpenetrating causes. Events arise from a complex causal nexus: birth, decay, cessation. What is secondary is the event, and a “self” is merely a temporary event. And so once again we find that the question of humanity (what *are* human beings) and the question of reality (what *is* [real]) are inextricably linked with the discussion of cause. But that is a question for the following chapter.

Value and Character

Some might argue that who we are--what we are about--has less to do with any particular structure or function of our capacities and more to do with our basic value or character, however these capacities are understood. Some see human beings pessimistically (whether they believe in free will or not, whether they emphasize reason or feelings, . . .). Others see human beings optimistically. There are also those who identify the most significant aspect of human life not with their current life at all, but rather with an eternal standard (an afterlife or lives) that adjudicates the *real* nature of human existence. In both of these cases one looks at human life from the perspective of its (earthly or eternal) *value*. Two questions arise as we explore human life from this perspective: 1) How is human life to be valued? Are people basically “good” or basically “evil” or “selfish”? 2) What happens after we die? How does our life on earth affect what happens after?

How Good are We?

We all probably have some opinion about the character of people. Some might claim that our opinions about whether humans are basically “good” or basically “bad” are really rather trivial. But are they? What is your default expectation regarding child care? Do you expect that children will naturally develop in a healthy manner if left alone, without guidance, structure, training, discipline and such. Is unsupervised socialization helpful or unhelpful for children? At

what ages? Why? What do you think about government? Do we need leaders, laws and police forces to protect us from our natural tendencies toward selfish self-destruction, or are we best left to ourselves: as individuals, small communities or a large collective? Or perhaps, because we are naturally self-serving, we are best *not* having much government. What do you think? How do you feel when someone lets you down? Are you shocked that a close friend would do such a thing, or do you shrug it off easily, assuming that people will often do such things for the sake of their own interests. While we may not consciously attend to our views about the nature of human nature, they influence our lives again and again.

The question of the character of human nature has been much debated in the history of philosophy. Plato argued that if we only *knew* the Good we would naturally *do* the Good. British philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued that humans are simply well-developed animals, oriented toward self-survival. American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson urged us to see that if we but allow ourselves the freedom to go where our heart leads, we can all become heroes, conduits of the divine.

In China, this question was front and center. Confucius stated that “by nature men are alike. Through practice they have become far apart.”⁶ But what does this mean? Are we equally capable of good and evil and through practice diverge into these separate ways? Or are humans *alike* in our physical nature, our practice of life revealing different habits of living our essential goodness in the context of a complex world? Perhaps the most influential interpreter of Confucius on this question was Mencius (around 371-289 bce), student of the pupil of Confucius’ grandson. Where Confucius appeared somewhat vague about the nature of human nature, Mencius was clear as can be. He argued for the inherent and original goodness of human nature and made this doctrine a central element of his entire philosophy. Below are a couple of

6. Confucius, *Analects*, 17:2

excerpts from *The Books of Mencius*.⁷ In these excerpts Mencius responds to others' opinions. See what you think about Mencius' approach to the goodness of humankind.

2. Kao Tzu said, 'Human nature is like whirling water. Give it an outlet in the east and it will flow east; give it an outlet in the west and it will flow west. Human nature does not show any preference for either good or bad just as water does not show any preference for either east or west.'

'It certainly is the case,' said Mencius, 'that water does not show any preference for either east or west, but does it show the same indifference to high and low? Human nature is good just as water seeks low ground. There is no man who is not good; there is no water that does not flow downwards.'

'Now in the case of water, by splashing it one can make it shoot up higher than one's forehead, and by forcing it one can make it stay on a hill. How can that be the nature of water? It is the circumstances being what they are. That man can be made bad shows that his nature is no different from that of water in this respect.' . . .

6. Kung-tu said, 'Kao Tzu said, "There is neither good nor bad in human nature." Some say, "Human nature can become good or it can become bad, and that is why with the rise of King Wen and King Wu, the people were given to goodness, while with the rise of King Yu and King Li, they were given to cruelty." Then there are others who say, "There are those who are good by nature and there are those who are bad by nature. For this reason, Hsiang [bad] could have Yao [good] as a prince, and Shun [good] could have the Blind Man [bad] as father, . . ."' Now you say human nature is good. Does this mean that all the

7. Composite from D.C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1970); Book VI, Part A, 2, 6. pp. 160-163. and Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 53-54.

others are mistaken?’

‘As far as what is genuinely in him is concerned, a man is capable of becoming good,’ said Mencius. ‘That is what I mean by good. As for his becoming bad, that is not the fault of his native endowment. The heart (or sense) of compassion is possessed by all men alike; likewise the sense of shame, the sense of respect, and the sense of right and wrong. The sense of compassion pertains to benevolence, the sense of shame to dutifulness, the sense of respect to the observance of the rites, and the sense of right and wrong to wisdom. Benevolence, dutifulness, observance of the rites, and wisdom are not welded on to me from the outside; they are in me originally.’

Where would we get our gut-sense of right and wrong, compassion and such, if goodness weren’t natural to us? Doesn’t our very capacity for improvement reveal an inherent goodness? Certainly, circumstances may shape us this way or that, but deep inside aren’t we all basically good? So argues Mencius, whose voice has been widely received in the history of Chinese philosophy.

Nevertheless, as you can see, Mencius’ was not the only voice. Now let us hear another, the voice of Hsün Tzu (flourished between 298 and 238 bce), a philosopher who took Confucius’ thought in an naturalist direction. Three excerpts will be presented from from *The Hsün Tzu*.⁸ In the second he refutes arguments of the followers of Mencius and in the third he refutes Mencius directly.

The nature of man is evil; his goodness is the result of his activity. Now, man’s inborn nature is to seek for gain. If this tendency is followed, strife and rapacity result and deference and compliance disappear. By inborn nature one is envious and hates others. If these tendencies are followed, injury and destruction

8. See Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 128–31.

result and loyalty and faithfulness disappear. By inborn nature one possesses the desires of ear and eye and likes sound and beauty. If these tendencies are followed lewdness and licentiousness result and the pattern and order of propriety and righteousness disappear. Therefore to follow man's nature and his feelings will inevitably result in strife and rapacity, combine with rebellion and disorder, and end in violence. Therefore there must be the civilizing influence of teachers and laws and the guidance of propriety and righteousness, and then it will result in deference and compliance, combine with pattern and order, and end up in discipline. From this point of view it is clear that the nature of man is evil and that his goodness is the result of activity. . . .

Someone may ask, "If man's nature is evil, whence come propriety and righteousness?" I answer that all propriety and righteousness are results of the activity of sages and not originally produced from man's nature. The potter pounds the clay and makes the vessel. This being the case, the vessel is the product of the artisan's activity and not the original product of man's nature. The sages gathered together their ideas and thoughts and became familiar with activity, facts, and principles, and thus produced propriety and righteousness and instituted laws and systems. This being the case, propriety and righteousness, and laws and systems are the products of the activity of the sages and not the original products of man's nature.

As to the eye desiring color, the ear desiring sound, the mouth desiring flavor, the heart desiring gain, and the body desiring pleasure and ease--all these are products of man's original nature and feelings. . . .

Mencius said, "The nature of man is good." I say that this is not true. By goodness at any time in any place is meant true principles and peaceful order, and by evil is meant imbalance, violence, and disorder. This is the distinction between good and evil. Now do we honestly regard man's nature as

characterized by true principles and peaceful order? If so, why are sages necessary and why are propriety and righteousness necessary? What possible improvement can sages make on true principles and peaceful order?

Now this is not the case. Man's nature is not evil. Therefore the sages of antiquity, knowing that man's nature is evil, that it is unbalanced and incorrect, and that it is violent, disorderly, and undisciplined, established the authority of rulers to govern the people, set forth clearly propriety and righteousness to transform them, instituted laws and governmental measures to rule them, and made punishment severe to restrain them, so that all will result in good order and be in accord with goodness. Such is the government of sage-kings and the transforming influence of propriety and righteousness.

So, whence comes our sense of righteousness? Is it *original*--naturally developing from our own inherent goodness? Or is it, perhaps, created and maintained by the collective wisdom of society, a necessary--but external--ingredient of any healthy people? Or perhaps (as neither Mencius nor Hsün Tzu suggest), our sense of propriety and righteousness is *neither* inborn nor an expression of the wisdom of the sages, but rather is merely "propaganda," the appropriate means by which those in power--either consciously or unconsciously--maintain their power over those who are not in power.

The debate about the goodness/ badness of human nature in Chinese philosophy developed in the context of the a Chinese culture that is very socially-conscious and sensitive to key virtues (like propriety and righteousness). In other contexts the discussion about the character of human nature is framed differently. One might ask about the primary motivation of people. Are humans (either individually or collectively) primarily motivated by happiness, power, survival, a sense of immortality (either literally or through some "legacy we leave through children, accomplishment, fame, etc.), or some other value? Why is it that we sometimes sacrifice our lives for something? Is this a sign of an inherent altruism, or is even self-sacrifice

motivated by a desire for eternal gain? One might speak of the conflict between our apparent or “conscious” motivations which often fall in line with familial and social conditioning (for example, Sigmund Freud might speak here of a “super-ego”) and the more libidinal and less conscious drives of human experience (Freud’s “id”). Some might question the whole notion of a “human nature” entirely, arguing that there is no common character of all humans. We simply are as we develop in the context of our unique worlds. Perhaps there is no true “center” of a human self which can be labelled “good” or “evil.” Rather we are simply fragmented associations of thought, value, and desire floating in space and time. Still others, as Shankara from the East or St. Augustine in the West, suggest that humans most essentially bear the stamp of the divine, our evil tendencies resulting from an ignorance or twistedness somehow embedded in the very fabric of our present experience. Needless to say, these kinds of questions lead us into still further questions (the nature of the self, the existence of spiritual reality, the character of “right and wrong” and so on). One of them is the question of the “after-life.”

What Happens After Death?

It is interesting that we speak of it as a question of *after-life*, because it is really a question of *after-death*. For the question is, “What happens after we die?” And once again, we might want to brush the question aside as being unanswerable and therefore unimportant. But for many, it is vitally important. Take Epicurus, for example. For him death was simply the dispersion of our (material) particles, body and soul alike. Consequently, to live our life in view of some event, activity, or state, arising after death, was a mistake. We should live solely for the pleasures of *this* life, for this life is all we have. Socrates, on the other hand (along with many from the East), appears to have believed in a successive process of death and rebirth of individual human souls. For Socrates, the character of our activities and development in *this* life significantly shape the quality of many lifetimes to come. How should we live this life here and now? How do we value the particular experiences, practices, relationships, and activities of our life here and now? It depends, to some extent, on how we understand what happens after death.

The basic options divide into four distinct viewpoints. First, there is the belief in annihilation. Human beings are born. They live. They die. And that is it. There is nothing else. We have seen that this is the position of Epicurus, who believed in the existence of a human “soul” (albeit a material one). Those who argue against the existence of a human soul generally assume some kind of annihilist viewpoint. But there are also some who argue that divine condemnation involves not some kind of physical, eternal, conscious punishment, but rather an annihilation of their very being. The second viewpoint is that of the transmigration from one life into another. As we mentioned above, this is the viewpoint of Socrates and of many in the East. It is understood somewhat differently depending on one’s understanding of the self. Some (Jain philosophers, for example) take a very strict view of the individuality of the human soul and see a progression of a particular soul from one lifetime to the next. Others (Buddhists, for example), while acknowledging the progression of thought and feeling from one life to another, do not ultimately want to understand this in terms of the history of a particular “soul.” Rather, what we perceive in transmigration is really the mutual influence of impermanent features.⁹ The third viewpoint (which, at times, can resemble forms of the second viewpoint) is the belief in final absorption, either after a single life or multiple lifetimes. This viewpoint holds that the elements of a given life are, at death/liberation, absorbed into the Ultimate Reality. Individual identity is dissolved into a larger Self/Emptiness/Way and lives on in this new form. The fourth viewpoint involves the belief in either spiritual translation or bodily resurrection. In this view, the continuity of individual selfhood is assumed (whether understood in the context of a single or multiple lifetimes). After death, this self continues living in a different “place,” either comprehended in terms of a soul’s location (heaven, hell, pure land, etc.), or in terms of a bodily resurrection into a new and re-created earth. The traditional Christian position combines both the

9. There are actually a wide range of nuanced and highly debated philosophical schools within the general category of those who believe in transmigration. For a survey of these positions see Yuvraj Krishan, *The Doctrine of Karma: Its Origin and Development in Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina Traditions* (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1997) and Bruce Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma: A Philosophical Study* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990).

belief in a temporary after-death residence with God in heaven, and a final, eternal, bodily residence with God in a re-created earth.

Needless to say, this is not an issue where a simple “everybody is right” approach will work. It is pretty hard to prepare for the annihilist end of everything and simultaneously believe in the transmigration of your life through eons of time. How do you understand yourself as a transient collection of properties destined to be dissolved or absorbed and, at the same time, live your life as if it will live forever (either as a result of spiritual translation, bodily resurrection, or multiple personal transmigration). While on many points philosophies and religions are mutually compatible, when it comes to one’s approach to “after death” the positions are mutually exclusive.

But how will we decide regarding such an issue? How can we intelligently reflect on this larger issue of life (and death)? In philosophical circles this is often tied up in the question of, “What evidence will I accept?” As we learned in our chapter on knowledge, some are more willing to accept certain evidence that others will not accept. What if someone literally came back from the dead and told us about the life to come? Would we believe that testimony (as Christians do)? What if one were to “remember” the long, long, history of their past lives? Would we believe that testimony (as Buddhists do)? What if a seance were to “succeed” in calling back a long lost relative from the dead? David Kalupahana writes of early Buddhist philosophy that, “extrasensory perception was recognized as a valid form of perceiving and verifying not only mental phenomena but also physical phenomena that are not given to immediate sensory perception.”¹⁰ Similarly, John Koller writes of the Nyaya school of philosophy in India that one kind of perception recognized by the Nyaya is “the perception of things in the past or future, or hidden, or infinitely small in size by one who possesses unusual powers generated by disciplined meditation, or *yoga*.”¹¹

10. David J. Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1975), 107.

11. John M. Koller, “Knowledge and Reality,” in *Voices of Wisdom: A Multicultural Philosophy Reader*, ed. E. Gary Kessler (Belmont, CA: Thompson/Wadsworth, 2007), 289.

Most Western philosophers these days reject the evidence of extra-sensory perception and thereby reduce the analysis of “after-death” to a logical discussion of the possibility of personal survival of death. This, in turn, reduces for the most part to a debate between physicalists, dualists, and such regarding the existence of some kind of “soul” which would be capable of surviving death and which we have outlined above.¹² Needless to say, questions regarding the criteria of personal identity (what exactly is the “I” which survives death), causality (what *causes* personal survival or annihilation), and time (just what is “eternity”) are connected with such discussions. Another way to approach intelligent reflection on human after-death might be to explore the issue, not so much in terms of either concrete evidence (sensory or extra-sensory) or analytic debate, but rather as one component of an over-all basic belief system (or perhaps as a “good, working hypothesis”). What kind of sense do I make of the way things are if I see it from the perspective of a physicalist, annihilist? What features of things are fruitfully comprehended/explored in such a perspective? What is left out? What if I explored (or lived) reality from another perspective--what might that be like? Without trying to find some hard “proof,” is there a practical way of determining your own reason-to-act-as-if my “after-death” may be this or that?

Relationships and Connections

We have mentioned that the question of personal identity is deeply connected with discussion of the survival of death. In his discussion of these matters, philosopher Trenton Merricks suggests that perhaps, “identity’s holding between a person at one time and a person at another is not *intrinsic* to the person involved, but is rather analyzed as his or her being related to

12. There are exceptions to this reductive approach. Trenton Merricks, for example, takes a largely physicalist approach to personal existence and then argues for the possibility of the reconstitution or resurrection of the human person/body in a later future time. See his “How to Live Forever Without Saving Your Soul: Physicalism and Immortality,” in *Soul, Body, and Survival: Essays on the Metaphysics of Human Persons*, ed. Kevin Corcoran (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 183–200.

some other thing (or things).”¹³ Again we ask, what is (human) life (about)? Is there something inside us (a “soul” perhaps, or some basic “goodness”) that makes us who we are? Or are there particular functions or faculties (such as “reason” or “free will”) that make humans humans? Or perhaps, like Merrick suggests, none of these criteria of identity are adequate and that, really we are simply who we are because of our relationships.

Think about it. If I were to ask you who you are, many of you would immediately respond with comments about your network of relationships. “I’m a mom.” “I’m a Jew.” “I’m a Coloradan.” Perhaps your network of relationships with nature, with the divine, with other people, with yourself, *is* who you are. Or at least it is what human life is *about*. We have already explored relationships in our outline of the life we examine (chapter two) and in our discussion of the “others,” and obligations surrounding our ethical life (chapter seven). We will explore relationships further in chapters to come (see chapter fifteen and especially chapter ???). What is important here is to recognize that one way of approaching the whole question of human “being” is to comprehend it in terms of relationship.

For some, human life is best understood not in terms of individual experience, but rather as social reality. The primary reality is not the particular person, but rather the society within which the particular is embedded. This approach has recently been suggested regarding the world of ants. The social mind of an ant colony is, perhaps, a more fruitful way of looking at the identity and “meaning” of ant existence. Perhaps human life is not “about” me. Perhaps it really is about family, nation, race, or the human race as a whole. Perhaps our response-ability for each other is more fundamental than any of our “faculties” for personal fulfillment. Perhaps we are *members* of the world more than *persons* in the world.

Or perhaps human being is best understood in terms of our relationship to a panorama of spiritual forces (angels, jinn, ghosts, river spirits, God, and so on). When we think of ourselves as

13. Trenton Merricks, “How to Live Forever Without Saving Your Soul: Physicalism and Immortality,” in *Soul, Body, and Survival: Essays on the Metaphysics of Human Persons*, ed. Kevin Corcoran (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 195.

private “souls” who live out a rational life here on earth we miss the point. The point is our place and performance in this battlefield of spiritual forces. This has been the perspective in aboriginal tribes throughout the world for millenia. This is the perspective of Islam and Bhakti Hinduism. Here it is not the fact of our free will that makes us human, but rather the exercise of that will in terms of the forces we face.

Or perhaps we make too much out of these relationships. Perhaps it is only (or primarily) our relationship with nature that is most fundamental. Perhaps all this talk about faculties and functions and futures is really a lot of hot air. We are simply animals--evolved in some measure differently from other animals, yes, but essentially an animal--and what matters is the survival and development of the species. From this perspective, one might appreciate relationships with others, faculties and such, but they are comprehended *within* the perspective of our more basic existence as a creature. We celebrate life as a creature. We connect with food, with senses, with land, with other animals (human and non-human). We seek to preserve the human race. Survival in relationship with this earth is what it is about.

For some, human life is not what is intrinsic or “in-here” to that life (soul, mind, goodness). Rather it is what is outside or “out there.” It is connection. It is about relationship. But, even if it is so, what makes life “about” relationship? What is it about relationship that makes life “about” relationship? And here we are asking the question of meaning.

Meaning and Story: Putting Human Being Into Practice

So far in this chapter we have been exploring what *is* life, what is characteristic or essential to being alive or human. But that is a different question than the question of meaning, of what life is *about*. Or is it? Just how are the questions of the nature and meaning of life connected?

The Meaning of Meaning

Think of each of these questions:

- What is life?
- What do you live *for*?
- What do you *want* in life?
- What do you *value* in life?

Though these are (obviously) different questions, our most basic personal reflections often reveal to us connections between these questions.

Now think of this question:

- What would you *die* for?

Throughout human history people have been prepared to die for things. Wars have been fought for access to property and resources. Populations have rebelled in order to secure basic freedoms. Some have been punished for horrible crimes while others have died performing an act of kindness. People have been martyred for their beliefs or even for their pursuit of art, science, or philosophy. Some die for love. Others die for religion. Reason and passion, freedom and choice, good and evil, relationships. When we give our lives, we offer them on behalf of those features that most make us human. For without these features (for example, without access to/relationship with land and basic resources; without freedom of speech), we feel that we are not living a fully human life. It is not far from “who we are” to “why we live” to “what we value.” We have already addressed something of “who we are” above. We will address our guiding values more fully in chapter 15. Now we must talk of “why we live,” of the meaning of life.

Though it may seem pompous to pontificate on the meaning of life, the fact of the matter is that we do it all the time, naturally. Think for a moment. What makes your day? When you come home and tell that special someone about your day, just *what* do you talk about? By this act you are presenting your day into a framework of “meaning.” Even if you were alone and simply thought about your day before falling asleep, in this act of thought you are re-presenting your day in a framework of meaning. Certain things would be highlighted (or neglected) in certain ways. This or that event would “fit”--to some extent--with others. When we review our day, we reflect on it’s “meaning.”

To repeat the story from the beginning of the chapter: we hear the news of a person we knew who committed suicide. And we grieve--we grieve differently than when people die from other causes. What is it that ends in suicide? Is it not the same for all? The ceasing of a heart-beat. A last breath. We grieve the lost connection with another. We miss the gift that each person offers to the world. Yet *suicide* feels different for those who grieve. Perhaps we grieve a suicide differently because we have this sense that life should mean something, should be worth living.

At the simplest act of remembering a day in the life, at the act of remembering an ended life, we reflect on meaning.

At the end of the previous chapter I suggested that the issues of (1) the meaning of language and (2) the meaning of life are not as far apart as we might have imagined. It is interesting to note that in the previous chapter--as we discussed the "meaning" of language--some of the windows through which language is viewed emphasized the basic elements or "parts" of language (words, ideas, referents), others pointed us to forms or functions (sentences, structure), while still other windows revealed the meaning of language in terms of the broader frameworks within which language is practiced (culture, symbolization, life). We inquired about how meaning is established (by government, by convention, etc.). We spoke of language as a "form of life," thinking of "linguaging" as an act of human "be-ing." Now, having read something about life, we can see some of the parallels between questions of language and questions of life. Some understand meaning in the "parts" (words, faculties), while others look at function (sentence, choice) and still others look at a broader whole (culture, life, relationship) for meaning. Some claim that "meaning" is something that those in power impose on the rest (and some argue that meaning is something that those in power *ought to* impose on the rest). And some find that making meaning is a simple part of life itself. Life speaks and speaking is itself part of life.

Perhaps it might help here to draw a distinction. *Personal* meaning is one thing. *Philosophical* meaning is another. On the one hand there is the reason I get out of bed in the morning. There is the sense of purpose, however small, that keeps prisoners alive in

concentration camps. There is “what makes my day.” This is personal meaning. One may be unhappy or penniless and still live a meaningful life. “Philosophical” meaning, however, is another matter, one which is difficult even to define. Think of the difference between “meaningful” work and “meaningless” work. Studies demonstrate that people tend to enjoy their work and to perform better in environments where they have greater connection to the entire process of their activity (as opposed to, for example, attaching bolts to parts for an unknown product or purpose). Here “meaning” seems to involve some connection with a whole, seeing some kind of “fit.” Yet the philosophical notion of life’s meaning also carries the notion of a supreme value, some kind of final “good” in human living.¹⁴

Needless to say the two are connected. For some, it is when there is a collapse of personal meaning when the question of philosophical meaning arises. The death of a loved one. The loss of a career or a limb. The collapse of a government. We are shaken, and perhaps shaken enough to ask a question beyond our own personal meaning. “What is it all about anyway?”, we wonder. “Why do we exist at all?” “Where does human life come from and where is it going?” “Is there anything “bigger” out there?” “Does anything make sense or is it all just absurd?” And, as you may be able to see by reading these questions, it is not far from “what is it all about?”, and “how do things fit?”, to “what is really real?” (the topic of our next chapter). In times of crisis we the loss of personal meaning may force us to re-examine or basis of philosophical meaning. In an “examined life” we consider our foundations in philosophical meaning to provide grounding for personal meaning. Since this text introduces the *philosophical* examination of life, we will explore the philosophical meaning of life to see how our approach to this “larger issue of life” might affect both our sense of personal meaning and our practice of living itself.

14. For a look at these meanings of philosophical meaning, compare <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning> with http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning_of_life. (accessed 5/19/09). For a similar division of ways of thinking about meaning see also Harold H. Titus, *Living Issues in Philosophy: An Introductory Textbook* (New York: American Book Company, 1964), 158–59.

The Meaning of Life

Whatever we mean by meaning, it is clear that many, many people believe that there is meaning to life: personal and philosophical. This is the stuff of song and screen. The love song. The story of freedom. Adventure, loss, desire. How do you measure a year? Forty-two. Tension and resolution. Life is full of meaning: tragic at times, but meaningful nonetheless. Or is it? The question of the ultimate meaning of human life has been examined from a number of different angles. Astrophysicists consider the place of human life in the history of the universe. Biologists and anthropologists inquire about human survival and development. Holy people reflect on human life from the perspective of some Ultimate Reality. Philosophers consider the meaning of life insofar as they (1) present or deny a somewhat coherent view of the world within which human life can be comprehended, or (2) present or deny some ultimate value of human living. Often these two are connected in some form. As you can see, this dual presentation forms something of a bridge between metaphysics (the study of what is real and the topic of our next chapter) and ethics (the topic of chapter 7). Let us look at a few examples.

First, the Stoics. We heard about the Stoics, a philosophical school in ancient Greece and Rome, in our first chapter. There we learned that they believed in a distinction between the “discourse about” philosophy and philosophy itself. Discourse about logic, physics, and ethics had to do with the conceptual analysis about the nature of things. Logic, physics, and ethics themselves, were accomplished when we lived according to the nature of things. The Stoics believed that Supreme Reason (*logos*) held the three together. They saw the universe as a massive, intelligent, System/Being. It is divided into basic elements such as earth, air, fire, and water. The presence of spirit (*pneuma* -a combination of fire and air) animates things, giving one form of life to plants, another to animals, and through its purest expression (*logos*), it gives birth to human reason. Human reason is therefore made of the same substance as the ordering force of the universe. The rules of Reason govern the behavior of the universe with an inevitability of cause and effect. They also govern our ability to think and to speak. Logic, therefore, is simply one way of attending to the order of reason.

Needless to say, Stoic ethics reflected this way of looking at the world. Our supreme good, for the Stoic was to live “according to Reason,” which was also to live “according to Nature,” which was also to live “virtuously.” Human life was about learning to shed our irrational passions and to discern and order ourselves in tune with the fundamental Reason of the universe. The meaning of life, for the Stoic, was intimately connected with our place in the universe as reasoning beings in connection with the ordering Force of the universe. The stereotype of the “stoic,” or unfeeling, response to the hardships of life derives from their willingness to receive the inevitable winds of Nature as part of the ordering of the universe in the context of their own ordered composure. It is part of their meaning of life.

Next, John Locke (1632-1704). We have read an excerpt from John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in our chapter on knowing. As we learned, Locke did not believe in any innate knowledge of Reason inhabiting the human mind. Instead he felt that all knowledge came to us through one source: *experience*, and in particular, our five senses. Locke was suspicious both of the universal (and unscientific) proclamations of the Medieval Church and of the grandiose theories of the rationalists. For Locke, there was only one solid way to correct our views of the world. And this was to isolate our thinking from other influences and then to systematically submit our reflection to the laws of nature. Like Francis Bacon (whose *Novum Organum* you tasted in chapter 4), Locke thought that custom, language, personal habits and such prevented us from really seeing the way things are. Consequently, in order to possess true understanding, we must stop all of our active theorizings, and passively receive what comes to us through the particular ideas of experience alone. Locke describes the process of the passive reception of impressions and the reflection upon them, as well as the world that this process discovers, as a kind of mechanism. *Laws* of nature. *Procedures* of reflection. Unlike the Stoics who see reason as a means of attuning to the harmony of the universe, Locke would understand reason as a way of disengaging from all other influences, so that the bare input of the senses can be received and recorded. This kind of work takes a great degree of self-control. But it is only

through such self-controlled reflection that we can discover the laws of nature and so re-order our practices in agriculture, in medicine, in society, and all of life.

And this is Locke's point. The world is a machine, comprehended through the procedures of a self-controlled experience untainted by culture or theory. By grasping the laws of this machine (and, of course, the laws of human nature are also part of these laws), we can take rational responsibility for this world and make it a better place to live. Responsible agency is at the core of Locke's ethics. We master the laws of human nature (our desires and habits and such) the same way we master the forces of nature: independence, science, order, self-control, progress. For example, the laws of nature, according to Locke, have granted human beings natural rights (for example, life and liberty). Since we have been granted these rights, it is important that we defend them. For Locke, the meaning of human life was one and the same with the meaning of the universe. It all fit together.

A lot of water passed under the bridge by the time of our next example, Friedrich Nietzsche. Modern empiricism and rationalism had worked their way into a corner such that Immanuel Kant demonstrated, based on their foundations, that the ultimately real was unknowable. Waves of Romanticism called into question the centrality of order and reason. The vision of science and progress was looking more confusing and less hopeful. The foundations upon which one perceived an ordered sense of the universe and the place of humankind were falling apart.

And central to this collapse of the modern western world-view was what Nietzsche called the "death of God." The assumption of an omnipotent, omniscient, all-loving deity, who created this earth and placed humans therein for some eternal purpose, and who was actively present in a saving interpersonal relationship with human beings, was, for many late moderns, simply unbelievable. This "God," who for centuries was perceived as the source of cosmic order, as the source of moral law, and as the end or goal of human existence, lost that place of honor. In fact many wondered if the whole enterprise of religion might not be some invention of human imagination or power. It was, perhaps, Friedrich Nietzsche that awakened the western world

most vividly to the implications of the collapse of the Christian and modern view of the world. Nietzsche proclaimed that God was dead and that, consequently humankind was now facing “*the advent of nihilism*” (“nihil” means nothing), a time when our we would have no transcendent source of meaning for our lives. I call this circumstance, or the belief in such a circumstance, *ultimate nihilism*.

In place of the modern notions of truth, value, and meaning, Nietzsche hailed the arrival of the “overman,” the one who, standing boldly in the face of apparent meaninglessness, would forge a new kind of meaning. He writes:

Behold, I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth! I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Poison-mixers are they, whether they know it or not. Despisers of life are they, decaying and poisoned themselves, of whom the earth is weary: So let them go.

Once the sin against God was the greatest sin; but God died, and these sinners died with him. To sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing, and to esteem the entrails of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth.¹⁵

Nietzsche, unlike the Stoics, saw no cosmic harmony, no ultimate Reason behind the way things were, and no universal virtue within which humans would find life meaningful. But, unlike Locke, he also saw no predetermined “laws” of nature or “procedures” of rational reflection, or direction of “progress” through which modern humanity would better itself. For Nietzsche, there was no transcendent source to which we could point for ultimate direction or sense of some

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), 125; italics are Nietzsche’s.

absolute “purpose” for life. But this did not leave humans completely hopeless. Quite the contrary, for Nietzsche, this meant that humans were finally free, released from the useless ties to illusory absolutes that had chained humankind. For Nietzsche, humans were, and ought to be, simply “will to power”: a passionate and creative expression of the self in the face of an ultimate meaninglessness. For Nietzsche, our meaning is not given, it is *created*, here and now from our selves with the resources of this present world.

The direction of western history appeared to follow Nietzsche’s proclamation. Marx, Freud, and Darwin all, in their own ways, questioned the Enlightenment sense of the meaning of human life. World Wars and economic depressions cast a shadow over the modern notion of “progress” through reason and science. Eventually, others followed Nietzsche in his proclamation of ultimate nihilism and his quest to overcome it. Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus made the subject of “nothingness”--of “nihilism”--a central point of their philosophies. You might say that by the 1950s and 60s, Europe--and later, the USA--had lost consensus regarding what life was all about.

So what does one live *for* in the midst of an ultimate meaninglessness? Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, and others, all pointed humanity back to the present, to authentic human existence, and to our free expressions/choices. When there is no ultimate meaning, we make our own meanings here and now through the passionate and authentic realization/expression of our freedom. There may not be any transcendent ultimate Source to tell me what life is all about, but I still can live my life with meaning here and now by choosing my own supreme values in the present.

One of Heidegger’s students is our last example. Keiji Nishitani (1900-???) studied under Heidegger in Freiburg, Germany from 1936 to 1939. Nishitani, was, however, not from Germany. He was Japanese, and also a student of Kitaro Nishida, whose work we read in our chapter on practicing life. Nishitani felt that the problem of nihilism--the lack of coherent foundation for any sense of the ultimate meaning of human life--was indeed the most significant issue facing humankind, an issue especially present in the tensions between religion and science

present in the 1950s. Nishitani, in a reflection on the development of his own philosophy shared that,

It seemed to me that the problem of modern nihilism in Nietzsche and others was profoundly connected with all these matters [Marxism, scientific rationalism and so on]. I am convinced that the problem of nihilism lies at the root of the mutual aversion of religion and science. And it was this that gave my philosophical engagement its starting point from which it grew larger and larger until it came to envelop nearly everything.¹⁶

For Nishitani, the western thinkers (Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, for example) had not gone far enough. They had correctly recognized the profound loss resulting from the collapse of the modern foundations of meaning. They had correctly recognized the need to start all over again from within. But, to Nishitani, they substituted a free and autonomous self for the other foundations of meaning which grounded modern culture. And it was the problem of the self itself which was beneath it all.

Nishitani drew upon the resources of Zen Buddhist philosophy. He perceived that the western “nihilists” viewed the meaninglessness of the world as something “we” face in a world “out there” and that “we” subjectively experience “in here” personally. This, for Nishitani, was the stimulus for what in Zen is called the Great Doubt, where we begin to see the profound meaninglessness of existence. But in Zen, Great Doubt goes beyond “overcoming” emptiness (nothingness, nihil) through the self. It is to discover that the “we” that faces the “nothingness” are ourselves nothing, and then to see this, not as some “issue” to be dealt with, but rather simply

16. Keiji Nishitani, “Watakushi no tetsukagakuteki hossokuten” (My Philosophical Starting Point) in Michitaro Tanaka, ed. , *Koza: Tetsugaku taikai* (Kyoto: Jimbunshoin, 1963), 1:229-230; cited in “Translator’s Introduction” to Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan van Bragt (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), xxxvi. Nishitani originally published this work between 1954 and 1956.

as the suchness that it is. It is not that we deny our existence or even our relationships and purposes here and there (the mountains are still mountains and the rivers are still rivers). But instead we see their very being as nothing, the mere movement of phenomena.

And so we may ask, “What does one live *for*?” in Nishitani’s view of the world. If there is no meaning in things, and furthermore now no “self” to experience that meaning, what is to be done? And the answer is, simply, we live. We act from emptiness and toward emptiness, seeing what is such and desiring nothing beyond what is such. We step beyond such distinctions as “subject” and “object” or “self” and “world.” We do not “deal with” anything. We simply act. We simply live. We are not given meaning. We do not even create meaning. There *is* no meaning. We live.

Through these four examples, we have seen how philosophical meaning is explored. We take a look at the way things are and how we fit in the midst of it all. We consider what, in light of all this, are the most important values of life, what might be the chief guiding values of human existence. Needless to say, our sense of these matters deeply affects how we live our lives in practice.

The Life of “Meaning”

So briefly--we will go into much greater detail in the final part of this text--let us see how this all works in practice. How does our examination of what (human) life is (about) affect our day to day life?

Think first of your basic decisions of life: education, marriage, career, use of time. Our decisions regarding these issues are intimately connected with our sense of what (human) life is (about). What about our reason, our soul, our freedom, our relationships. Are these important to us? How important? Important enough to invest time in? Or do we even believe in them? Perhaps what we dream of as love is merely a power play for security and pleasure between two biological entities. Do you invest in *this* life or the *next*? What kinds of relationships, education, and so on would best facilitate this or that way of seeing things?

Another way of looking at it is to ask about what you value and why. What relationships, what possessions, what events or activities do you value? What is important in life, and why? How do your values in very simple, daily things reflect your sense of what life is (about)? Think of your housing, your clothing, your food, your entertainment, think of the way your own room is arranged? How does the arrangement of your room reflect your sense of the meaning of life?

And still another way of exploring the practical implications of our philosophy of life's meaning is to consider what *kind* of energy we put into things. Here it is not just a matter of *what* you do (reading, as opposed to texting), but of *how* you do things. What kind of effort or energy is going out when you act? Is it an effort to be successful? Is it the flow of reason, what is logical? Are you expressing or producing? Are you opening yourself to experience or are you making something happen? Is there a self present or is there simply action without an actor? If you pay attention to the kind of energy you give to life, you may discover a few hints about what you think (human) life is (about).

Journal Assignment 11.1 Exploring the Meaning of Life

This assignment provides a way for you to summarize what you believe about life's meaning and to examine how your reflections on this "larger issue of life" might influence your mind and life in practice.

Parts and Structure

Think about yourself. Who are you? Think about your mind, your feelings. What kind of a person are you? Think about your body. How do you relate to your body? Do you *like* your mind, your feelings, your body? Think about your soul. Do you believe in a soul (or in a body)? How have you cared for your soul in the past? How would you *like* to care for your self (in all aspects) in the future? What role do you think such matters as mind, feelings, body, soul, play in the "meaning of things"?

Choice and Cause

Now think about choice and cause. What is "freedom"? Do human beings have "free will"? Are we merely the end result of a chain of *karma* or atomic causes or can we act in some absolutely independent way? Does chance happen? think about your own choices and influences. How do you feel when someone else restricts your freedoms or when another's freedoms are taken away? Is there something essentially human stolen when basic freedoms are removed? What influences your own choices and how much? How do you feel about your own influence in things? What would you like to cause in the future?

Value and Character

Now turn and think about human value and after-death. What do you think about the character of humanity? Are we basically good or evil? And if you decide on some combination of the two, how does this work? Do humans need governing to save them from their own selfishness or does governing simply promote oppression through the selfishness of a few? Are there some people or societies that are “evil”? What does this mean for those people who have relationships with them? Consider yourself. Are *you* basically good or bad? What do you think? What does this mean about how you treat yourself? What do you think happens after you die? How do you intend on preparing for that end?

Relationships and Connections

Now think about your relationships. Would you agree with those who argue that what is most essential about humans--more than reason, more than initiation of conscious action, more than some inherent goodness or badness--is our configuration of relationships? Just how important *are* human relationships and why? Which relationships are important to you and why (with self, others, nature, spiritual reality, Ultimate)?

Meaning and Story: Putting Human Being into Practice

Now finally, the ultimate question: in twenty-five words or less, explain the meaning of life. Then state what that means for the meaning of your life.