

# Introduction

## What Is a Human Being For?

### Questioning the Question

For several years I have made a practice of subjecting my introductory philosophy students to a pop quiz on the first day of class. The assignment is to write an essay in response to a simple question: "What is a human being for?" This is obviously a variation on the more familiar question, "What is the meaning of life?" But the form of the question is sufficiently odd to leave students in a state of bewilderment. They know perfectly well what chairs and cups and backpacks are for, but it has never occurred to them that human beings might be *for anything* in a similar way. An odd question, perhaps, but eventually the students manage to compose themselves with varied and predictable results. A human being is for:

- Learning and solving problems
- Preserving and beautifying the earth
- Serving God
- Loving and being loved
- Whatever they choose to be for
- Realizing their potential
- Survival and reproduction
- Feeding decomposers
- Etc.

I engage students in this exercise because it gives them a whiff of the sort of questions that might come up in philosophy, and also because it gives me a whiff of the values and attitudes I will encounter during the course of the semester. Yet it must be admitted that

asking students to answer this question on the first day of class is a particularly unphilosophical thing to do. This is because the first step in philosophy is always to scrutinize questions, not to answer them. Indeed, one of my own college professors used to insist that philosophy has no business answering questions at all, but should confine itself to rendering critiques of questions.

### Is the Question Answerable?

Before we can hope to make any progress on the question about life's meaning we must determine whether the question itself is problematic. Many questions are. Some questions are problematic because they are unanswerable, either because they are incoherent or because we lack sufficient means to answer them. For example, take the old standard from theology: Can God create a stone too heavy for God to lift? This question was designed to demonstrate that God cannot possibly be omnipotent. If we say that God *can* create such a stone, then it follows that there is one thing God is powerless to do: namely, to lift the stone. But if we admit that God *cannot* create the stone, then ipso facto God is not omnipotent. Any answer to the question implies that God is not all-powerful. On the surface this question has the appearance of legitimacy, but in fact the question is incoherent because it creates a logical monstrosity: a stone too heavy to be lifted by a being presumed capable of lifting any stone at all amounts to a logically impossible stone.

Some philosophers have maintained that the meaning of life question is incoherent in a similar way, not because it creates a logical monstrosity but because it creates a grammatical one. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, believed that human life is the context of meaning—the setting wherein things take on meaning—and cannot therefore be a candidate for meaning itself.<sup>1</sup> By this reasoning, to inquire about the meaning of life is absurd in the way that voting for the voting booth would be. Wittgenstein's suggestion that our question is illegitimate rests on the claim that it is a recursive question of the sort, "What is the meaning of this question?" But is it? It is not obvious that "What is the meaning of life?" constitutes the same kind of grammatical monstrosity as "What is the meaning of this question?" Does the fact that entities and events in life can have meaning imply that it makes no sense to ask whether a life itself can have meaning? It's hard to see why. It seems perfectly sensible to ask, "What is the color of the box containing red things?" If there is no logical or grammatical

monstrosity in that question, then it seems logically and grammatically permissible to inquire about the meaning of life.

It appears, then, that our question is not rendered unanswerable on grounds of incoherence. It might, however, be unanswerable on other grounds. Some questions are theoretically impossible to answer. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle tells us it is impossible to determine both the velocity and the location of an elementary particle at the same time. A choice to observe one necessarily prevents observation of the other. Similarly, it may be that the meaning of life is just inaccessible in principle. If it were supposed, for example, that knowing the meaning of life required information that has been irretrievably lost, then it would be futile to pursue an answer. Or consider the possibility that the question is unanswerable due to our own limitations. When asked about the existence of God, one of Woody Allen's characters dismissed the question with, "How should I know? I get lost in Chinatown." Perhaps the meaning of life is like that—no matter how desperately we need the answer it might be completely over our heads. Contemporary physicists find themselves in this condition with respect to quantum theory. They use the theory as a tool all the time, and with impressive results, but they do not pretend to comprehend it. As Richard Feynman famously quipped, "I think I can safely say that no one understands quantum mechanics." If we are incapable of comprehending even the simplest events in nature, then what makes us think we can comprehend the meaning of life?

Another of my college professors used to say that philosophy amounts to a series of questions that cannot be answered, but *must* be answered. Like quantum physicists, perhaps, we might manage to get on in life even though its true meaning is forever beyond us. This may very well be the case, but the fact remains that no one has yet *shown* it to be so. We have no equivalent to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle that can be applied to the meaning of life. And without such a demonstration we need not feel compelled to dismiss the question as unanswerable—at least not before completing our attempt to see more clearly what sort of question it is.

### Is the Question Misleading?

A question may be problematic even though it is legitimate and answerable. Our question, "What is the meaning of life?" appears to be misleading in problematic ways. A question would be misleading if it made unwarranted assumptions, or if it were ambiguous. For

example, the question, “Who is the emperor of New York?” is obviously misinformed because it makes the false assumption that there is an emperor of New York. It appears that our question makes a similar assumption: it asks about the meaning of life as if it were obvious that life *has* meaning. But this is certainly not obvious to everyone. In fact, many would object to the assumption, insisting that “What is the meaning of life?” should be read to ask, “Is there any meaning to life?” In the pages ahead it will be important to keep both readings of the question firmly in mind. We might accomplish this by reformulating the question to read: “Does life have meaning, and if so, what is it?”

But even this reformulation of the question is misleading because it assumes that the meaning of life is singular and objective. Many people may be satisfied with (and even insist upon) the assumption that there is a one-size-fits-all meaning to life, but others would find reasons to object strenuously. Some, for example, might insist on a distinction between multiple meanings *in* life and a singular meaning *of* life. The fact that many particular things in a person’s life may be meaningful in various ways does not make it obvious that life in general is meaningful. We have already seen that Wittgenstein’s objection relies on this distinction. He believed that things *in* life could be found meaningful, but that it made no sense to ask whether life itself is meaningful.

Of course, it might make sense—Wittgenstein notwithstanding—to affirm the meaning of life as a whole if we assume that it is derived from particular meanings in life. When I say, in a general sense, that I enjoy my mother’s cooking I mean that I find a majority of her meals enjoyable. Analogously, a person might judge that life as a whole is meaningful simply because it contains an abundance of objects, events, and relations that are themselves meaningful. But if this is the case, then we might extend the same principle to declare that life as a whole is always meaningful in a potential sense, regardless of whether it contains particular meanings. For example, if I reject the meaningfulness of life as a whole because I find nothing in life particular meaningful, you might respond by accusing me of a failure of insight or imagination, and insist that I would find life meaningful if only I got my thinking straight. The meaning of life in this sense would be grounded in the perpetual possibility for meaningfulness, that is, the meaning may be found, whether or not we succeed in finding it.

It should be apparent that our question may be misleading in various ways, and for that reason we must take care to clarify our assumptions along the way and to identify any possible ambiguities.

The following variations on our question illustrate just how open the question is to multiple readings:

- Why is there anything at all, rather than nothing?
- What is the purpose of creation?
- Why should I go on living?
- How should I live my life?
- Does anything matter?
- What is the nature of the life process?

### Is the Question Authentic?

Rhetorical questions are generally taken to be inauthentic. They merely pretend to be questions, whereas they are really assertions or exclamations masquerading as questions. "What are friends for?" really means "*This* is what friends are for!" If I were to ask whether you had purchased a lottery ticket and you responded, "What's the point?" I would not consider telling you that the point is to win a lot of money. We both know perfectly well what the point of entering the lottery is. Rather, your rhetorical question is really a commentary on the folly of wagering good money against bad odds.

Perhaps questions about the meaning of life are not genuine questions at all, but merely veiled complaints, or expressions of confusion, or pleas for sympathy. We have good reason to expect that questions about the meaning of life will be far more likely to arise in the context of adversity or uncertainty. Suppose your neighbor has just lost her family in a senseless accident and cries out, "What's the point of existing?" In this case it would be foolish to suppose that she is expressing an interest in doing some serious reading in philosophy. That would be the farthest thing from her mind. The point here is that the adverse circumstances in which questions about the meaning of life frequently arise might suggest that such questions are intended for effect, in which case they would be rhetorical questions and therefore not genuine.

Questions about the meaning of life may in fact often be rhetorical, but there is no reason to accept the view that they are always or even primarily so. The question might just as well arise in a philosophy class, or on vacation, or in a supermarket. But even if the question is used rhetorically it remains a serious and important one. It would be a grave error to conclude that the significance of questions may always be reduced to their particular contexts. In the case of our grief stricken neighbor the question may have taken the form of an emotional outburst, but this does not imply that it lacks independent

merit as a legitimate intellectual inquiry. It would be easy to assume that the poor woman is just not thinking clearly in the circumstances and that nothing she says should be taken seriously. But maybe she is thinking more clearly than ever; maybe her loss is the occasion for her deepest insights about the meaning of life. Perhaps the emotional force behind the outburst should be seen not as invalidating the question, but rather as providing strong warrant for taking it seriously in the intellectual sense.

### Is It a Philosophical Question?

Not all questions are philosophically significant. Our question about the meaning of life might qualify as answerable, coherent and authentic but still be lacking in philosophical interest. According to a popular conception of philosophy, the meaning of life shows up as the quintessential philosophical problem. Readers of the *New Yorker* may take this impression from cartoons featuring a philosophical sage seated on a mountaintop (or in a cave) receiving seekers after the meaning of existence. But this popular impression is slightly misleading, for it turns out that relatively few philosophers have bothered to address the question directly, and a majority would agree that the meaning of life is no more central to philosophy than questions that arise within science, politics, religion, and the arts.

Traditionally, philosophy has concerned itself with three principal problem areas: epistemology (the foundations, scope, and limits of knowledge), metaphysics (the ultimate nature of reality), and value theory (the grounds and norms for ethics and aesthetics). Any inquiry becomes philosophical to the extent that it traffics in one or more of these problem areas, which our question appears to do. For example, it is not self-evident that the meaning of life can be known, so any assertion or assumption one way or the other must be supported by argument, and to provide such arguments is to engage in epistemology. The same holds for metaphysical assertions and assumptions. Many discussions of the meaning of life posit (or reject) the existence of God, or immortality of the soul, or freedom of the will, or a universal purpose—all of which involve metaphysical commitments and argumentation. And finally, philosophers have occasionally tried to show that inquiry into the meaning of life does not ask for metaphysical explanation at all, but merely seeks a justification to show that life is worth living. But any attempt to provide (or critique) such justifications places the inquiry squarely in the domain of value theory.

It appears, then, that the meaning of life qualifies as a legitimate concern for philosophy, but it should be emphasized that while the question is sufficiently philosophical it is neither central nor exclusive to the discipline. In the chapters ahead I will not assume that the question of life's meaning belongs exclusively to philosophy, yet it is one that should be extensively vetted by philosophical critique. In particular, philosophy should be able to provide some guidance in shaping the question. But perhaps even more importantly, philosophy might help to clarify what is meant by "meaning."

## The Meaning of Meaning

The meanings of words and the significance of objects and events are normally taken for granted. It is only when problems arise, when we fail to apprehend or to express meaning, that the nature of meaning becomes an issue. If this is so, then important clues to what we *mean* when we declare that life is meaningful might be found where meaning is conspicuously absent.

### Consider *der Muselmann*

Human existence was scraped raw in the Nazi death camps of World War II. Conditions in the camps were carefully constructed for the systematic degradation of human lives. The majority of prisoners lived in absolute squalor, forced to endure terror, uncertainty, humiliation, hunger, fatigue, frostbite, disease, and injury, while constantly facing the threat of extermination. Anything resembling faith, hope, charity, or a sense of dignity would, under these circumstances, bear the mark of unreason. Fear, disgust, resentment, suspicion, and an overwhelming sense of injustice prevailed. Having lost their will to live, many prisoners exercised the option for suicide, but most somehow found the means to struggle on, one terrifying day at a time.

A remnant of these Holocaust victims survived the death camps to produce a chilling literature of testimony, recording unthinkable atrocities and their impact upon victims. Strangely enough, the most disturbing figures among holocaust victims are given relatively little attention in the testimonial literature. These were *die Muselmänner*.<sup>2</sup> *Der Muselmann* was the ultimate victim of the death camps: a mere cipher, a zombie, a profoundly dehumanized nonperson. Jean Amery describes *der Muselmann* as "the prisoner who was giving up and was given up



by his comrades, [he] no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts of good or bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual. He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions."<sup>3</sup> Ryn and Klodzinski render the following horrific picture of *der Muselmann*:

The SS man was walking slowly, looking at the [*Muselmann*] who was coming toward him. We looked to the left, to see what would happen. Dragging his wooden clogs, the dull-witted and aimless creature ended up bumping right into the SS officer, who yelled at him and gave him a lashing on the head. The [*Muselmann*] stood still, without realizing what had happened. When he received a second and, then, a third lashing because he had forgotten to take off his cap, he began to do it on himself, as he had dysentery. When the SS man saw the black, stinking liquid begin to cover his clogs, he went crazy. He hurled himself on top of the [*Muselmann*] and began kicking his stomach with all his strength. Even after the poor thing had fallen into his own excrement, the SS man kept beating his head and chest. The [*Muselmann*] didn't defend himself. With the first kick, he folded in two, and after a few more he was dead.<sup>4</sup>

*Der Muselmann* was literally insensible, indifferent to his environment, beyond compliance or resistance, beyond the ability to care or take interest, beyond attraction or repulsion, beyond anticipation or memory, beyond the reach of information. Their faces rigid masks, their motions unintended, they sometimes crouched or stood shivering, what little behavior they performed was random, not owned. And yet they were living creatures.

The image of *der Muselmann* forces upon us questions about the meaning of life, and in a sense it also provides us with a vague measure of meaning, for in *der Muselmann* we encounter a mode of human existence that is uniquely and profoundly devoid of meaning. In the most general sense, therefore, it may be seen that the meaning of life is found in whatever constitutes the essential difference between *der Muselmann* and the rest of humanity.

How, then, shall we think about this essential difference? What sense can we make of phrases such as "living dead" and "staggering corpse"? In what sense is *der Muselmann* alive, and in what sense is he no longer meaningfully alive? In the most basic terms possible we may say that a living organism becomes a dead thing when its rate



of chemical composition is overtaken by the rate of chemical decomposition. An organism dies when it becomes a plaything of environmental circumstances, when it no longer resists being absorbed into its environment by the pitiless forces of material recycling, when the distinction between self and world ceases to be. Living organisms are alive by virtue of complex dynamics that enable them to construct and maintain this vital distinction. In humans these dynamics are staggeringly complex, involving many interrelated systems and subsystems, all participating in a tightly scripted orchestration of countless cells.

If we apply this crude definition strictly we must agree that *der Muselmann* is technically alive because he continues, albeit inadvertently, to resist decomposition. He breathes, he metabolizes, he shivers from the cold, and so on. But this is merely to say that various subfunctions (i.e., reflex systems) remain intact. As much could be said of *der Muselmann* if we extracted various organs and sent them off to hospitals around the world, there to be kept ticking over by artificial means. The real question, however, is whether there is anything about *der Muselmann* that has the wherewithal to arouse the entire organism and to engage it in meaningful activity. *Der Muselmann's* heart continues to perform a subfunction, as do his kidneys, lungs, intestines, etc. But in the most decisive sense *der Muselmann* has become a plaything of his environment, a mere object that wants not, fears not, hopes not, thinks not. He is a human being merely by virtue of momentum. But there is no integrated striving, no attitude, no thesis, no person.

### The Logic of Meaning

The bottom line in all of this is to say that the life of *der Muselmann* is no longer *about* anything. If something—a word, an object, an activity—has meaning, then it has the property of “aboutness.” Our questions are, therefore, how human lives come to be about anything, and whether we can say with any confidence what they should be about.

Aboutness is a vague notion, suggesting an orientation or disposition of one thing toward another. The notion becomes only slightly more clear when we specify what sorts of things might have the property of aboutness.<sup>5</sup> Linguistic expressions (e.g., words, phrases, signs) have aboutness in an intuitively obvious sense. The word “apple,” for example, is about a particular kind of fruit, just as “the Big Apple” is about a particular American city. The question, “where is the post office?” is about a certain building having a particular function, but it is also about the location of that building. States of mind, such as ideas, memories, and emotions have aboutness too. Your memories

are about events and experiences that happened in the past, whereas your fears and hopes are about events and experiences that may happen in the future. Acts of behavior are directly or indirectly about the outcomes they are intended to produce. Even sensations and perceptions may be said to possess the property of aboutness. Your seeing or hearing is manifestly about whatever you see or hear, even when you aren't yet sure what the object or the sound is. And if a human life has meaning then it, too, must be about something or another.

Aboutness is one of several concepts that may be grouped together, by a sort of family resemblance, under the larger concept of teleology. Aboutness, functionality, representation, intentionality, value, and meaningfulness are all teleological terms. That is, they involve some *telos* (plural: *telē*), some end, goal, or purpose. There are subtle and important differences between each of these notions, but in the most general sense they all participate in the logic of means-to-end. Inherent in each of these concepts is the idea that something exists "for the sake of" something else. Teleological events—a behavior, for example—happen *so that* some future state might be achieved. The future state is the goal, the point, the value, the meaning of the behavior. If an event is genuinely teleological (goal governed), then we may say that it will not become fully intelligible until we identify the goal served by the behavior, what the behavior is *for*. Non-teleological events, by contrast, may be rendered intelligible by identifying *because of* factors, that is, antecedent causal conditions that operate aimlessly, without any suggestion of serving a purpose or function.

To illustrate: suppose we witness a brick falling loose from the top of a building. The falling of the brick may be rendered intelligible by reference to the laws of classical physics. We say the event happened *because of* various factors and forces, such as structural faults, gravity, and so on. But there is no *so that* story to be told. Now suppose we see a person falling from the building. The physics of the event—the *because of* story—would be roughly the same as for the falling brick. But in the case of the falling person we might reasonably expect the full explanation to be more complicated, and we might persist in our inquiry until we discovered *why* the person fell. Was there some *telos* at work? Some agency? Was suicide the point of the fall? If we determine that the event was purely accidental, then we will be satisfied with the *because of* account, but if we suspect a teleological factor, then we won't rest until we apprehend the meaning of the event in terms of a *so that* account.

Returning now to the circumstances of *der Muselmann*: here we encounter a being for whom there is no *so that* story. *Der Muselmann*

is a brick-like entity, a *because of* phenomenon, a mere plaything of environmental forces. We may agree that his heart and kidneys are still functioning *so that* the body will be nourished and purified, but if the whole organism is not engaged by the superordinate telē of an organized personality, then these functions amount to nothing more than residual processes. Such a life—a life without telē—is a life without meaning. If the lesson from *der Muselmann* is that telos is a necessary condition for meaning in life, then our next question must be whether telos is sufficient for meaning.

### Consider Sisyphus

Sisyphus is remembered in Greek mythology for being the most deceitful and crafty of mortals. He seduced his niece, usurped his brother's throne, and recklessly exposed the sexual exploits of Zeus. For his hubristic meddling in the affairs of the gods, Sisyphus was condemned to an eternity of tedium and frustration. He was assigned to push a heavy stone up a steep hill, but just as he reached the summit the stone would escape his grasp and roll back to the bottom of the hill, leaving poor Sisyphus to begin again . . . and yet again . . . for eternity.

Unlike *der Muselmann*, Sisyphus has an occupation; his life is *about* something. His telos is to advance the stone to the summit. The point of the story, however, is that a life of tedium and futility, even though it is goal directed, does not constitute a meaningful existence. Indeed, according to the French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, Sisyphus personifies the utter absurdity of human existence. Just any old purpose, it would appear, is not sufficient to make life meaningful. In order for a telos to confer meaning on a life it must be in some way agreeable to the subject of the life. The life of Sisyphus is not *necessarily* devoid of meaning (since it has a point), but such a life will not be experienced as meaningful unless its activities are satisfying to the subject. In the language of Aristotle we might say that in order for a telos to confer meaning, it must be sufficient to bring the subject to a state of *eudaimonia*, a state of well-being or happiness.

We now have two necessary conditions for judging a life to have meaning: from *der Muselmann* we learn that for one's life to be meaningful there must be some purpose(s) served by the activities of the subject, and from the plight of Sisyphus we learn that the purpose(s) must be sufficient to bring happiness to the subject.

But now we may ask whether satisfying these two necessary conditions is sufficient for a meaningful life. If so, then the life of

Sisyphus would qualify as meaningful only if he could bring himself to enjoy his assignment. If Sisyphus somehow got “into” the job, if he sincerely *wanted* to pursue the cycle of laborious failure, then by these principles we would have to concede that he has a meaningful existence. If it works for Sisyphus, then who are we to judge? There seems to be something commendable in this attitude of tolerance for the pursuits of other persons, yet somehow it doesn’t seem quite right. Even if we are willing to grant that Sisyphus leads a subjectively meaningful life there remains the haunting suspicion that it’s not deeply meaningful, that his life has meaning merely in some minimal sense. We suspect that it *shouldn’t* be meaningful; we suspect that there is something deficient about Sisyphus in his embrace of such a life. Perhaps a less ambiguous example will help.

### Consider Villains, Fools, and Derelicts

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky’s Ivan reports on the crimes of Turkish soldiers in Bulgaria:

They burn villages, murder, outrage women and children, and nail their prisoners by the ears to the fences, leaving them till morning, and in the morning they hang them. . . . These Turks took a pleasure in torturing children too; cutting the unborn child from the mother’s womb, and tossing babies up in the air and catching them on the points of their bayonets before their mother’s eyes. Doing it before the mother’s eyes was what gave zest to the amusement. Here is another scene that I thought very interesting. Imagine a trembling mother with her baby in her arms, a circle of invading Turks around her. They’ve planned a diversion: they pet the baby to make it laugh. They succeed; the baby laughs. At that moment, a Turk points a pistol four inches from the baby’s face. The baby laughs with glee, holds out its little hands to the pistol, and he pulls the trigger in the baby’s face and blows out its brains. Artistic, wasn’t it?<sup>6</sup>

Most reasonable persons would be loathe to concede that a life in pursuit of such telē could possibly qualify as meaningful. Some ends—subjectively satisfying or not—simply defy justification, and goals that cannot be justified cannot be considered genuinely worthy of pursuit. Now consider the problems raised by individuals who

devote their lives to harmless lost causes. Christopher Belshaw asks us to imagine the absurd pursuits of Angelica, the ambitious gardener who busies herself with the task of teaching her flowers to sing.<sup>7</sup> Angelica is invested in a project that she finds worthwhile, and she has a sense of fulfillment, but she is—if anyone is—embarked on a fool's errand. Her pursuit is beyond moral justification for the reason that it violates the first rule of moral discourse: *ought implies can*. That is, it is irrational for anyone to find point in a goal that cannot possibly be accomplished, and those who pursue such goals are fairly accused of engaging in meaningless activities. Happily engaged or not, reason suggests that Angelica's life is devoid of meaning.

To make matters worse, we still have to consider the case of derelicts. Imagine a young woman of immense and varied talents who freely abandons a bright future in favor of life as a bag lady. There she is: on the street living from handout to handout, picking her way through trashcans, while she could be composing operas or saving lives in an operating room somewhere. Her only goal is to survive hour by hour. The moral intuition wants to claim that the young woman's life is meaningless, despite the facts that she harms no one and displays no signs of regret or despair. We feel an urge to say that no one should live such a life, and we are inclined to view her choice as some sort of evidence that she is insane.

Granted, these are extreme examples, but they allow us to see that inserting rational and moral criteria into the equation brings along some serious complications. Just how close is the link between meaning, on one hand, and rational or moral justification, on the other? Our instincts suggest that the lives of villains, fools and derelicts are deficient in meaning because they are deficient in justification. No amount of post hoc rationalization, the gut feels, can make such lives appear meaningful. But how would you react if some self-appointed moralists came along and pronounced your life meaningless because your pursuits failed to measure up to their criteria? The very idea! And yet in the same breath you might yourself declare that poor Angelica is absurdly foolish.

When it comes to our own lives we tend almost exclusively to use the subjective criterion of meaning (happiness), but with respect to others we are quick to apply moral criteria. Obviously, this leaves us with commitments to two different concepts of meaningfulness—one defined by a psychological criterion and the other by a moral criterion. And when we have two concepts trained on the same phenomenon we are likely to generate ambiguity and confusion. This, I believe, is one reason why apprehending the meaning of life has proven to be

such an elusive enterprise. And yet we are reluctant to drop either criterion. We expect the psychological and moral criteria to converge, and when they fail to agree—i.e., when happy lives are immoral, or when virtuous lives are unhappy—we are left with a sense that things are out of whack. And if the criteria fail to agree when applied to *our own lives*, then we sense what Thomas Nagel calls the absurd character of human life.<sup>8</sup> Nagel thinks it is a fairly obvious feature of the human condition that we are capable of two modes of judgment about our telē. In the course of everyday life we undertake satisfying goals, and may even succeed in justifying them, thus finding our lives to be meaningful. But then occasionally we are overtaken by self-doubt, when even our most cherished projects appear to have no ultimate point. The universal human capacity to transcend ourselves in reflective thought makes it inevitable that even the most heroic and virtuous lives may be rendered pointless. Sometimes, perhaps when we least expect it, our psychological and moral criteria may fall out of synch, leaving us in a state of bewilderment about the meaning of life.

It is difficult to see where all of this leaves us. Nagel recommends that we simply accept the irony of our dual capacity for committing to telē and doubting our own commitments, and then try not to take ourselves too seriously. He is comfortable with the conclusion that the potential absurdity of the human condition does not necessarily preclude the meaningfulness of human existence. Fits of self-doubt notwithstanding, we have it in our nature to seek goals that we find both personally satisfying and morally defensible. Thus, in addition to the teleological criterion gleaned from *der Muselmann*, and in addition to the psychological criterion gleaned from Sisyphus, we now find good reason to assert that a life cannot be judged meaningful unless it also satisfies a moral criterion. A meaningful life must be morally significant as well as subjectively satisfying; it must be virtuous as well as happy.

### Consider the Options

In a formal sense we might declare that our quest to discover the conditions for a meaningful life is now completed: *the meaning of human life consists in the pursuit of goals that enable a marriage of happiness and virtue*. It may be that this general principle for the meaning of life takes us as far as the inquiry can go. Perhaps from here on out it's all up to the individual to find some agenda of projects that happens to be both personally satisfying and morally significant. Finding meaning in life might therefore boil down to something that is theoretically



very simple, such as selecting a meal that is both tasty and nutritious. But there is no reason to think that fixing on a general formula for the meaning of life will bring our inquiry to a close. Far from it! For here is where serious inquiry must begin.

Our formula for judging a meaningful life—goals that enable a union of happiness and virtue—may be a lot easier to state than to accomplish. To be sure, many individuals manage to live intensely happy lives. After all, the only requirement for happiness is that we get what we want, and many individuals get just that. Yet such lives are not always meaningful, as Tolstoy's *Confession* attests. Tolstoy had it all—he was wealthy, famous, healthy, well loved by family and friends—and yet he came to a stage in his life when it all felt utterly pointless. He got what everyone wants, but was still left wanting. It is also true that many individuals manage to live consistently virtuous lives that are not in the least happy. What is required for virtue is that we act as we should, and many among us do exactly that. And yet such lives of commendable dutifulness may also be felt to be utterly pointless.

Getting what we want makes us happy, and wanting what is right makes us good, but to achieve happiness and virtue simultaneously is not an easy thing to do. Satisfying our desires often entails a violation of our moral commitments, and honoring our moral commitments often prevents our getting what we want. The secret, of course, is to want only those things that we honestly judge to be good. The most obvious strategy for resolving conflict between desire and virtue would be to conflate the psychological criterion and the moral criterion. That is, one might accept a moral vision as the given and then work on transforming one's desires to come into harmony with objective values. Alternatively, one might accept the subjective factor as fixed and then to bring one's moral vision into line with one's selfish desires. It might be reasoned, for example, that the whole point of moral precepts is to construct a social order in which individuals might maximize their happiness, and if this is the case, then what's wrong with a bit of moral tinkering? If the ultimate point is for the self to love the good, then this might be brought about either by changing the self or changing the good. There may be obvious problems inherent in each of these strategies, but the important thing to see is that it all boils down to the goals that come to be embodied in a life. The challenge in any event is to desire the right goals. Seeking a meaningful life is therefore a quest for moral truth no less than a longing for personal satisfaction.

It is now obvious that we cannot expect to get very far in our inquiry about a meaningful life until we get the question of goals sorted



out. Finding the secret to a meaningful life depends, fundamentally, on having a decent theory about the nature of goal seeking, that is, a theory about teleology. What are goals, anyway? What can be said about their reality status? Are they out there somewhere waiting to be discovered, or are they merely invented? What role do goals play in organizing our lives? How do we come to have them? Are they natural, or do they transcend nature? How are goals related to values? How do we judge their merits? What makes achieving them satisfying and worthwhile? If we are seeking some purpose in life, just where and how do we look?

This book takes seriously the idea that the stance we take concerning the nature and dynamics of goals and values will have much to say about how we conduct our individual and collective searches for meaningful lives. What we think about teleology will decisively influence what we are prepared to accept as a union of happiness and virtue. And finding a satisfying way to think about teleology is the challenge of the next two chapters.