

Lesson 2

Meaning of Life

“Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done,” it suddenly occurred to him. “But how could that be, when I did everything so properly?” he replied, and immediately dismissed from his mind this, the sole solution of all the riddles of life and death, as something quite impossible.

Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

What is the meaning of life? This is the big question—the hardest to answer, the most urgent, and at the same time the most obscure. Careful thinkers often avoid it, aware that the question is vague, that the meaning of the word "meaning" is itself ambiguous, and that the answers are not always literal truths that can be defended by argument and reason. Yet, it is reason that makes an answer possible, and it is reason that makes the question necessary. In this chapter, we will consider possible foundations for meaning in life and candidates for the type of life that would be meaningful.

What Kind of Meaning?

For most of us, the question about the meaning of life is most likely to arise in a time of confusion, when we are depressed or when some incident has upset our values and expectations. In everyday life, when we aren't studying philosophy or thinking in general about things, life seems crammed full of meanings. There's a term paper to write, an oil filter to change in the car, a good party to look forward to or remember, and the prospect of an important job interview sometime in the next few weeks. But when we begin to think abstractly, as we inevitably do at times, it becomes obvious to us that none of these small goals and expectations could count as the meaning of life. And so we look at bigger things—happiness in general, doing well in life, success, influence, love. But then the ominous message of the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes hits home: “All is vanity,” and soon to pass away. And so we begin to look beyond life itself for the meaning of life—the ultimate question of philosophy.

What is the meaning of life? First, we should ask: what is the meaning of "meaning" in this question? Sometimes, the meaning of something (a sign, a word) is what it refers to, something beyond itself. Thus, the sign “Beware of the dog” presumably refers to some dog, probably unseen, presumably large, and possibly ferocious. The name Socrates is the name of Socrates. Thinking of meaning this way, we would say that the meaning of each of our lives is whatever our individual lives refer to. But what would this be? One might say that each of our lives, in some sense, refers to the people around us—family, friends, associates—so that the meaning of life is other people. Or one might say that each of our lives refers to the larger community, to the nation, or to humanity as a whole. Or one might say that our lives refer to our Creator, so that the meaning of life is God. But the concept of “reference” becomes stretched very thin here, and one might well object that a life doesn't refer to anything at all. It just is. This seems to leave us

without an answer to the question of life's meaning. Perhaps the problem is with the notion of meaning as reference.

The Meaning of Life: From the Book of Ecclesiastes

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever . . . All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun . . .

I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, it is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions . . . Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun. And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: . . . I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all. Then said I in my heart, as it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart that this also is vanity . . . Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

But let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

—Ecclesiastes 1:2–9, 13–14; 2:1–17

(book of both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible, third century BCE, King Solomon, King James Version)

We can say that particular words and signs refer, but only within the context of a language, a community of shared meanings. The written word *pepino* doesn't mean anything to a person who doesn't speak Spanish. The word *fore* may be meaningless to someone who doesn't play golf. Reference is a contextual affair, and so it is in life, too. The meaning of our particular acts can be explained by reference to goals and conventions (“He did that to impress the recruiter,” or “He did that to signal a left-hand turn”). But can we similarly explain the meaning of our whole lives?

A rare person does dedicate their entire existence to a single goal—winning the revolution or finding a cure for cancer—but most people are not so single-minded, and their lives don't have a meaning in this easy-to-define sense. Still, this doesn't mean that their lives lack meaning. In linguistics, we can ask what the word "pepino" means, but we cannot intelligibly ask what the meaning of the whole language is. The question "What is the meaning of Spanish?" is nonsense. So, too, we might say, asking for the meaning of life as a whole is nonsense—but this seems to deprive us of any possible answer to our all-important question.

In any case, when people ask about the meaning of life, they often have in mind just such a reference to something beyond them, something outside their lives. These references may be extremely important. They may even be the most important things in life. But it is worth pointing out that, in a sense, these references do not fully answer the question; they only postpone it. Four such answers along these lines are worth mentioning: thinking of one's children, or God, or an afterlife as the meaning of one's life, or, in despair, concluding too quickly that life has no meaning.

Children as Meaning

Many people would say that the meaning of life lies in their children and their children's children. But this answer has an odd consequence as soon as you start to think about it. If the meaning of life lies not in these children's own lives, but in someone else's life, what is it that makes their lives meaningful? Their children. But what makes their children's lives meaningful in turn? Their children, and so on. In this way, people have always tended to project abstractly into the future, to a place of total peace and happiness—what philosophers call a **utopia**. And this is how they would like their children, or their children's children, or their children's children's children, to live. But how does this make their own lives meaningful? And what is the meaning of life for those distant relatives happily living in Utopia? They face the same question. Successful couples often look back on their years of struggle together and agree that those were the best years of their lives. How does this square with the idea that an eventual peaceful Utopia is the meaning of life? And is happiness itself so obviously the meaning of life?

God as Meaning

A traditional answer to the question of the meaning of life is God. In fact, it often has been suggested that for people who believe in God, the question does not even arise, and that in the days before, many people doubted his existence, the meaning of life was never in question. But this is not true. The great philosopher Saint Augustine, a most devout Christian, asked that question more persistently than most atheists. So did Martin Luther and an enormous number of Christian thinkers before him and since. To think that believing in God alone answers the question of life's meaning only pushes it back one step further. Why has God created us? What does he expect from us? Why did he create us? Some people think that God created us as something special, not only "in His own image" but with a mission to accomplish for him here on earth. But why would he do that if he can do anything? To prove a point? (To whom?) To satisfy his vanity? (The God of the Old Testament was, after all, a jealous God; perhaps he was a vain God, too.) Furthermore, why should we think that we have been created for a special mission or purpose? If we are, what is that mission? What is that purpose? The question thus repeats itself, as the great thinkers of Christianity have long recognized: What is the meaning of our lives? Belief in God seems only to make the question more urgent; belief does not solve it.

Afterlife as Meaning

Some people believe that the meaning of life is to be found in another life, that is, our reward or punishment for this one. But whether or not you believe in such an afterlife, this answer to the question is odd, too. To say that this life has meaning only by reference to the next one is to say, as is openly claimed in the Book of Ecclesiastes, that this life itself is insignificant, meaningless. But what is it that we are to do in this insignificant life so that we will be rewarded in the next one? Simply have faith? Do good works? Live life to the fullest? Realize our artistic or social potential? Convert the heathens? Learn to cook? Again, the question repeats itself, and one might also ask: If this life is so insignificant, what would make the next one any more meaningful? Is it that this one is so short and the next one is so long? But if life—even a few minutes of life—has no significance in itself, then what significance can eternal life have? If you're bored by sitting in a class for an hour, it won't make you any less bored if you are told that the class will be extended for ten more hours. On the other hand, Christian thinkers, especially in the past several centuries, have often argued that the rewards of the next life will be available only to those who live this life to the fullest. This brings up our question once again: What is it to live life to the fullest? What is it to find this life meaningful?

No Meaning at All

On the other side of the question, there are those philosophers—and a fair number of today's students—who would say that life has no meaning at all. The word often used to express this view is "absurd". "Life is absurd," they say, which means that it has no meaning. Again, this is a view held by both those who believe in God and those who don't, although it is clear that the most troubling and final statements have come from those who don't. For example, the French philosopher **Albert Camus** said in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the absurd had become a widespread sensibility in our times.

At any street corner, the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face. . . .

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the "why" arises, and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.

Albert Camus was born in Algeria in 1913. He was an outspoken journalist and throughout his life adopted a difficult middle stance in politics, between the radicals and revolutionaries on his left and the harsh authorities of Nazi occupation and perpetrators of colonial injustices on his right. His first published novel, *The Stranger*, made him an instant celebrity in Europe; it is still one of the most popular novels on American college campuses. His philosophy was based on his view that life is essentially "absurd," that the universe will never satisfy our expectations for meaning and justice. His reaction, however, was not that life is therefore not worth living, but rather that we have to *make* it worth living by rebelling against this absurdity, by refusing to participate in the injustices of the world, and by living life to the fullest. He died in a car crash in 1960.

It is important to emphasize that each of these answers may have great importance in a person's life. One can certainly dedicate oneself to one's children, and many people always have. It is possible (though rarer than people usually say) to devote one's life to God, and many people do. But it is just as important to realize that these noble answers leave our question open, for they transfer it one step down the line. What is the meaning of our children's lives? What kind of life would amount to life in the service of God? We need an answer in our lives, not just beyond them.

The same might be said of the reply that life has no meaning, that it is all absurd. Camus sometimes argues for that position on atheistic grounds; if there is no external meaning, then there can be no meaning at all. But an external meaning may not be the meaning of life, and it does not follow from the absence of God (if, in fact, he does not exist) that life is without meaning.

The Thought of "External Recurrence"

The greatest weight.—What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence . . ." Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in everything, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate, eternal confirmation and seal? —Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* §381, 1882, trans. Walter Kaufmann

The Myth of Sisyphus (as Told by Camus)

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day of his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. No fate can be surmounted by scorn.

The struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. —Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942

It is worth noting that linguists now insist that meaning must be found within the context of language. A word has meaning not just because of its reference but, more importantly, because of its sense in the language. Thus, we might say, by way of analogy, that the meaning of life is to be found in the context of our lives—the sense they make and the sense we give to them—rather than in reference to anything outside of life. Devotion to God answers the question of the meaning of life insofar as one actually lives for God. Having children answers the question insofar as one actually lives for one's children. Ironically, **nihilism**—the view that life has no meaning—also can provide life with a meaning, if one actually dedicates one's life to the proposition that life has no meaning and deflates the false and sometimes self-righteous and vicious meanings that people think it has. Camus seems to have lived his life that way.

The Meanings of Life

Life is like the Olympic Games: a few strain their muscles to win a prize, others sell trinkets to the crowd for a profit, and some just come to see how everything is done.

— Pythagoras, sixth century BCE

Life is like playing the violin in public while learning the instrument as one goes.

— Samuel Butler, 1612–1680

Life is just a bowl of cherries.

— Anonymous

Life is a bowl of pits.

— Rodney Dangerfield

The question of the meaning of life does not require or allow a specific answer. Indeed, what is required is a metaphor, an image, a vision of life in which you can see yourself as having a definite role, a set of reasonable expectations, and—what makes this so important—your vision in many ways determines the life you will lead. For example, suppose you go into business, or perhaps to school, with the attitude that life is “dog-eat-dog” and everyone for himself. You will greet everyone as a threat and a rival; you will not be wholly honest, and in any case, you will not enjoy others' company. People will begin to sense your competitive hostility and distrust you, perhaps even testing your intentions with small acts of provocation. And soon you will find yourself indeed in a “dog-eat-dog” atmosphere—one that you largely have created yourself. So the question of the meaning of life is not just a matter of discovery but also an important act of creation. Your own philosophy is only in part the expression and clarification of the view you already have of the world, for the philosophy you formulate also will be an instrument for shaping and revising that view. Thus, some philosophers who have had a gloomy or pessimistic

temperament willfully have formulated rather cheerful and optimistic philosophies, not to deceive themselves but to change themselves, and some of them have succeeded remarkably well.

The images we use to talk about life define the meaning we find, or don't find, in it. Thus, your answers to Opening Questions 1 and 4 in particular should give you a fairly clear indication about the general view of life you seem to accept, even if your answer is playful or poetic. (We reveal our views through play and poetry, as well as in doing serious philosophy.) If you claimed that "Life is a game," for example, then you said that you think life shouldn't be taken very seriously (whether or not you yourself do take it seriously), that it doesn't add up to anything in the end, and that the best way to live is to enjoy it. On the other hand, if you stated that "Life is a gift from God, to be used wisely," you said that you think life is indeed serious, with a more or less definite mission (which you have to discern) and a fairly clear-cut sense of success and failure (in God's judgment). In what follows, we list and briefly describe a number of grand images of life and its meaning (or lack thereof) that have appeared throughout history and in students' papers. Of course, the list is not at all complete; you will want to add some images of your own, which may be even better than the ones we have listed here.

Life as a Game

If life is a game, it is not to be taken so seriously, as we said above. A game is a self-contained activity, and even if it does add up to something (as playing basketball increases your coordination or as running track increases your endurance), the significance of the game lies in the playing itself. ("It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.") But then again, some people see games as fiercely competitive. (Thus, Vince Lombardi's famous line, "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing!") And to see life that way is to see it as a perpetual con in which you win or lose. If you think life is a game, it is therefore also important to ask what kind of game it is. Some games are played for fun alone. Some games are played to prove your superiority (arm wrestling); others are played to kill time (solitaire). Some games are distinctively social (bridge); some are intentionally anxiety producing (high-stakes poker); some are aimed at hurting the opponent (boxing); and some are aimed at helping others (turning charity into a game, for example, to see who can collect the most money for a cause). Many writers have used the notion of life as a game—Eric Berne's *Games People Play* spent time on the best-seller list—and some philosophers have suggested that language, economics, and philosophy itself are games. To think of life as a game is to put it in a certain perspective, in order not to take it too seriously, to emphasize the importance of obeying the rules and, perhaps, the centrality of being a "good sport," enjoying oneself, and, if possible, winning. But we tend to use the words "winner" and "loser" in a dangerous way. For example, what kind of standards are we setting for ourselves when we declare that the second-best football team in the world—the team that just lost the Super Bowl— "is a bunch of losers"?

Life as a Story

"Life imitates art," wrote the Irish dramatist and essayist Oscar Wilde, reversing Plato, who claimed that art is an imitation of life. It is obvious that we do not live just moment to moment or for some single great goal, but rather we follow a rather detailed script, a story, a narrative,

which (to at least some extent) we make up as we go along. The outlines of the story and our roles in it are probably provided first by our families and our culture, then by the circumstances in which we find ourselves. To think of life as a story is to think of life in a particular temporal way, as a plot unfolding, as the development of character and personality. (The German philosophers of the nineteenth century talked about life as a *Bildungsroman*, a story of personal development as an individual goes through the various quests, disappointments, and discoveries of life.)

We often find ourselves making decisions about our lives using the same standards we use to evaluate literature or a movie: Is it interesting? Is it boring? Does it have enough suspense? Is it in good taste? Is it well timed? Is it carried out dramatically—or overdramatically, “overacted”? Is this action in line with the character of the hero (namely, you)? The American novelist John Barth (in *The End of the Road*) suggested that each of us is the hero of our own story: “The character Polonius,” he writes, “did not consider himself a minor character in *Hamlet*.” One could rewrite *Hamlet* from Polonius’s point of view (as, indeed, playwright Tom Stoppard has rewritten *Hamlet* wonderfully from the point of view of two even more minor characters, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, in his play *Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*). *Hamlet*, of course, is a tragedy. But some people live their lives as comedies, as farce, and others as adventure stories—choosing glamorous jobs or dangerous hobbies—doing whatever is required dramatically to add to their list of swashbuckling episodes. According to this view, it is not the end goal or outcome of life that gives life meaning, but the quality of the story, the quality with which one lives out and develops their role or roles. To choose the wrong role (one for which one is unsuited and untalented) or not to recognize one’s role—or to have too many roles or incoherent roles—is to damage the meaning that one finds in life.

Life as Tragedy

One incontrovertible fact is that we all die. But this fact can be ignored, or death can be viewed as an inconvenience, as a passage to another life, or as an ultimate disaster. If we look at our lives as less dramatic and less well-written versions of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, or *Faust*, we indeed can find the crucial ingredients of tragedy in every one of us—some tragic flaw, some error in judgment, some fatal contradiction—that get played out through life until everything ends in death. The philosopher Camus ends his novel *The Stranger* with a character declaring, “All men are brothers, and the same end awaits them all—death.” As opposed to the game metaphor, the tragedy metaphor casts life as a serious and unhappy process, punctuated by pleasures, perhaps, but ultimately an inevitable progression toward a tragic plot that can have only one end. To live well, in this view, means to play one’s tragic role well—to bear it heroically, perhaps making some grand soliloquies along the way.

Life as Comedy

“Life is a joke.” Well, perhaps not, but it may be refreshing to think of life that way in contrast to the idea that life is tragic. Laughter too often is ignored as an essential ingredient in life, perhaps even as the essential ingredient in the good life. Plato does not write much about laughter, but he certainly displays a profound sense of humor throughout his Socratic dialogues. The sixteenth-century Dutch philosopher **Erasmus** wrote one of the most profound books about human life,

titled *In Praise of Folly*, a celebration of human foolishness. Nietzsche's fictional prophet Zarathustra teaches that we should not be so serious but instead enjoy laughter and levity.

Of course, there are many kinds of humor. There are jokes, including both good and bad jokes, offensive jokes, and "shaggy dog" (tediously protracted) jokes. Some thinkers would emphasize the importance of sophistication in humor, but others would say that laughter itself is important, not what it is about. (Offensive jokes, as opposed to merely bad or silly jokes, on the other hand, perhaps should not count as "humor" at all.) Jokes, however, tend to be rather contrived and limited in time, and a person who spends all of their time playing or telling jokes (a "jokester") too easily becomes a tedious and pathetic person to have around. But then there are more serious comedies, not one-line, stand-up humor but protracted stories of ambition and frustration, desire and disappointment, all treated not in terms of what Camus called "The Absurd" but rather as absurdity in a humorous sense.

Tragedy and comedy can be combined, in "black humor" or in irony. At the end of a classic Humphrey Bogart–John Huston movie, *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, the older man (played by Walter Huston, John's father) has lost everything. Still, he bursts into uproarious laughter and encourages the others to do the same. It provides the only possible "happy ending" to a story of greed, disappointment, and death. It is hard to deny that all of us could use a little more humor, not so much in our lives (television provides more than enough of that) but about our lives, in the way we see our own faults and foibles.

From the Stranger

[In prison, awaiting execution, Meursault:]

Then all day there was my appeal to think about. I made the most of this idea, studying my effects to squeeze out the maximum consolation. Thus, I always began by assuming the worst; my appeal was dismissed. That meant, of course, I was to die. Sooner than others, obviously. "But," I reminded myself, "it's common knowledge that life isn't worth living, anyhow." And, on a wide view, I could see that it makes little difference whether one dies at the age of thirty or three-score and ten—since, in either case, other men and women will continue living, the world will go on as before. Also, whether I died now or forty years hence, this business of dying had to be got through, inevitably. Still, somehow this line of thought wasn't as consoling as it should have been; the idea of all those years of life in hand was a galling reminder! However, I could argue myself out of it by picturing what would have been my feelings when my term was up, and death had cornered me. Once you're up against it, the precise manner of your death obviously has little importance. Therefore—but it was hard not to lose the thread of the argument leading up to that "therefore"—I should be prepared to face the dismissal of my appeal. — Albert Camus, 1942. From: Stuart Gilbert, trans. Copyright 1946 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Life as a Mission

Christianity has often taught that life is a mission, the mission being to get others to become Christians, too. But not only Christians accept this view of life as a “calling.” The German poet **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**, for example, described his mission in life as creating poetry to give the German people a sense of cultural identity. The philosopher Hegel took it as his mission (around the same time as Goethe) to use philosophy to clarify, for everyone, the meaning of the world in the wake of the French Revolution. Political extremists often talk of their lives as a mission—to liberate oppressed people or to get rid of tyranny in their homeland. Scientists sometimes feel they have a mission to fulfill in expanding knowledge or developing a cure for some dread disease, and people with children often feel that their mission is to raise their children well and do what they can to make the world a better place for them to live in. If one’s mission is primarily moral, it will be manifested according to one’s moral philosophy. A utilitarian like Bentham would aim to change things to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. An ethical rationalist like Kant would urge that our goal should be to cultivate our moral personality and to practice our duty as prescribed by reason.

Life as Art

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) is still considered to be the greatest German man of letters. He was also a scientist, a lawyer, a civil servant, an artist, an adventurer, a physicist, and a politician. He made important discoveries in botany and wrote essays on Newtonian physics. Goethe wrote in virtually every literary genre, from simple love poetry to long and involved epic plays, the most famous of which is *Faust*, which he worked on for over sixty years. He once claimed to “teach poetry to speak in German,” and Hegel followed him in philosophy. Both the poet and the philosopher used the biological imagery of growth as the basis of their work, combating the largely mechanical imagery that dominated the age after Newton.

The German philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche** urged that we live our lives as works of art. He was comparing life not so much to a story but to an art like sculpture, suggesting that one live by creating a shape for oneself, “building character,” developing what we call “style.” The German philosopher **Friedrich von Schelling** saw the whole of life as God’s work of art (with us, in effect, as God’s apprentices). Artists often describe their sense of mission in life as “to create,” but it is the activity itself that counts for them as much as the results of their efforts. The ideal of this view is appropriately to live beautifully or, if that is not possible, to live at least with style, “with class,” we might say. From this point of view, life is to be evaluated as an artwork—as moving, inspiring, well-designed, dramatic, or colorful, or as clumsy, uninspired, and uninspiring, or easily forgettable.

Friedrich von Schelling (1775–1854) was a German philosopher who was a friend and great admirer of the Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century. His philosophy, accordingly, places unusual emphasis on the importance of creativity and the centrality of art. Indeed, he interprets God not only as a creator but ultimately as the Great Artist, who is still creating the universe through us. Schelling was one of Hegel’s best friends in college, and the two developed their philosophies together until they quarreled and went their separate ways.

German philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844–1900) is known especially for his attacks on Christianity and Christian morality, as well as some unflattering comments about women. He declared himself an “immoralist,” and insisted instead on the *aesthetic* value of life. Yet, he is generally recognized as one of the great moral philosophers of all time.

Life as an Adventure

Life as a story, life as art—these are inspiring images, but the virtues of life then become the virtues of literature or sculpture: their shape and timing, their appeal to onlookers. But life can be aesthetic and exciting without being like art, without the need to always think about the shape of the whole or what it looks like to an observer. There is also the thrill of living “to the fullest,” taking chances, enjoying challenge, and the rush of adrenaline. These are the concerns of those who see life as an adventure. Their way of living is to take risks, even risking their lives, and to thrill in both skill and uncertainty. This is certainly not an image for everyone.

The Meaning of Life: Nietzsche

Concerning life, the wisest men of all ages have judged alike: it is no good. Always and everywhere one has heard the same sound from their mouths—a sound full of doubt, full of melancholy, full of weariness of life, full of resistance to life. . . . Even Socrates was tired of it. What does that evidence? What does it evince? Formerly, one would have said (—oh, it has been said, and loud enough, and especially by our pessimists): “At least something of all this must be true! The consensus of the sages evidences the truth.” Shall we still talk like that today? May we? “At least something must be sick here,” we retort. These wisest men of all ages—they should first be scrutinized closely. Were they all perhaps shaky on their legs? late? tottery? decadents? Could it be that wisdom appears on earth as a raven, inspired by a little whiff of carrion?

When one finds it necessary to turn reason into a tyrant, as Socrates did, the danger cannot be slight that something else will play the tyrant. Rationality was then hit upon as the savior; neither Socrates nor his “patients” had any choice about being rational: it was *de rigueur*, it was their last resort. The fanaticism with which all Greek reflection throws itself upon rationality betrays a desperate situation; there was danger, there was but one choice: either to perish or to be absurdly rational... One must be clever, clear, bright at any price: any concession to instincts, to the unconscious, leads downward. — From *Twilight of the Idols*, 1889

There is an old Chinese curse: “May you live in interesting times!” But for those who see life this way, there may be no other way to live. The alternatives are too tedious. And unlike those who view life as art or as literature, those who see life as adventure never plan a proper ending. When it’s over, it’s just—over.

Life as Disease

Life viewed as a tragedy has a sense of grandeur about it; life viewed as a disease is rather pathetic. **Sigmund Freud**, for example, said that “the goal of all life is death,” a view that has been around since ancient times. Not many years ago, Kurt Vonnegut said that we are “terrible

animals,” and that the earth’s immune system is trying to get rid of us. The “disease” metaphor has been applied to modern life, to Western civilization, to capitalism, and so on. But to be “sick” presupposes some sense of what it is to be well, and the all-important question for anyone who uses this metaphor is: what would count as a healthy life? Immortality? A life of antlike social productivity? A life of unblemished happiness? A life of continuous love without a hint of hostility? These all may be desirable, of course, but to desire them does not mean that the lack of them makes life a disease. And yet, much of our language these days is caught up in such “health” metaphors. (Another word for much the same view is the word natural; natural is healthy, unnatural means disease or deformity.) We talk about a “healthy economy,” and we think of what we used to call games now as “exercise” to promote health. And life itself, viewed through the health metaphors, begins with the expression “a healthy economy.” If we take the metaphor of health too seriously, life itself is bound to seem like a fatal disease, at least ultimately, because there seems to be no cure for it, and it ends in death.

Austrian-born **Sigmund Freud** (1856–1939) is not usually thought of as a philosopher. As one of the greatest thinkers of modern times, though, he has changed our conception of ourselves and our minds as much as any orthodox philosopher, even while rejecting some of the favorite premises of most philosophers. For example, he argued that the clarity of self-knowledge discussed by thinkers such as Descartes is often an illusion, and that most of our ideas and desires are, in fact, products of the unconscious, where forbidden urges and wishes are repressed and often distort what we think we know so clearly. And yet Freud himself remained the great defender of rational thinking. His whole technique of psychoanalysis, he once wrote, was aimed at nothing less than making the unconscious conscious and so putting its contents within the realm of rational understanding and control.

Life as Desire

The view of life as desire is often coupled with the **Sisyphus myth** of life as constant frustration. The Greek allegory in this case is **Tantalus** (from whose name we get the word tantalizing), who was condemned by the gods to be tied just out of reach of a bunch of grapes; he spent all eternity reaching for the fruit, but he never managed to get any. A more modern version of the life-as-desire story is the legend of Faust, the subject of some of the greatest plays in Western literature—Dr. Faustus, by the English writer Christopher Marlowe in 1589, and Faust, by Goethe, have already been mentioned. Faust lived for his desires; when one was satisfied, it was immediately replaced by another. This image of life is that of continuous wanting, one craving succeeding another, with no end in sight. A person wants to earn “just enough money to support myself,” and does so, only to find that now they want something more, which becomes the focus of life until it is acquired, but then it, too, is not enough. Now the person wants something else. And so on and so on. This is not necessarily a life of frustration, for such desires usually can be satisfied. It is rather the life of desire after desire, in which nothing is ever ultimately satisfying. On this view, desire, as well as the satisfaction of desire, gives life meaning; not to desire is to be already dead.

Life as Nirvana

The opposite view of life as desire is life as not desiring, as the overcoming of desire. Freud called the effort to maintain psychological equilibrium the “constancy principle” in his early psychoanalytic works and the “nirvana principle” later on (though he thought of it as governing our psyches independently of conscious effort). In his view, the goal of life is to attain as restful a state as possible, without tension or desire. The Sanskrit word nirvana, meaning “extinguish,” is used in Buddhism to refer to the state of liberation from selfish cravings. The goal of Buddhism is to loosen the hold our desires have on us and to reach a state of tranquility. In Buddhism, nirvana includes an equanimity toward death, and Freud even sometimes referred to his principle as the “death wish.” The Western counterpart to the Buddhist nirvana is the peace of mind that some schools of thought have promoted as the goal of philosophical activity, which they characterize as **contemplation** (unperturbed learning and thinking).

What We’re Here For

We are put on this earth to help others, but what the others are here for, I cannot say. —
John Foster Hall (1867–1945) (a.k.a. The Reverend Vivian Foster, the Vicar of Mirth),
English comedian

Life as Altruism

Altruism is acting for the benefit of others, even if there is no benefit whatsoever to oneself. Some people see themselves as being here on earth to help others less fortunate than they are. It is a view of life that has a very definite sense of mission, as well as quite clear-cut views of success and failure and of what ought to be done. For some people, life as altruism is a one-way enterprise; they help others to give their own lives meaning, but they expect nothing in return. For others, life as altruism is a general ideal, and they hope that someday everyone will help one another selflessly.

What Do You Value Most?

Do not value either your children or your life or anything else more than goodness. —
Socrates, in Plato’s *Crito*, trans. John Madison Cooper

Life as Honor

Honor is a concept that has changed over time, but for the Greeks in Homer’s *Iliad*, for instance, life was essentially a matter of living up to the expectations of your community, of proving yourself in battle, and of not disgracing yourself in any way. This was not to say that you couldn’t behave badly: Achilles went sulking to his tent like a child when the king took one of his favorite slave girls away from him. But he established his honor again when he returned to the field of battle to avenge the death of his best friend. For the Greek heroes, honor was more important than life itself, and given the choice between death with honor and life without it, they would not have hesitated for a moment. But the concept of honor has not been limited to military heroes. Socrates died for his honor, too, not in battle but in a prison cell, to show that he valued

his principles more than life itself. Our own concept of honor is not so clear, however. American soldiers have died with honor, of course. Still, the more general sense of honor—as the guiding principle of life—is surely not so evident in daily American life as it supposedly was in ancient Athens. But we do have a sense of duty, and many people would say that, whatever else, the meaning of life is doing your duty—to God, country, family, friends, and employer.

Stoicism

Stoicism is a philosophy that flourished for centuries, from 300 BCE (not long after Aristotle's death) to the fourth and fifth centuries CE (near the end of the Roman Empire). The Stoics viewed most human desires and emotions as irrational and held that, to live in harmony with the universe, we need to control our passions and lead a simple life of integrity and duty. Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE), a member of the court of the emperor Nero, was the most famous of the later Stoics; like Socrates, he was condemned to death (allegedly for plotting to kill Nero, but this is unlikely). The Stoic school also included a Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (121–180), and hundreds of lesser figures who were powerful spokesmen in their times. Most of the Stoics did not share Seneca's fate, but virtually all of them stressed the importance of maintaining one's honor and integrity even at the expense of one's life.

Life as Learning

A common image is the view of life as a learning experience. Of course, why we are learning all of this is an open question; but some learning, at least, is satisfying for its own sake. This satisfaction, presumably, is what the learning of life is all about. We have a bad experience (being walked out on by a boyfriend or girlfriend, being thrown out of school for smoking), and we “chalk it up to experience.” Some people feel compelled to experience as much as possible, to “try everything at least once,” just to know what it is like. For them, “living life to the fullest” means doing everything. But notice that this same expression means something very different from other viewpoints: the person who sees life as a mission lives life to the fullest by taking every opportunity to carry out their mission, whereas the person who sees life as a tragedy takes that phrase to mean suffering in a dramatic way. These days, the learning theme is evident in talk of “developing your human potential.” This view of life was also popular in Germany almost two hundred years ago and can be found in Greek philosophy, for example, in Aristotle. Does it make sense to ask what we are learning for? The age-old answer is that learning leads to **wisdom**, and accordingly, the life of contemplation has been the suggestion of philosophers ever since ancient times.

“Four Noble Truths” of Buddhism

1. Life is marked by suffering.
2. Suffering arises from desire.
3. Desire can be eliminated.
4. One can eliminate desire by following the “right way.”

Life as Suffering

“Life is suffering,” says the first noble truth of Buddhism, according to one translation. The last word might be better translated as “troubled” or “dissatisfying.” Still, the gist is that life is filled with turmoil and stress. The great pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer, who Buddhism strongly influenced, also thought that life is a source of frustration. Our desires are ultimately irrational and pointless, he says. The answer, he proposes, is **detachment** as a result of recognizing that any lasting satisfaction is unavailable. Schopenhauer’s answer is somewhat similar to Stoicism, which also taught that most of our passions are irrational and best overcome through detachment.

The myth of Sisyphus pushing his rock up the mountain, only to have it fall back down, reflects the idea that life does not bring lasting fulfillment. We sometimes look at life as just one repetition after another, ultimately adding up to nothing. A character in one modern novel commits suicide when she looks at her toothbrush and realizes that she will have to brush her teeth again and again for the rest of her life, a prospect that, when thought of all at once, indeed seems pointless. Sometimes you fix something, knowing that it will break again soon; you learn how to do something for the seventeenth time, knowing that you will have forgotten it in a week. You get a high school diploma just to go to college, just to get a B.A., to get into medical school, just to get an M.D., to intern, just to study surgery, just to practice surgery, just to live the good life you wanted to live while you were in high school, but then you find you are too old and too busy to enjoy it. This perspective on life is a form of seeing life as absurd. But it is worth recalling that Camus thought Sisyphus’s life was meaningful, despite the absurdity of his task, because he reacted to his frustration with a kind of defiance. Is there anything analogous to this in our lives?

The Only Serious Philosophical Question

“There is only one serious philosophical question, and that is suicide. Whether life is worth living or not amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest... comes afterward... One must first answer.” — Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Life as an Investment

Business plays such a major role in our society that we sometimes find ourselves inclined to think of life as business. (“The business of America is business,” said Calvin Coolidge, a businessman who happened also to be president.) To consider life this way is to think of the years of our lives as so much capital, which we invest in various enterprises—a career, a particular school, marriage, and children—to get a certain return. What it is that is returned is not so clear, and so the standards for a good investment versus a poor one are a matter of considerable dispute. A father might consider his son to have “wasted his talents” (that is, to have made a poor investment) because he decided to be a poet, whereas the son may accuse the father of having “sold out” for going into business as he did. It is fairly easy to confuse this metaphor with its most prominent manifestation and think of the actual money a person earns in

life and the estate they accumulate as a result of success. A moment's reflection, however, will show that this is not always a dependable measure. If a good investment is measured by what one has at the end, there is a very real question about how this could be the meaning of life, since this payoff is definite only when the life of which it is the supposed "meaning" has ended.

Aristotle, on Friendship and the Good

The excellent person is of one mind with himself, and desires the same things in his whole soul. . . . The excellent person is related to his friend as he is related to himself, since the friend is another himself. Hence, friendship seems to be one of the features of the good life. —Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IX, Chapter 4. Trans. Terence Irwin

Life as Relationships

We have said too little directly about love, marriage, and friendship. Still, it has been obvious to many people that what is most important in their lives is human relationships, not the grand and abstract sense of being part of humanity or of being a citizen of a great nation. Still, the very particular relationship one has with another person or a few other persons. Thus, people say that what really counts in life is friendship, or that the most important thing in life is love. But why do we describe something so important with a word that is as bland as "relationship"? Why do we think of the union of two people as a "relating" of one separate being to another, rather than thinking in terms of a union to begin with? Indeed, much of our language about "relationships" presents us with this unflattering picture of two lonely souls trying to "get through" to one another, to "communicate," or to "break down the barriers." On the other hand, there is a much more inspiring picture of all of us already connected, perhaps—as Hegel argued—in one all-embracing Spirit. In this view, it is the distance between us, not intimacy, that is the aberration. The meaning of our lives is our network of relations with other people; ideally, the meaning of life is love.