

Meaning and the Afterlife

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It's a cliché about philosophers that they ponder the meaning of life. But, by and large, they don't. Philosophers rarely consider the question and when they do, they often dismiss it as nonsense. Among those who take life's meaning seriously, many do so only to proclaim that it has none: life is meaningless or absurd.¹

The extent to which the question is neglected in contemporary philosophy can be hidden by well-meaning substitution. Thus philosophers ask what it takes for someone to live a “meaningful life.” This is the topic of Susan Wolf's *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, and of many essays that engage with her.² Wolf is representative both in shifting the question—from the meaning of life as a whole to individual lives—and in the outline of her answer. According to Wolf, to live a meaningful life is to engage, more or less happily and successfully, in activities that matter. This might involve relationships with other people, caring for those you love; it might be the pursuit of justice; it could be art or science or philosophy, productive work or joyful leisure.

My topic is not the idea of a meaningful life—though I will come back to it at the end. It's the question of life's meaning. For Wolf, as for her fellow travelers, some people's lives are meaningful while others' lives are not. The meaning that interests her is a personal possession. But when we ask if life as a whole has meaning, we are not asking for something that varies from life to life. The question has one answer for everyone or it has no answer at all. What is the meaning of human life, as such?

¹ A classic case: Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1955).

² Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

It is this question that philosophers are prone to dismiss, finding it nonsensical. The sticking point is “meaning.” What does that word mean in “the meaning of life”? We talk about the meaning of words or linguistic meaning, the meaning of an utterance or of writing in a book. When we ask for the meaning of life, are we asking whether life has meaning in this sense? Could human life be a sentence in some cosmic language?

In principle, it could. There could be aliens who communicate through the activities of species over centuries, for whom revolutions are commas and stretches of progress or regress make up words. They might chance upon sentences spelled out by accident in human history, like the text of *Hamlet* hammered out by monkeys at typewriters. That would be an astonishing fact. I’d be curious to know what we happen to say. But it’s not the meaning we are looking for. To be unwitting ink in some alien script would only confirm our absurdity.

Perhaps we shouldn’t be hung up on “meaning.” What about the point or purpose of human life? Humanity could play a role, or have a function, in a larger system. In Douglas Adams’ *Hitchhiker’s* books, Earth is part of a galactic computer designed, ironically, to find the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything.³ (Notoriously, the answer is 42.) But if we were cogs in a cosmic machine, discovering our function wouldn’t tell us what life means. It would leave our existential maladies untouched. Thomas Nagel makes a grisly version of this point:

If we learned that we were being raised to provide food for other creatures fond of human flesh, who planned to turn us into cutlets before we got too stringy—even if we learned that the human race had been developed by animal breeders precisely for this purpose—that would still not give our lives meaning.⁴

You might think that the problem is with the function. “Admittedly, the usual form of service to a

³ Douglas Adams, *The Ultimate Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (New York: Del Rey, 2002).

⁴ Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd,” *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 716–27, 721.

higher being is different from this,” Nagel concedes. “One is supposed to behold and partake of the glory of God, for example, in a way in which chickens do not share in the glory of coq au vin.”⁵ Which is true enough. But it doesn’t help us understand the question. The point remains that function alone is not enough to give life meaning, not in the sense that interests us—which means that “meaning” in “the meaning of life” does not mean function.

It is here that philosophers tend to throw in the towel. I will not follow them. Instead, I’ll turn to the surprisingly recent origins of “the meaning of life” to argue that the question of life’s meaning does make sense. What we want from the meaning of life is an interpretation of human life as a whole that reconciles us to the human condition.

Understood in this way, the question could have a secular answer, as it does in the Romantic tradition for which the human future stands in for religious eschatology. To bring this possibility into focus, I’ll accentuate the negative. Narratives of human extinction, like those explored by Samuel Scheffler in *Death and the Afterlife*, help us see how human history might, or might not, have a meaning we can rationally accept.⁶

I’ll argue, finally, that progress towards justice plays a pivotal role in the narratives of human history and the human future that could give meaning to life; I’ll trace the limits of justice as a source of affirmation; and I’ll return to the vexed relationship between life’s meaning and the meaning of individual lives.

I

“Since the dawn of time,” the sophomoric essayist declares, “humanity has pondered the meaning of life.” Except we haven’t. The question doesn’t come up in Plato or Aristotle, Seneca or Epictetus, Augustine or Aquinas, Descartes, Hume, or Kant. They ask what it means to live a good human life;

⁵ Nagel, “The Absurd,” 721.

⁶ Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, ed. Niko Kolodny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

but they don't ask what human life means.

“The meaning of life”—that turn of phrase—originates in 1834. It appears, first, in the mouth of a fictional philosopher, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (“God-born devil’s-dung”), in Thomas Carlyle’s parodic novel *Sartor Resartus*.⁷ In a chapter called “The Everlasting No,” Teufelsdröckh laments his isolation from the world around him: “To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb.”⁸ It is in this mood that he questions the meaning of life.

Carlyle did not invent the meaning of life, not just because—as I will argue—we can make sense of it in terms that transcend his historical moment, but because he was building on German Romanticism. In the late 1820s, he had read the German thinker Novalis, whom he introduced to English readers.⁹ Novalis had used the phrase “*der Sinn das Lebens*,” which Carlyle likely encountered in his aphoristic fragments. In 1797, Novalis wrote: “Only an artist can guess the meaning of life.”¹⁰ The phrase first appeared in print, in German, in Friedrich Schlegel’s novel, *Lucinde*, published in 1799.¹¹

This history affords a number of clues. First, the question of life’s meaning was more or less invisible until the nineteenth century. Second, it’s a question that we ask in times of emptiness or anguish. We ask it when we suffer or grieve without consolation, when we are lonely and bitter, when misery and injustice overwhelm us. Life is profoundly flawed. Is there some meaning to it all? The question is pressing for us, as it was for early existentialists like Søren Kierkegaard, tormented by the angst of human existence, when we fear that it means nothing.¹²

⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1833–1834), ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 140.

⁸ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 127.

⁹ Steven Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 77.

¹⁰ Cassedy, *What Do We Mean?*, 57.

¹¹ Cassedy, *What Do We Mean?*, 67–8.

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (1843), trans. Alastair Hannay and ed. Victor Eremita

Finally, both Novalis and Carlyle connect the meaning of life with the interpretation of reality—which is akin to the interpretation of art—reviving early Christian ideas of “reading the book of the world.” “In *that* book [actual Scripture], no one reads except those who know the alphabet,” St. Augustine wrote; “[but] in the world as a whole even the uneducated may read.”¹³ His image was revived by Johan Georg Hamann in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ It shows up in Novalis, for whom “the world is in fact a *communication*”—but a problematic one: “The time is no longer when God’s spirit was intelligible. The [*Sinn*] of the world has gone missing. We’re stuck at the letters [of the alphabet].”¹⁵ And in *Sartor Resartus*: “We speak of the Volume of Nature and truly a Volume it is,—whose Author and Writer is God. To read it! Dost thou, dost man, so much as well know the Alphabet thereof?”¹⁶

If we follow the clues, we can elucidate what “meaning” means in “the meaning of life.” When we look for the meaning of a work of art, a narrative or a painting or a piece of music, we are interested not in its linguistic meaning—except in the case of verbal narrative, there may not be any—and not in its purpose or function in a system. What we want is its significance. We want a description of what it does and how—what it is “about” in the broadest sense—that tells us what our attitude towards it ought to be. We are looking for truths that will tell us how to feel. (The answer is often complex and multivalent.)

Interpretation here unites attention, explanation, and affect.¹⁷ So it is with the meaning of life. The question is how to feel about everything, about the whole of existence and the place of humankind within it. The meaning of life would be a truth about us and about the world that answers that question:

(London: Penguin, 1992).

¹³ Cassedy, *What Do We Mean?*, 26.

¹⁴ Cassedy, *What Do We Mean?*, 46–7.

¹⁵ Cassedy, *What Do We Mean?*, 64.

¹⁶ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 195.

¹⁷ This mode of interpretation stands in contrast to the “hermeneutics of suspicion” or “symptomatic reading” once dominant in literary studies; see Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

a truth that tells us what our attitude towards it ought to be—what to feel and why. That is why we ask the question when life is hard. We want to be reconciled, somehow, to loss and failure, injustice and human suffering. We are hoping for a truth that will take the edge off our despair.

This interpretation helps explain the timing of the question, why it should materialize at the point in history that it did. Before the nineteenth century, the vast majority of people took for granted a religious worldview that prescribed an answer. “Religion, whatever it is, is a man’s total reaction upon life,” William James wrote, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. “To get at [this reaction] you must go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree every one possesses.”¹⁸ When one inhabits a religion, one’s total reaction is reconciled or redeemed. Religions offer saving visions of the whole residual cosmos. If they do not proclaim the meaning of life, they offer the conviction that there is one, however inscrutable it may be. There is a truth that tells us how to feel.

The problem, felt acutely by Novalis and Carlyle, is how to sustain the meaning of life outside the context of religious revelation. The phrase emerges when its object becomes a difficulty. For many religions, the meaning of life appears in a theodicy that vindicates the ways of God to man. Life is hard, but there’s a story to be told on which it works out for the best, perhaps in some immortal afterlife. If we are not given the story, we have faith that it exists, beyond our comprehension. Thus, Alexander Pope ends the first epistle of his 1734 *Essay on Man*:

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
All Discord, Harmony, not understood;
All partial Evil, universal Good:
And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason’s spite,

¹⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), ed. Matthew Bradley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 35.

One truth is clear, “Whatever IS, is RIGHT.”¹⁹

Pope’s rhyming, repetitive antitheses teach us that each harm is secretly beneficial, each complaint has a rejoinder, theodicy like clockwork, the tick-tock of God’s design, invisible to us, underscored at last by the insistence of “IS, is.”

Modern philosophers detached the aim of theodicy—showing that whatever is, is right—from the dogmas of traditional religion.²⁰ Thus Leibniz would argue, on logical grounds, that this is the best of all possible worlds.²¹ Rousseau would trace the ills of human life to the depredations of society: they are within our power to fix.²² And for Hegel, the “insight to which philosophy ought to lead ... is that the real world is as it ought to be.”²³

Few now believe these arguments work: that philosophy can prove that all is well. Worse, why assume that there is any way we ought to feel, that reality dictates a total reaction to life? James is, once more, a plausible spokesman:

It is notorious that facts are compatible with opposite emotional comments, since the same fact will inspire entirely different feelings in different persons, and at different times in the same person; and there is no rationally deducible connection between any outer fact and the sentiments it may happen to provoke.²⁴

¹⁹ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man* (1734), ed. Tom Jones (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 26–27.

²⁰ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

²¹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* (1710), trans. E. M. Huggard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

²² See Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 37, 49–53.

²³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1837), trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988), 39.

²⁴ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 120.

Although the tone is different, it is the same idea that fuels *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which Albert Camus wrote: “Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”²⁵ The absurdity is not that the world dictates a negative response, that the truth is terrible, but that the most profound of questions—“What is the meaning of life?”—receives no answer. There’s no particular way we ought to feel about the world: when it comes down to it, our total reaction is arbitrary. We ask; and the universe shrugs. Is there nothing left to say?

II

In the spirit of absurdity, I’ll argue that the question of life’s meaning *can* be answered by considering that the answer might be grim.

In *Children of Men*, a novel by P. D. James adapted for film by Alfonso Cuarón, humanity has become sterile.²⁶ No child has been conceived for eighteen years. Futureless, society shudders towards collapse. But James is interested less in the practical challenges of the final generation—who will take care of the elderly? what happens to the global economy when we can’t invest in or borrow against the future?—than in their spiritual life. How would you feel if you knew that humankind would not go on? In the world of the novel, protagonist Theo Faron writes that “those who lived gave way to [an] almost universal negativism, what the French named *ennui universel*.”

It came upon us like an insidious disease; indeed, it was a disease, with its soon-familiar symptoms of lassitude, depression, ill-defined malaise, a readiness to give way to minor infections, a perpetual disabling headache. I fought against it, as did many others. ... The

²⁵ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.

²⁶ P. D. James, *Children of Men* (New York: Vintage, 1992); *Children of Men*, cowritten and directed by Alfonso Cuarón (Universal Pictures, 2006).

weapons I fight with are my consolations: books, music, food, wine, nature. ... [But] without the hope of posterity, for our race if not for ourselves, without the assurance that we being dead yet live, all pleasures of the mind and senses sometimes seem to me no more than pathetic and crumbling defences shored up against our ruins.²⁷

James was anticipated by the antiwar activist and author Jonathan Schell in *The Fate of the Earth*, an influential work of speculative nonfiction. Though his ultimate topic is nuclear apocalypse, Schell pulls apart its elements: the painful, premature death of billions and “the cancellation of all future generations of human beings.”²⁸ Like James, he imagines the second without the first, through general sterility; and like James, he expects a bleak response. To those who face extinction, he writes, “the futility of all the activities of the common world—of marriage, of politics, of the arts, of learning, and, for that matter, of war—would be driven home inexorably.”²⁹

In *Death and the Afterlife*, Samuel Scheffler puts the infertility scenario to philosophical use.³⁰ Like James and Schell, he writes, “I find it plausible to suppose that such a world would be a world characterized by widespread apathy, anomie, and despair; by the erosion of social institutions and social solidarity; by the deterioration of the physical environment; and by a pervasive loss of conviction about the value or point of many activities.”³¹ In ways we barely recognize and rarely explore, the meaning of what we do from day to day depends on an implicit faith that humanity will outlive us, at least for several generations. It depends, as Scheffler puts it, on our belief in a “collective afterlife.”³²

That our activities are mortgaged to the future may be obvious when their outcome is long

²⁷ James, *Children of Men*, 9.

²⁸ Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 115.

²⁹ Schell, *Fate of the Earth*, 169.

³⁰ Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, ed. Niko Kolodny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³¹ Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, 40.

³² Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, 64.

distant—as when we contribute incrementally to a cure for cancer that may not be discovered for decades—but the phenomenon is arguably more pervasive. At least part of the point of art and science is lost if they will have no audience in fifty years. Why bother to contribute to traditions that are doomed? If humanity is sterile, there will be no-one to carry our collective inheritance onward. The argument that art’s value rests on posterity goes back at least as far as the eighteenth century, when Denis Diderot was asked to imagine a comet hitting the Earth in a thousand years’ time. For Diderot, this would mean “goodbye to poems, speeches, temples, palaces, paintings, and statues”; we would do nothing but “plant cabbages.”³³

Even the transient pleasures of reading or listening to music, of eating and drinking, might pall, as they do for Theo Faron, to whom “pleasure now comes so rarely and, when it does, is indistinguishable from pain.”³⁴

Scheffler presents his speculations on the infertility scenario, in the first instance, as anthropological: they concern what would we would cease to value. I want to turn instead to a normative question: how *should* we react to the prospect of imminent human extinction? Should we despair, as Theo Faron does? Should we respond instead with equanimity? Or is it a matter of temperament, depressing to some, perhaps, but anodyne to others? Is there a way one ought to feel about the whole residual cosmos in *Children of Men*?

I think there is. Our emotional reactions here are not purely subjective, any more than other emotions, like anger or grief, which can apt, or fitting, or not. Thus, there are good reasons to resist Faron’s nihilistic response. For one thing, it isn’t clear *why* the value of reading or listening to music, let alone of food and drink—a value that seems contained in the moment of engagement—should depend on what is to come. It’s not like curing cancer in a hundred years. Even as the world ends, we can cling to the solace of art and the pleasures of the flesh.

And there’s a question of time. Why should the value of what we do evaporate in the heat of

³³ Michael Rosen, *The Shadow of God: Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), 261–2.

³⁴ James, *Children of Men*, 9; see Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, 43.

imminent extinction, when we knew all along that humanity's days were numbered? Scheffler dubs this "the Alvy Singer problem," after the nine-year-old in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* who sees no point in doing homework if the universe will one day end.³⁵ Alvy's stance may seem ridiculous, but there's an argument behind it. If the value of what we do rests on the flourishing of subsequent generations, then the final generation, whenever it comes, does nothing of value. It cannot flourish. But then the same is true of the penultimate generation, by the very same principle, and so of the generation before that. The dominoes of flourishing cascade from human extinction to the present, leaving only worthless debris.

Unless you're prepared to believe that nothing we do matters, you can't believe that of the final generation, whenever it comes. And while I don't think we can prove that there is value in the world—at least, not to the nihilist's satisfaction—that doesn't mean it isn't true. Faron may be so depressed he doesn't want to listen to opera, read P. G. Wodehouse novels, or play board games with close friends; but those activities are still worthwhile. Their value does not rest entirely on posterity. (Why should it?) It follows that the very first domino need not fall. Even the final generation can find value in their lives.

The question of what value there can be in the lives of the final generation is distinct from the question I want to ask, which is how we should feel about imminent extinction. But they are related, since if nihilism is true, it's not the case that we should affirm our existence at all. What's more, the fact that we can argue about the relationship between Faron's attitude and nihilism helps mute the prospect of absurdity. Here the news is perversely good. Since there are reasons for responding to the end of human history in one way, not another, our total reaction need not be arbitrary: some attitudes are more rational than others. We shouldn't welcome imminent extinction; but we should not concede that it annihilates all value unless we are willing to be nihilists. Reality *can* dictate how we should feel about human life as a whole.

In other words, life could have meaning. As potential meanings go, the ones elicited by

³⁵ Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, 62–64, 188–90; *Annie Hall*, directed by Woody Allen (United Artists, 1977).

extinction are dismaying—so negative they hardly count. But once we measure our response to the infertility scenario, we can vary the hypothetical, testing our total reaction, asking what the facts tell us to feel. In doing so, we explore what it would take to give life meaning—a meaning in light of which we should affirm, or at least accept, the history of human life.

III

Why protest the imminent extinction of humanity? In part because we value human history and its subject, humankind, and in valuing them, want them to go on. Scientists talk about “ecological grief,” as those on the front lines of the climate crisis watch ecosystems collapse and endangered species die.³⁶ Like grief at the loss of individual life, ecological grief is about the irreplaceability of what is lost; it’s a basic expression of love. Humanity is lovable, too, for all its frailty. Grief at the prospect of human extinction is the reflexive form of ecological grief. If we love humanity, we’ll want it to survive.

In *Why Worry About Future Generations?*, Scheffler emphasizes the centrality of attachment in valuing and offers our attachment not just to humanity but to communities, cultures, and traditions as a reason to recoil from human extinction.³⁷ He is right about the value of preserving what is valuable. But mere survival is not enough. Our emotional reaction to extinction should embrace not only preservation, but change; for we have unfinished business.³⁸

Think about injustice: the persistent violation of human rights, the frustration of needs we have the wealth and resources to meet. Add to that our ignorance, how much we still don’t know about

³⁶ Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis, “Ecological Grief as Mental Health Response to Climate Change–Related Loss,” *Nature Climate Change* 8 (2018): 275–81.

³⁷ Samuel Scheffler, *Why Worry About Future Generations?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 33–34, 60; see also Johann Frick, “On the Survival of Humanity,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 47 (2017): 344–67.

³⁸ For an early expression of this idea in population ethics, see Jonathan Bennett, “Maximising Happiness,” *Obligations to Future Generations*, eds. R. I. Sikora and Brian Barry (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 61–73; and for development, Jonathan Knutzen, “Unfinished Business,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 23 (2023): 1–15.

the universe, the yet-unanswered questions of pure science and philosophy. Add, too, our untapped creativity and our inhibited capacity for love. For human life to end like this would be—in a sense that is not just metaphorical—premature.

It would be different if, in the course of generations, humanity worked to mitigate injustice, to protect the vulnerable and to answer human need. Imagine we achieved a kind of society barely conceivable now: that we came as close to justice as human frailty permits. Not utopia, but the best that we can do. Sterility might still afflict us, as it does in *Children of Men*, but we'd answer with invention, solidarity, and compassion. We'd find ways to care for one another, to share art and friendship, the solace and companionship of whistling in the dark. We would meet our end with grace. I'm not saying I'd be happy with this narrative, but I think it's one we can accept.

The point is not that human extinction, under these circumstances, would not be a matter for regret. Nor is progress towards justice the main or only reason to desire that humanity survive. The point is that our attitude to human history should be different in this case than it was in *Children of Men*. It should respond to the shape of history—where injustice and its mitigation are essential aspects of that shape. If the meaning of life is a truth about us and our place in the world that tells us what to feel and why—we hope, a truth that reconciles us, somehow, to the human condition—it could be a truth about Scheffler's collective afterlife.

The idea that the human future could replace religious eschatology originates, like “the meaning of life,” in German Romanticism. In *The Shadow of God*, Michael Rosen traces what his subtitle describes as “the Passage from Heaven to History” in Kant and Hegel.³⁹ Kant thinks of human progress towards the kingdom of ends, in which happiness is proportioned to virtue, as necessarily historical. And he writes, in the “Idea for a Human History with a Cosmopolitan Aim”:

In the human being (as the only rational creature on earth), those predispositions whose goal is the use of his reason were to develop completely only in the species, but not in the

³⁹ Rosen, *Shadow of God*.

individual. ... [Nature] needs an immense series of generations, each of which transmits its enlightenment to the next, in order finally to propel its germs in our species to that stage of development which is completely suited to its aim.⁴⁰

For Hegel, history is the intelligible process of “spirit” striving towards self-consciousness and human freedom.⁴¹ And for Marx, history is the inexorable sequence of economic modes by which primitive communism gives way to slavery, to feudalism, to capitalism, and eventually to the higher communism whose banner reads “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”⁴²

The catch is that Marx and Hegel, like religious eschatologists, treat the direction of human history as determined in advance. There is a final state to which we are inevitably progressing. I don’t believe that’s true. The arc of the moral universe depends on what we do and that depends on us. But historical determinism is inessential to the basic thought: that the shape of human history can provide the sort of meaning religions offer, the meaning we want from “the meaning of life.”

Justice plays a pivotal role in the histories imagined by Kant, Hegel, and Marx—though Marx might not put it those terms.⁴³ Justice matters not only for itself but as an antidote to absurdity. Other things matter, too: the relationships and pastimes, work and play, that make for meaningful lives. But human existence as a whole would not have meaning if the good things in it were distributed in ways that are perpetually unjust.

This vision is less distant from religion than it might seem. It is often said that religious belief originates in fear of death, that it’s meant to console us in our mortality. But that view is simplistic. As

⁴⁰ Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Human History with a Cosmopolitan Aim” (1784), trans. Allen Wood, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, eds. Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 108–120, 109–10.

⁴¹ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1857), trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

⁴² Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme” (1875), in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 610–16, 615.

⁴³ See Allen Wood, “The Marxian Critique of Justice,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 244–82.

the pioneering theologian John Bowker argued, the ubiquitous injustice of our world—where the innocent suffer and the guilty go free—cries out for metaphysical solution.⁴⁴ That is why religions look for justice in a world beyond, or dismiss the world we think we know as an illusion. The truth would otherwise be intolerable. The point of being immortal is not simply to cheat death but to make room for the justice our mortality frustrates. The virtuous must be rewarded and the vicious damned; and if that does not happen in this world, it must happen in another. Justice comes first—as it does in our emerging picture of life’s meaning.

To make this picture more precise, we need to answer a series of pressing questions. In what sense is progress towards justice necessary for the acceptance, or affirmation, of human life that would give it meaning? Is justice sufficient? And how does the potential for meaning in human life, as such, bear on the meaning of individual lives?

IV

It is possible to find in Kant, influenced by Rousseau, a claim of radical priority for justice in our attitude to human history. Confronting the problem of evil and the need for theodicy—how to reconcile ourselves with the suffering and injustice of the world—Rousseau argued that the solution was in our hands. A world without moral evil would already be a world we could and should affirm. As Susan Neiman writes:

The fact that we do not live forever is no more of an evil [for Rousseau] than the fact that we do not have wings or live on air. Only a humanity estranged from its own nature, hence unable to accept natural necessity, will view death itself as an evil.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ John Bowker, *The Meanings of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴⁵ Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 49–50.

Rosen elaborates in *The Shadow of God*:

If we could only get back to living “according to nature”, there would be no natural evil—death would be no evil and suffering would be slight and insignificant—so the central difficulty of theodicy would simply go away.⁴⁶

When Kant read Rousseau’s *Émile*, he is said to have missed his otherwise clockwork afternoon stroll. He went on to write, with evident excitement:

Newton was the first to see order and regularity combined with great simplicity, where disorder and ill-matched variety had reigned before. Since then comets have been moving in geometric orbits. Rousseau was the first to discover in the variety of shapes that men assume the deeply concealed nature of man and to observe the hidden law that justifies Providence. ... After Newton and Rousseau, God is justified, and Pope’s thesis [that whatever is, is right] is henceforth true.⁴⁷

Ignoring interpretive complexities, we can think of the Rousseau-Kant position as akin to the Stoic theory of virtue as necessary and sufficient for *eudaimonia*. Every other good is a “preferred indifferent”: something to desire and pursue without emotional investment. *Eudaimonia* is enough. According to Rousseau-Kant, justice is both necessary and sufficient for human history to be acceptable to us; we may wish for more, but we should do so with detachment. The eradication of “natural evil” is a preferred indifferent, justice the only object of angst.

If this is right, the existentialists were wrong: reason may dictate a total reaction to the world, and that reaction may be, if not exactly affirmation, then acceptance of the universe and the place of

⁴⁶ Rosen, *Shadow of God*, 54.

⁴⁷ Quoted from Kant’s notebooks in Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 53.

human life within it. This need not rest on anything transcendent or divine. The afterlife it calls for is not personal but collective. The meaning of life—the truth that tells us how to feel about the whole residual cosmos—lies in our halting, perhaps perpetual, progress towards justice in this world.

My view is less radical than Rousseau-Kant. Although justice plays a special part in the meaning of life, it's not by itself sufficient for the acceptance, or affirmation, of human history. For the Stoics, virtue is distinctive in being wholly under our control; and what we do not control, we should treat with emotional detachment.⁴⁸ But if I am to disengage from what I do not control, I should disengage from all but the elements of future justice that are up to me, which is not the Rousseau-Kant approach. On the other hand, if I recoil from injustice even when it's beyond my control, why not recoil, as well, from natural suffering? Suppose the world ends not with Schell's infertility but Diderot's comet: billions die in terrible pain. That is not a human future I believe we should accept.

This is consistent with two weaker claims. The first is that justice is necessary for the rational acceptance, or affirmation, of human history. I stand by the assertion above, shared with Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel, that we should recoil from a future in which justice goes unserved, even if that future is in other ways good: no amount of creativity, or love, can compensate for the perpetual violation of rights or frustration of needs we could readily meet.

The second claim turns on drawing distinctions I have so far suppressed. I argued that the meaning of life would be a truth about us and the world that answers the question how to feel about everything: the whole of existence and the place of humankind within it. But we have focused on attitudes directed at humanity: at human history and human life. In truth, there are several objects of interpretation, for each of which we can ask "What is it about?"—a question whose answer should orient us towards it. There is humanity, and human history, and the vast cosmos-at-large.

The shift is not one of perspective, as though we could take up the view from nowhere. The perspective is always ours—but its focus alters. If the object is human history, justice is a necessary but not sufficient element of any truth that should reconcile us to the facts. If our object is not human

⁴⁸ Epictetus, "Handbook," *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

history but humankind, things may be different. Here we look for a truth about humanity that tells us how to feel about ourselves. Even a future of terrible suffering, from which we rightly recoil, may be a future in which we should accept or affirm humanity itself. Suppose we face our predicament as I imagined us facing infertility, in section III, with invention, solidarity, and compassion? There would be no shame in that.

When we focus on humanity, it makes sense to limit our attention to what is under our collective control. Here justice is arguably special. It's not the only thing that is up to us, but the rest may be preferred indifferents. Imagine a state of justice in which rights are respected and basic needs are met; the conditions are apt for art and science to flourish, and for relationships to grow. But people don't bother, content to languish in ignorance, consuming "muzak and potatoes."⁴⁹ Their emotional lives are shallow too: they'd rather not commit. No injustice, then, but few of the goods of life. Though I cannot argue for this verdict, I think we should accept, and not recoil, from humanity in this world. No doubt we should hope for a more creative future, but unlike the desire for justice, our preference for creativity should be emotionally detached.

If this is right, the question of life's meaning is intelligible, and its answer is partly up to us. The meaning of human life, in the sense of humanity itself, depends on progress towards justice, which determines how to feel about humankind—which means that we collectively determine it. When it comes to human history, there is more than justice to consider: against the Rousseau-Kant position, there are natural evils, too. But justice remains primary, in part because it's the aspect of meaning over which we have control, in part because it's a means by which to mitigate natural harms.

What about our attitude towards the cosmos, including the preponderance that has nothing to do with us? Should we recoil from a universe without intelligent alien life? Are the fates of other stars preferred indifferents? I do not know, but I believe these are the sorts of questions we should ask if we hope to make sense of the meaning of the cosmos, not just the meaning of human life.

Finally, faced with a diversity of questions, each about the meaning or significance of

⁴⁹ Derek Parfit, "Overpopulation and the Quality of Life," *Applied Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 145–64, 148.

something, we face the further question how significant they are. It's one thing to ask how we should feel about humanity or what attitude we should take when we reflect on human history. It's another to ask how much we ought to care about the meaning of life: how much attention to devote to it, how much it matters in each of its diverse forms.

If it were a condition of living a meaningful life that humanity or human history had a meaning I could accept, it would be obvious why, and in what way, that meaning mattered. One might defend this thought by reference to Wolf and Scheffler. If the value of our activities rests to a large extent on the collective afterlife then a future that lacks meaning through imminent extinction, or perpetual injustice, may be one in which it is difficult to live a meaningful life. But I'm not sure the antecedent holds. As I argued in relation to Alvy Singer, if it were a condition of flourishing that the next generation flourish, the prospect of human extinction, imminent or not, would push us towards nihilism. We should resist that pressure, holding that the final generation can find value in their lives.

Still, this is not to say how far they flourish. It's one thing to engage, more or less happily and successfully, in activities that matter, and so to live meaningfully, by Wolf's criterion. It's another to accept, or affirm, human life. On the historical narrative I have sketched, the desire to find meaning in human history is deep and widespread. It is continuous with the religious impulse, which is in part an impulse towards justice, in this life or the next. It's an impulse I share. When I respond with grief to the infertility scenario, I do so in part because I care about the shape of human history, as such. For those who feel this way—as perhaps we should—the shadow of extinction, or perpetual injustice, is an obstacle to flourishing. This is not because it drains all value from what we do, though it may be harder to appreciate that value in despair at the human fate. Rather, what obstructs our flourishing is despair itself. If human life is meaningless, or worse, a certain happiness is morally out of reach.⁵⁰

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