

Meaningfulness and Identities

Wai-hung Wong

Abstract Three distinct but related questions can be asked about the meaningfulness of one's life. The first is 'What is the meaning of life?,' which can be called 'the cosmic question about meaningfulness'; the second is 'What is a meaningful life?,' which can be called 'the general question about meaningfulness'; and the third is 'What is the meaning of *my* life?,' which can be called 'the personal question about meaningfulness.' I argue that in order to deal with all three questions we should start with the personal question. There is a way of understanding the personal question which allows us to answer it independently of any consideration of the cosmic question, but which nonetheless helps us see why the cosmic question should be dismissed as a bad question. Besides, a recommendable answer to the general question can be derived from my understanding of how the personal question should be answered. Two notions are essential to my account, namely, the notion of identities and the notion of a biographical life. And the account can be epitomized in this enticing way: a person's life is meaningful if it contains material for an autobiography that she thinks is worth writing and others think is worth reading.

Keywords Meaning · Meaningfulness · Identities · Identification · Value · Biographical Life · Skepticism · Ultimateness · Subjective · Objective · Intersubjective

1 Introduction

Philosophers who think 'What is the meaning of life?' is a bad question usually give two

reasons for thinking so. One is that the question is too obscure; it can be used to ask quite different questions and it is not clear which of these different questions is best expressed by ‘What is the meaning of life?.’¹ The other reason is that the question assumes, without justification, that there is some one thing that would be the answer, if it indeed has a positive answer. I agree with these philosophers, and to the above two reasons I want to add a third: the question is bad because it seems to trivialize a question that may be more pressing for those who ask it, namely, ‘What is the meaning of *my* life?.’ Let us call the former ‘the cosmic question about meaningfulness’ and the latter ‘the personal question about meaningfulness.’² The cosmic question seems to trivialize the personal question because an answer to it implies an answer to the personal question. That is, if there is something that gives meaning to life, it can give meaning to my life as well; but if life has no meaning, then my life cannot have meaning either. The personal question may be, however, more pressing (but no less obscure) than the cosmic question because a person who asks it may feel a stronger need to answer it than to answer the cosmic question. She may feel that even if there is such a thing as the meaning of life, and even if her life has such generic meaning, she would not be satisfied unless she can find some meaning specific to *her* life.

But unless there is a way of understanding the personal question as independent of the cosmic question, it is hard to see why the cosmic question should not take priority over the personal question. After all, it is natural to think that it will be pointless for me to look for the meaning of my life if human life is meaningless. On the other hand, if we understand the two questions as totally unrelated, and if we are troubled by the cosmic question at all, we may still be dissatisfied even if we know how to answer the personal

question positively, for such an answer then has no implication for how we should tackle the cosmic question. So the ideal solution is this: we find a way of understanding the personal question which allows us to answer it independently of any consideration of the cosmic question, and which nonetheless gives us some hint as to how the cosmic question can be answered or dismissed.

The obscurity of both questions should give us sufficient room for trying to work out such a solution, but it does not mean anything goes. Our understanding of the questions has to capture the most important concerns of those who ask them, to imply plausible answers to related questions, such as whether a meaningful life must also be happy and whether an immoral person's life can be meaningful, and to be suggestive of a reasonable explanation of why people ask the personal or the cosmic question in the circumstances or the way in which they ask it.

2 A Comparison to Questions about Human Knowledge

Some philosophers argue that individual human lives can be meaningful even if human life as such has no meaning, but they focus on what can be called (for lack of a better name) 'the general question about meaningfulness' rather than the personal question.³

Here are some slightly different ways of asking the general question: What is a meaningful life? What would give a life meaning? What kinds of lives are meaningful? What are the conditions for a meaningful life? The question is general because a person who asks it does not specifically ask about the meaning of her or someone else's life; she asks about the meaning of any human life. The cosmic question is also general in nature, but unlike the general question about meaningfulness, it does not presuppose that some

lives are meaningful or have meaning — the answer to the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ may be ‘None.’⁴

It may be helpful to compare the cosmic, the general, and the personal questions about meaningfulness to three corresponding questions about human knowledge. The comparison would look neater if we reformulate the cosmic question as ‘Is life meaningful?,’ which is in any case a better formulation because it does not assume that there is some one thing that makes life meaningful if life is meaningful. The three questions about human knowledge are:

- (1) Do human beings know anything about the world?
- (2) What allows human beings to have knowledge of the world?
- (3) How much do I know about the world?

The answer to (1), as the intractable problem of epistemological skepticism suggests, may be ‘No.’ But even if the answer is a philosophically satisfying ‘Yes,’ it does not necessarily satisfy a person who asks also (3) — a refutation of skepticism does not give me any reassurance that *I* am not more ignorant than most people. It is easy to see that (1) and (3) correspond to the cosmic and the personal questions about meaningfulness.⁵ People who ask (2) do not try to answer skepticism; they may be doing what Quine calls ‘naturalized epistemology.’⁶ But (2) is, like (1) but unlike (3), a general question. The general question about meaningfulness corresponds to (2),⁷ and it indeed can also be understood naturalistically, that is, as a question that does not call for a religious answer or an answer that has to appeal to something external to or beyond the world (whatever that means). As a matter of fact, most philosophers who tackle the general question think that the conditions for meaningful individual lives are to be

satisfied within the world in which those lives are lived.

(3) is a mundane question, but as Descartes' well-known epistemological project attested, it can be asked in such a way that it becomes the starting point of an attempt to answer (1). I don't have an analogous project here — I begin with the personal question about meaningfulness not *for the sake of* answering the cosmic question. I do, however, hope to find something in a proper understanding of the personal question that helps answer or dismiss the cosmic question. And although I am not going to tackle the general question about meaningfulness directly, my ultimate aim is to answer that question. There are, as I will explain, good reasons for starting with the personal question. Moreover, as I have pointed out, the personal question is in itself a very pressing question for a person who does ask it, more pressing than the cosmic question, and more pressing than the general question too. Even if that person happens to be a philosopher.

The personal question about meaningfulness may sound like a psychological question: an individual person wonders whether her life is meaningful and the question we are concerned with is the question of what will make her answer 'Yes'; and if she answers 'Yes,' her problem is solved. The personal question may well be no more than a psychological question if it is considered independently of the general question about meaningfulness. As a psychological question there may be very different ways of answering 'Yes' for different people, and there is no reason to expect that such different answers can be generalized in any way. Since my strategy is to figure out a way of answering the general question by considering how each of us should answer the personal question, the personal question is not treated merely as a psychological question here.

What is important is not whether an individual person answers ‘Yes’ to the personal question, but whether her way of answering it is *correct* when she does ask the question and answer it. The personal question is treated as a normative question here; as Christine Korsgaard points out, “[t]here is no normativity if you cannot be wrong” (Korsgaard 1996: 161). And there is no good way of telling whether a person’s answer to the personal question is correct or not unless we have a good answer to the general question.

3 The Personal Question

The personal question about meaningfulness is first and foremost an evaluative question. This may not be as clear as it should be when the question is expressed by ‘What is the meaning of my life?’, for ‘What is ...?’ questions usually are not evaluative. But the evaluative nature of the personal question is conspicuous when it is expressed by ‘Does my life have meaning?’ or, perhaps even more so, by ‘Is my life meaningful?’. An answer to the question is an evaluation: if my life is meaningful, it will be (other things being equal) in some sense *better* than if it is not. We have to look deeper into the personal question to see why we think this way; my point here is merely that any interpretation of the personal question has to reflect this thought. And it is its evaluative nature that partly explains why the question is so pressing.

Most people who seriously ask the personal question do not ask it as a result of studying philosophy. Philosophical questions are never pressing.⁸ Instead, it is typically because they are being faced with some critical problems in their lives that people ask the personal question. Their lives are in crisis, and the crisis stimulates them to want to evaluate their lives so that they can know how to go on or whether they should go on at

all. The evaluative question did not arise when their lives were satisfying, for even though they did not self-consciously decide to go on with their lives, the satisfaction they had was sufficient to keep them going and keep them from asking the personal question. This is analogous to the attitude that many of us have towards our health: we do not evaluate our health until we suffer from some physical pain or from some sorts of malfunctioning of our bodies that we are aware of.

Surely this does not mean that anyone being faced with some critical problems in her life would ask about the meaningfulness of her life. Some people are incurably unreflective; and sometimes problems in our lives can be so serious and urgent that reflection about meaningfulness would just be a luxury. Nor does it mean that people whose lives are satisfying would never ask the personal question. Some people are so naturally reflective that they do not need the stimulation of difficulties in life to want to evaluate the meaningfulness of their lives.⁹ This is analogous to people who want to know whether their health is good even when they seem to be enjoying good health. (And the analogy can go further. Some, though certainly not many, can be so overly concerned with the personal question that they become, as it were, hypochondriac about the meaningfulness of their lives.¹⁰)

Now we have the first reason for starting with the personal question: seeing that the personal question is evaluative helps us make better sense of the general question. Why do we want to know the conditions for a meaningful life? Because a meaningful life is better than a meaningless life and we want to know the conditions for a meaningful life so that we can evaluate the meaningfulness of our lives. And if the evaluation comes out bad, we may then try to live a life that satisfies the conditions. We may like to

evaluate others' lives too, but it is clear that it is our own lives that we feel the strongest need to evaluate, which is to ask the personal question.

Besides 'What is the meaning of my life?,' 'Does my life have meaning?,' and 'Is my life meaningful?,' the personal question is sometimes expressed also by 'Is my life worthwhile?.' In this way of expressing the question, a meaningful life is one that is worthwhile, and a meaningless life is one that is not. Given that the personal question is evaluative, and given that the notion of meaningfulness involved is so obscure,¹¹ this seems to be a preferable way of asking the question. Indeed, in what follows I will pursue the issue by clarifying this way of asking the personal question, and my reason for doing so is simply that this will eventually allow us to make the best sense of and answer not only the personal question, but also the general question and the cosmic question about meaningfulness.

There are, however, in turn two different ways of understanding the question 'Is my life worthwhile?.' One is to take it to mean 'Is my life worth living?'; the other is to take it to mean 'Is my life of value?.'¹² Both have problems, but I will argue that the latter is how we should in the end understand the personal question provided that we have a proper understanding of the concept of a life involved.

'Is my life worth living?' is not as straightforward a question as it may appear. Compare it with, for example, 'Is the book worth reading?.' The book and the reading of it are two different things; what the question asks is whether the book is worth the reading of it, or more precisely, whether the content of the book or the satisfaction we can get from reading it is worth the time spent on or the effort put in reading it. Although 'Is my life worth living?' appears to be the same kind of question as 'Is the book worth

reading?,' it cannot be understood as straightforwardly. My life and the living of it are actually the same thing, so it does not make sense to ask whether my life is worth the living of it. The question is instead usually taken to be whether the satisfaction, achievements, benefits, and whatever good things I enjoy in my life are worth the time I spend, the efforts I make, the pain I suffer, and other bad things I endure. This makes some sense, but there is a problem: the good things I enjoy are part of my life, but so are the time I spend, the efforts I make, and all the bad things I endure. What the question 'Is my life worth living?' asks is in effect whether some part of my life is worth some other part of my life, while what I am supposed to evaluate in asking the personal question about meaningfulness is my life *as a whole*, not just part of it.

Perhaps the question 'Is my life worth living?' can nonetheless be taken to ask about my whole life. Richard Wollheim, for example, suggests that for a person to find his life worth living is "for him to think that his life, as it stretches ahead of him, promises a tolerable balance between pleasure and pain" (Wollheim 1984: 244). But a balance between pleasure and pain can be understood as some kind of net value (and some may think the net value has to involve a balance of something more distinctly human, and hence more complex, than mere pleasure and pain), and the question 'Is my life worth living?' can then be taken to be a form of the question 'Is my life of value?.'

It thus seems more reasonable to take 'Is my life worthwhile?' to mean 'Is my life of value?.' Some people believe that every life is of value simply because it is a life, or, a living human organism (and the most radical version of this view covers all life-forms, not just human lives). Whether this view is correct or not, it cannot be an answer to the personal question 'Is my life of value?' as being asked by a person who wants to know

whether her life is of any specific value, i.e. value that is specific to her life.¹³ In order to see how the personal question can be answered, we have to have a concept of a life that allows us to differentiate lives in such a way that it is at least partly because of such difference that people can answer the personal question differently. We have to, of course, clarify the concept of value involved too.

And now we have the second reason for starting with the personal question: it is in the personal question that we can more easily see that the concept of a life we employ in asking about meaningfulness is not as clear as it appears. Questions about meaningfulness — the personal, the general, and the cosmic questions — may all need a concept of a life more refined than the one that we may too readily employ when we ask only the general or the cosmic question, that is, the all-embracing concept which includes in a life everything that the person who lives it does, thinks, feels, and experiences as well as everything that happens to her.

4 The Concept of a Biographical Life

Although the personal question about meaningfulness is about my life as a whole, not every detail of my life is relevant to evaluating whether my life is meaningful, worthwhile, or of value.¹⁴ What I ate for breakfast this morning, or what I usually eat for breakfast, does not affect the meaningfulness (or the lack of it) of my life, while the fact that I always have breakfast to eat may. Both the books I read and that I read at all are relevant to the evaluation. My life may be more meaningful because I was introduced to the music of J. S. Bach, Gustav Mahler, and John Coltrane and love it, but it might not make any difference who introduced the music to me. My family, friends, and enemies

certainly matter, but my hairdressers, dentists, and landlords normally do not. My sleeping time does not (unless the quality of sleep counts) contribute anything to the meaningfulness of my life; it is my waking time that counts, and not all of it at that. Indeed, whether in terms of time, of my activities, or of my relationships with other people, many details of my life are just irrelevant to the evaluation of its meaningfulness.

There are aspects of my life that are important enough to be referred to as ‘a life’ in a sense, such as my social life, my family life, my school life, my love life, and my intellectual life. Surely none of these can be picked out as *my life* that I want to evaluate when I ask the personal question about meaningfulness, for I do not want to evaluate just one aspect of my life. It may be, however, suggested that my life that I want to evaluate is a combination of all these ‘lives.’ Although we seem to have a fairly clear idea of what to include in these ‘lives,’ I don’t think such a concept of a life can serve our purposes here because there can easily be something in my life that is relevant to the evaluation of its meaningfulness but that is not included in any of these ‘lives.’

The concept of a life that we need here should thus not be all-embracing or too narrow. What we need is, I suggest, the concept of what can be called ‘a biographical life’: the biographical life of a person is her life as how it should be described in an ideally complete and accurate biography of her. We are not talking about actual biographies, which are usually, if not always, incomplete and get some of the facts wrong; and not everyone has an actual biography. But insofar as we understand what kinds of things are supposed to be included in an ideal biography, whether the life described is eventful or not, we should not have much difficulty understanding the concept of a biographical life.

What makes a life biographical is that it is the life of a being who tries, at least sometimes, to direct, shape, develop, or unify her life in some way — to have her *bios*, as it were, *graphed* by herself. It is, to put it another way, the life of a being who sometimes asks the question ‘How should I live?’ and tries to answer it and live accordingly. This question does not have to be asked in the high-sounding Socratic way that is completely general in nature. In fact, it does not seem that many people would ask the Socratic question. ‘How should I live?’ can be asked simply as a practical question that we all do ask sometimes in different ways, such as when we think about what career we should pursue, which between two job offers we should accept, how much time we should spend on making money, which city or country we should live in if we have a choice, what role we should play in our family, whether we should continue a particular personal relationship, whether we should get married, whether we should have children, when we should retire, or what hobbies we should develop.

I do not mean to suggest that a biographical life must be a life that is well-planned or a life of a being who always succeeds in directing, shaping, developing, or unifying her life in exactly the way she likes. As a matter of fact, most of our lives are not well-planned and often go against our attempt to direct, shape, develop, or unify them. But we do succeed sometimes. And even when we fail, the attempt itself still constitutes an important part of our biographical lives. Besides, the failed attempt will nonetheless occasion some direction or development; if such direction or development is unexpected or undesirable, it may give rise to our further attempt to direct, shape, develop, or unit our lives. Successful attempts as well as failed attempts, together with some of the things that simply happen to us but are related to such attempts, are all connected by us in our

understanding of them as having us at the center.¹⁵ We have such connective understanding simply because these attempts, whether successful or failed, are *our* attempts to direct, shape, develop, or unify *our* lives. And it is in such attempts and such connective understanding of them that each of us makes himself or herself the protagonist of a story — a life's story, a biography.¹⁶

A biographical life is thus a life of a being who renders, directly or indirectly, her life some kind of story and understands her life that way, who is also capable of, at least at some stages of her life, narrating it. There is no biography without the possibility of an autobiography. If we understand the ideal biography and the ideal autobiography of a person both as objective descriptions of the direction or development of the person's life, then the *descriptive* content of a person's ideal biography has to be the same as that of her ideal autobiography, the only difference being that the former is a third-personal account and the latter first-personal.¹⁷

The notion of an ideal autobiography brings out an important point: a biographical life is the life of a being with *self-awareness*, a being who is an 'I.' Self-awareness is necessary for distinguishing one's own life from others', and human lives are distinct from one another biographically precisely because they are lives of beings who distinguish their lives from one another's. As far as biographical lives are concerned, individuality and self-awareness are two sides of the same coin. This also explains why the personal question about meaningfulness is a question only for a being who lives a biographical life — a being who refers to a life as 'my life.'

It is important to note that any life that is not biographical is not subject to the evaluation of meaningfulness, for questions about meaningfulness and answers to them

(if there are any) are inseparable from concerns that arise only in the context of a biographical life, such as concerns about the actual and possible direction or development of one's life. This means not only that questions about meaningfulness would be asked only *by* beings with such concerns, but also that they can be asked only *about* the lives of such beings, that is, their biographical lives.¹⁸

It should be clear from the above exposition of the concept of a biographical life that lives of lower animals cannot be biographical, which is why their lives cannot be meaningful *or meaningless* in the sense in which a human life can be. We may be inclined to see, for example, a spider's life as meaningless because it cannot be meaningful, but strictly speaking it is neither meaningful nor meaningless; it is simply not subject to this kind of evaluation. Saying that a spider's life is meaningless, like saying that an oyster's life is boring or that a nightingale's life is musical, is nothing but human projection. Perhaps what is meant is that a human being would find a spider's life meaningless if she was to live such a life, but no human being can live a spider's life any more than a horse can live a bee's life. Some pessimists liken human lives to lives of lower animals and conclude that human lives are just as meaningless; if we bear in mind that lives of lower animals are not biographical, we should see that this kind of comparison does not make as much sense as the pessimists think.

In fact, not even every human life is biographical. A human being who was born without any of the mental capacities that a normal human being has cannot have a biographical life no matter how long she lives. Again, we may be inclined to say that such a life is meaningless, but saying this makes only as much sense as saying that a person who is comatose is bored or that a three months old baby does not have any

friends. Only a biographical life can be meaningful or meaningless. This is not merely a verbal distinction, and we will see the importance of this point when we look into the cosmic question about meaningfulness.

5 Value and Identities

I have argued that the personal question about meaningfulness should be understood as ‘Is my life of value?’ and that it is one’s biographical life that is to be evaluated when one asks the personal question. Let us now look at the concept of value. Although a biographical life can be evaluated and valued in different ways, I think the most promising direction to go, if we are to capture the concerns of most of those who ask the personal question, is to take the concept of value involved to be non-instrumental. When we ask the personal question about meaningfulness, most of us, I believe, are looking for an answer that will provide us with a sense of *ultimateness* or *finality*, and it seems that we will not have such a sense if the answer is that our lives¹⁹ have only instrumental value, for then we will feel the need to go on to ask whether the ends which give our lives instrumental value are of value in themselves. This is why the personal question should be understood as asking whether one’s life is of value *in itself* rather than of value simply because it is a means to, or is necessary for, achieving some end, goal, or purpose which is of value in itself.

If we understand the personal question this way, we do not have to answer it, as some philosophers suggest, in terms of ends, goals, or purposes. Although what I mean by ‘value in itself’ above is ‘non-instrumental value,’ it should not be taken to imply that something that is of value in itself must be a final end or an end in itself, for it may not be

considered an end — something that one seeks to attain — in the first place.²⁰ However, when I try to answer the personal question, I may still want to refer to my ends, my goals, or my purposes for the simple reason that they are what partly constitute my life. What is ruled out here as an answer to the personal question is that my life is of value because it is *a means* to some end, goal, or purpose, particularly when the end, goal, or purpose is not my own, such as God's purpose.²¹

Although whatever can be included in my biographical life is potentially relevant to the evaluation of meaningfulness, I cannot practically evaluate my biographical life by evaluating every single detail of it. What I need in order to carry out the evaluation is some way of subsuming the details of my life so that I do not have to go through them individually. Let us quickly look at two suggestions that may readily be gathered from the literature.

One suggestion is that I can subsume the details of my life under the different final ends (goals, purposes) that I have. Anything that cannot be so subsumed has to be, on this suggestion, considered irrelevant to the evaluation of meaningfulness even if it is clearly part of my biographical life. The evaluation of meaningfulness then consists in evaluating these final ends, and my life would be by default meaningless if these ends are not valuable or if I did not have any final ends.²²

Another suggestion is that I can subsume the details of my life under the different projects and commitments that I have. This may not look very different from the first suggestion, for what I strive to achieve in my projects and commitments are presumably my final ends. But the projects and commitments themselves are not final ends, and my engagement in them does not have to be understood in terms of means and ends (the

sense of fulfillment that may partly but significantly constitute my engagement is, for example, neither a means nor an end). Again, on this suggestion some part of my biographical life has to be left out as irrelevant because it is clear that not everything in my biographical life is part of the projects and commitments that I have. The evaluation of meaningfulness is then a matter of evaluating these projects and commitments, and my life would be by default meaningless if these projects and commitments are not valuable or if I did not have any projects or commitments.²³

The problem with both suggestions is that they imply that I have to leave out some part of my biographical life as irrelevant to the evaluation of meaningfulness, and this is a problem not simply because something is left out, but because what is left out can in fact be relevant to the evaluation. Both suggestions seem to be underlain by the idea that what can make my life meaningful has to be something that I positively undertake or initiate, something that is substantially my activity, something that is mostly, if not completely, up to me. But this idea is mistaken. Something that simply happens to me can certainly make my life less meaningful; but then why can't something that simply happens to me make my life more meaningful? If, for example, I happened to be in different places throughout my life in which I was in a position to help others in different ways and I did help them, then there is no reason why this should not count for the meaningfulness of my life *simply because* I was rather passive in helping others, because helping others was not my final end or project.²⁴ Indeed, even something that I am forced to do can make my life more meaningful, depending on the context in which it happens, on how I will look at it afterwards, and on what influence it has on other aspects of my life.

The notion that we need in order to subsume the details of our lives for the evaluation of meaningfulness is, I suggest, the notion of identity. If we understand the notion of identity in the most elastic way, that is, understand ‘identity’ to mean ‘that which a person can be identified as,’ we can use it to refer to anything in our biographical lives. Such a notion of identity is so elastic that an identity of a person does not even have to be something that the person can be *uniquely* identified as. I have the unique identity as my son’s father, but I also have the identity as a father, which is not unique. This accords well with our everyday use of the idea of identity, such as when we speak of cultural, national, or professional identities and when we speak of different people’s having the same identity.

In this elastic sense of identity I can have many identities, some of them cover a large set of my activities and a long period of time, and others cover just a particular involvement at a particular time. One of my identities is, for example, a professor of philosophy, but it is also one of my identities that I am the person who is writing this very essay on the meaning of life. Not only things that I positively undertake form my identities, things that are entirely not up to me (or not entirely up to me) do too, such as my identity as one of the four children of my parents and my identity as a witness of an alleged miracle.

Although a particular activity or involvement that I have at a particular time can constitute an identity of mine, I do not have to understand and refer to every single detail of my life in terms of a particular identity. Indeed, most of the details of my life can be subsumed under a manageable number of identities that I have which cover large sets of my activities and long periods of time. My biographical life can thus be practically

evaluated for meaningfulness without leaving out anything that is relevant to the evaluation.

It is easy to see that the notion of identity, thus understood, can incorporate both the notion of final ends and the notion of projects and commitments: I have the identity as the person who has this or that final end and this or that project or commitment. As a result, evaluating the meaningfulness of my life in terms of my identities will do nothing to belittle whatever importance that my final ends and my projects and commitments may have to the evaluation.

6 Answering the Personal Question

Here is what I take to be the best way of answering the personal question about meaningfulness in terms of the notion of identity. Is my life of value (worthwhile, meaningful)? I should answer ‘Yes’ if all the following conditions are satisfied, and ‘No’ if none is:

(P1) I have some identities that I identify myself with.

(P2) Among the identities that I identify myself with, there are at least some that I value non-instrumentally.

(P3) I have reasons for valuing these identities non-instrumentally.

(P4) At least some of these identities that I value non-instrumentally are also valued non-instrumentally by others.

(P5) Those who value these identities of mine non-instrumentally have reasons for valuing them non-instrumentally.

We can say that the identities figuring in (P1)-(P5) are the identities by virtue of which

my life is meaningful. Obviously all five conditions need to be clarified, refined, and defended.

(P1) is for securing that I am in a position to say, without any sense of self-alienation, that it is *my* life that is of value. Although we have adopted the most elastic notion of identity, some of my identities are not merely what I can be identified as, but are considered by others to be what make me the person who I am, the person who has the biographical life that I have. I may not, however, identify myself with all the identities that others think make me the person who I am. That is, I may not understand some of these identities as defining who I am and may in that sense alienate myself from them. But for me to be the person who has the biographical life that I have, some of my identities must define who I am.²⁵ And if I did not identify myself with *any* of my identities, I would alienate myself from myself, and hence would alienate myself from my whole biographical life.

Self-alienation is thus incompatible with a sense of having a biographical life *of one's own*, which is necessary for seeing one's own life as meaningful. If I did not even have a sense of having a biographical life of my own, how could I see myself as having a life of my own that is of value? This is perhaps why sometimes a person who sees her life as meaningless would express her dim view by saying 'I don't even have a life!.' Obviously she has a life, a biographical life; it is just that she has no identities at all that she identifies herself with. Incidentally, the requirement of (P1) also shows why I might not see my life as meaningful even if I am, as Susan Wolf puts it, "actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value" (Wolf 2007: 65), for I might alienate myself from the project (or more precisely, from my identity as

the person who has that project) even if I pursue it actively in a way.²⁶

(P2) cannot be satisfied unless (P1) has already been, but not *vice versa*. It is possible for me to identify myself with some of my identities while I do not value them²⁷ — one does not have to suffer from self-alienation to see one's life as meaningless.

Some may object that if I identify myself with an identity, it must be because I value it to some extent. Korsgaard, for example, proposes a conception of practical identity which is the conception (a) “under which you value yourself and find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking” and (b) without which “you will have no reason to act and to live”(Korsgaard 1996: 123). But given the complexity of human psychology, as exemplified by phenomena like self-hate and despising oneself, it does not seem difficult to imagine that I identify myself with an identity that I *disvalue*. If I were a Dalit (an untouchable) in India, I would see myself as being obligated by the identity as a Dalit to act in particular ways and in that sense identify myself with the identity, but I did not have to value the identity (why should I?). Korsgaard's (a) and (b), like my (P1) and (P2), can come apart.²⁸ In any case, I certainly can identify myself with an identity that I do not value or disvalue; not everything that I admit as defining who I am is also something that I am proud of being, something that I see as good in some way. This possibility is sufficient for distinguishing between (P1) and (P2).

What exactly is it for me to value my identities? This is a matter of degree. I more or less value my identity as *x* if I satisfy at least one of the following conditions: I prefer being *x* to not being *x* and my preference is not for the sake of achieving any end independently of being *x*; I have some positive evaluative emotion towards being *x* (a paradigm of such emotion is being proud of being *x*, but the emotion can be vaguer than

this); if it is possible to be a better or worse *x*, I will desire and attempt to be a better *x*, and the attempt is not for the sake of achieving any end independently of being a better *x*; I willingly allow my identity as *x* to dominate at least some of the most important aspects of my life, such as the allocation of my time and other resources and some of the most intimate relationships I have with others; and I would rather die than cease to be *x*.

If I would rather die than cease to be *x*, then I value my identity as *x* to the greatest degree. A most dramatic example of valuing one's identity to such a degree is the case of the title character of Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, a version of the Don Juan legend: Don Giovanni would rather be cast into the flames of hell than give up his libertine way of life, that is, his identity as an unscrupulous seducer of women. If I value my identity as *x* to this degree, I can see being *x* as my *raison d'être* — I would rather die than cease to be *x* because if I were not *x*, it would not make any difference *to me* whether I live or not. It seems that it is in this connection that the personal question about meaningfulness has some bearing on the question of suicide. If I had no identities that I see as my *raison d'être*, I might see myself as having a reason not to live, a reason to commit suicide (but whether I would be motivated to commit suicide is a much more complicated matter).

If I were Don Giovanni, I might satisfy (P1)-(P3), but my life would still not be that meaningful because it is not clear that I had satisfied (P4) and (P5). (P3), (P4) and (P5) together reflect the normative aspect of the evaluative judgment that my life is meaningful. It is because the judgment that my life is meaningful has a normative dimension that it has the kind of significance and usefulness I take it to have, for it, as Korsgaard characterizes normativity, tells me “what to think, what to like, what to say,

what to do, and what to be” (Korsgaard 1996: 9). That is, if I understand that a meaningful life is better than a meaningless life, and judge that my life is meaningful, I will see that the judgment has normative implications for what I should think, what I should do, what I should be, and what I can reasonably expect of others as far as their evaluative attitudes towards my life are concerned.

It is difficult to see how the judgment can have such implications for me, can significantly constrain or direct my life, if I understand the meaningfulness of my life to be something purely subjective, something depends solely on what I happen to believe, feel, desire, or value. In order to be normative, such a judgment has to be, like other normative judgments, at least in some respect *intersubjective* if not objective too. The normative force of such an evaluative judgment has to come, at least partly, from something beyond my subjective perspective in the sense that the correctness of the judgment is not simply up to me. This is why there is a significant difference between ‘My life is meaningful’ and ‘My life is meaningful *to me*.’ I would not be altogether satisfied if the latter is all I could truly say as an answer to the personal question about meaningfulness.

(P4) and (P5) reflect the social aspect of the evaluative judgment that my life is meaningful. If my life is meaningful, this should give my life some kind of standing recognized by those who are capable of making the same kind of evaluative judgment concerning the meaningfulness of their and others’ lives. If I satisfy only (P1)- (P3) but not also (P4) and (P5), it is not clear how my life can have the kind of standing that I take a meaningful life to have. To satisfy (P4) and (P5), it is not enough that my identities could be valued also by others; they have to be *actually* valued by others. Suppose I

wrote novels as great as Tolstoy's but did not show them to anyone and destroyed them all before I died so that no one in the world besides myself even knew of their existence, then even if my life was very similar to that of Tolstoy's in other respects, it would not be as meaningful as Tolstoy's life.

What then is it for others to value my identities? The answer should be in line with the above answer to the question 'What is it for me to value my identities?' if (P4) is to reflect the intersubjectivity of evaluating the meaningfulness of my life. A person more or less values my identity as x if she satisfies at least one of the following conditions: she prefers my being x to my not being x and her preference is not for the sake of achieving any of her ends; she has some positive evaluative emotion towards my being x (a paradigm of such emotion is admiration of my being x , but the emotion can be vaguer than this); if it is possible to be a better or worse x , she will want me to be a better x , and not because of some other desires that she has; she willingly allows me, qua x , to affect or even dominate at least some of the important aspects of her life, such as the allocation of her time and other resources and some of the intimate relationships she has with others; and she would die for maintaining my identity as x . If a person satisfies the last condition, she values my identity as x to the greatest degree.

(P3) and (P5), both of which are about reasons, are necessary not only for the normativity, but also for the stability, of the meaningfulness of my life. The meaningfulness of my life is not supposed to be something that is whimsical, something that could appear out of the blue and then suddenly disappear. If I had no idea how to answer the question of why I value my identities, my valuing them might simply be whimsical and for that reason unstable — I might stop valuing them tomorrow without

knowing why I stop valuing them. Similarly, if those who value my identities had no idea how to answer the question of why they value my identities, their valuing them might be whimsical. So, they need reasons too if the meaningfulness of my life is to be stable.

It should be noted that the reasons referred to in (P3) and (P5) are minimal. (P3) and (P5) are silent about whether there can be objectively good reasons for me or others to value my identities. All it takes for me to have reasons in this minimal sense is for me to be able to answer the question of why I value my identities, an answer that is to my own satisfaction. In other words, I will satisfy (P3) if my valuing my identities survives reflection. Likewise, others' answers to why they value my identities have to pass the test of their reflection.

The meaningfulness of my life is not all or nothing. Since valuing something is a matter of degree, (P2) and (P4) allow me to evaluate my life as *more or less* meaningful. And since I have to satisfy (P4) and (P5), I may be wrong about the meaningfulness of my life: I may be wrong about whether others value my identities or whether they have reasons for doing so, even if I could not be wrong about whether I myself value these identities or about whether I have reasons for valuing them. Unless I believe that my life is meaningful simply because I think so, I should agree that it is possible for me to misjudge whether my life is meaningful.

According to the account suggested here, my life is (more or less) meaningful if I satisfy all the conditions (P1)-(P5) but is meaningless if I satisfy none. But what if I satisfy only some of the conditions? There is no obvious answer to this. If I satisfy only one or two of the conditions, my life would perhaps still be somewhat meaningful or at

least not be completely meaningless, but it would clearly not be as meaningful as when all five conditions were satisfied. I do not, however, think this is a problem with the account. Indeed, I think it is a virtue of the account that it leaves room for indeterminate or borderline cases. Not everyone who asks the personal question about meaningfulness could get a definite answer because in some cases there is simply no definite answer.

7 Answering the General Question

If the personal question about meaningfulness has to be answered in terms of the notion of identity, the general question should be so answered too, for, as I have pointed out, our concern with the general question is grounded in our concern with the personal question — we want to know the conditions for a meaningful life so that we can evaluate the meaningfulness of our own lives. In that case, we can easily derive an answer to the general question from conditions (P1)-(P5) by generalizing the conditions. If this is a good answer, which I believe it is, and if we might not have as easily identified such an answer without identifying (P1)-(P5) in the first place, we have one more reason for tackling the personal question first.

The generalization is straightforward. A person *A*'s life is meaningful if she satisfies all the following conditions, and meaningless if she satisfies none:

- (G1) *A* has some identities that *A* identifies herself with.
- (G2) Among the identities that *A* identifies herself with, there are at least some that she values non-instrumentally.
- (G3) *A* has reasons for valuing these identities non-instrumentally.
- (G4) At least some of these identities that *A* values non-instrumentally are also valued

non-instrumentally by others.

(G5) Those who value these identities of *A*'s non-instrumentally have reasons for valuing them non-instrumentally.

We can use (G1)-(G5) to evaluate not only the meaningfulness of our own lives, but that of others' lives too. In evaluating others' lives, meaningfulness of life is still a matter of degree, and there are still indeterminate or borderline cases. But our evaluation of the meaningfulness of others' lives is more easily mistaken than that of our own lives because we may be wrong about the satisfaction of *any* of the five conditions in the case of others.

The above account can perhaps be epitomized in this enticing but somewhat misleading way: a person's life is meaningful if it contains material for an autobiography that she thinks is worth writing and others think is worth reading.²⁹ The material is supposed to be constituted by her identities which both she and others value, and the autobiography is worth writing and reading precisely because of these identities' being valued. And one does not have to be conceited to think this way. Consider a woman whose identity as a good mother is greatly valued both by herself and by her children — whose life is meaningful by virtue of being a good mother; she does not have to be conceited to think that her life contains material for an autobiography that is worth writing for her children to read, and her children would certainly find the autobiography worth reading.

8 Objective Values and Objectively Good Reasons

For those who believe in objective values, (G1)-(G5) may not be sufficient for

meaningfulness. They may object that a person's life cannot be meaningful unless it instantiates some values that are objective, values that are totally independent of what she or others think or feel. I don't know how to show that a satisfactory account of what makes a life meaningful cannot be given by appealing to the notion of objective values, but I think I do have some rather good reasons for not wanting to appeal to such a notion. First of all, the existence of objective values is questionable. As J. L. Mackie remarks, "[i]f there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe" (Mackie 1977: 38). If objective values are necessary for meaningfulness, skepticism about objective values will imply skepticism about meaningfulness. But we certainly do not want to render answers to questions about meaningfulness a hostage to something that we are not sure exist. This gives us a good reason for trying to give an account of a meaningful life independently of any consideration of objective values.

Moreover, even if there are objective values, we certainly do not understand them well; it is not even clear what they are supposed to be. Do fine gastronomic experiences, body-building, religious fanaticism, heavy metal rock music, tracing one's family tree, and comparing Aristotle's and Mencius's moral philosophy, to give just a few examples, have objective values? I for one don't know the answer, and I doubt that many people would think they do. If meaningfulness requires objective values, we will not, in most cases, be able to tell whether a person's life is meaningful because we do not know what have, and what have not, objective values. Because of this an account of a meaningful life that makes objective values necessary for meaningfulness will not be useful — we cannot apply it in such a way that most of the time we will get a definite answer to

whether a particular life is meaningful.

Believers in objective values may be able to come up with a few examples of objective values that most people would agree on, but it is doubtful that they will be able to provide us with a list of objective values that is long enough to be helpful here.

Although we should allow for indeterminate or borderline cases, we will not be satisfied with an account of a meaningful life that is practically useless. This should be all the more clear when we consider the circumstances in which people usually ask the personal question about meaningfulness: the question about the meaningfulness of one's own life is a pressing one that demands a definite answer. Of course, a pressing question that demands a definite answer may not have a definite answer, but at least a definite answer is what we should look for. This is a good enough reason for us to separate meaningfulness from objective values *as far as we can*.

On the other hand, if there are objective values, they certainly can be part of what makes a life meaningful according to my account. That is, if there are objective values, some identities may themselves have, or imply final ends or projects and commitments that have, objective values. What my account of meaningfulness does not incorporate is the idea that objective values are *necessary* for a meaningful life. And I think what I said about the possibility of self-alienation and its relation to meaningfulness has already made it clear that objective values are not *sufficient* for a meaningful life either.³⁰

Another possible objection to my account is from believers in objectively good reasons, who are usually close friends of believers in objective values. They believe that a person always values something for objectively good or bad reasons, and that only when she values it for some objectively good reasons that the valuing can contribute

something positive to her life. Applying this idea to my account of a meaningful life, they would object that even if I am right that meaningfulness is a matter of valuing identities and that the valuing must be supported by some reasons, I am wrong in supposing that the reasons involved do not have to be objectively good.

I think it is simply not true that when one values something, one must value it for some objectively good or bad reasons, or that valuing something for reasons that are not (clearly) objectively good can never make positive contributions to one's life. Here is an important example: suppose the reason Mary honestly gives for loving Joseph, and hence for valuing her identity as Joseph's lover, is that Joseph has all the virtues her father had or that he is the person God has picked for her; and suppose such reason is good enough for her that her valuing the identity in question passes the test of reflection. Is her reason objectively good or bad? I think it is at least not clear that her reason is objective good, but this does not make her love not true love. And if her valuing the identity in question passes the test of reflection by virtue of such reason, then the valuing is stable and can make positive contributions to her life (and his as well).

Both believers in objective values and believers in objectively good reasons may have the impression that (G1)-(G5) make it too easy for a life to be meaningful. This is a false impression. Meaningfulness is, as I have pointed out, a matter of degree, and what is easy is for a life to be *minimally* meaningful. We should find this palatable, for most of us do not think that our lives are meaningless or that it is indeterminate whether our lives are meaningful. In fact, most of us think our lives are *somewhat* meaningful (that is, except when we are being perplexed by the cosmic question about meaningfulness), though very few people think their lives are *impressively* meaningful.³¹ A good account

of a meaningful life should lay out the conditions for a meaningful life in such a way that even a minimally meaningful life can satisfy all the conditions, while there are elements in the conditions that allow us to explain how a life can be impressively meaningful.

This is precisely what my account does.

9 Cases

Let me elaborate on my account of what makes a life meaningful by applying it to some difficult but interesting cases.

9.1 Case One: The Immortal Stone-roller

Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to roll a heavy stone uphill over and over again *forever*, and his life is considered by some to be a paradigm of a meaningless life. Now if ‘Sisyphus’s life’ refers to his life after he was condemned, it is easy to explain why it is meaningless: Sisyphus does not identify himself with his identity as a stone-roller because he was condemned to be one, and it is difficult to imagine that he has other identities that he can identify himself with if his sole activity is stone-rolling; he does not value his identity as a stone roller for the same reason; nor does he have any other identities that he himself and others value. He does not satisfy (G1)-(G5) at all.

Would Sisyphus’s life be meaningful if, as Richard Taylor imagines, the gods mercifully implanted in him an obsession with, or even a genuine love of, stone-rolling? It does not seem that such a mental change can make his life clearly meaningful, for it cannot in any way help him satisfy (G4) and (G5). Taylor thinks Sisyphus’s life now *seems to himself* “filled with mission and meaning” because “Sisyphus has been reconciled to it, and indeed more, he has been led to embrace it” (Taylor 1970: 259-

260).³² Sisyphus can indeed see himself as having satisfied (G1)-(G3), but it is not clear that he can see himself as having satisfied (G4) and (G5) as well, which means that, according to my account, it is not clear that he should consider his own life meaningful.³³

Actually, 'Sisyphus's life' should refer to his life both after and before the condemnation. Suppose that Sisyphus identifies himself with and values (with reasons) his identity as the one who revealed divine secrets to humans, and that some humans value (with reasons) this identity of his. Is Sisyphus's life meaningful then? This seems to me an indeterminate case for a reason that I have not mentioned: my account is not supposed to apply to immortal beings. If the identity as a stone-roller does not give any meaning to Sisyphus's life, and if Sisyphus has to do nothing else but roll the stone *eternally* after the condemnation, this may completely offset the meaningfulness his life might have before the condemnation.

By contrast, if I, a mortal being, at some point of my life had to roll a stone or do something like that until I die, my life *as a whole* would still be meaningful provided that I had done things that allowed me to satisfy (G1)-(G5). It might be useful and make sense for one to say 'My life *now* is meaningless,' but this is not the same as saying 'My life is meaningless'; the latter implies the former, but not *vice versa*.

9.2 Case Two: The Monster

Was Adolf Hitler's life meaningful? It seems that he satisfied (G1)-(G3), and probably (G4) and (G5) as well, so his life seemed to be at least somewhat meaningful. Some philosophers think an immoral person's life can be meaningful,³⁴ but some people may find it repulsive to say of the life of a monster like Hitler that it was meaningful. What is repulsive, however, can be true. Even those who find it repulsive to refer to Hitler's life

as meaningful would, I think, agree that his life was not meaningless. They might insist that Hitler's life was neither meaningful nor meaningless, but what reason is there for thinking so? According to my account, we can say that a person's life is neither meaningful nor meaningless if it is a borderline case. But Hitler's life was not a borderline case if he satisfied all the conditions (G1)-(G5).

If an immoral person's life is meaningful, it is by virtue of some of his identities that it is so, but we would not expect his identity as an immoral person to be one of them. Let us take the great composer Richard Wagner as an example. Some believe that he was an immoral person, and let us suppose that he was. Most people would think that his life was meaningful by virtue of being a composer but not by virtue of being an immoral person. For it is reasonable to think that Wagner identified himself with and valued his identity as a composer, and that others valued this identity of his too; but it is not reasonable to think so of his identity as an immoral person. In the case of Hitler, it was presumably not by virtue of his identity as the monster who was responsible for the death of millions of Jews, but by virtue of his identity as a powerful political leader, that his life was meaningful.

Some may object that while Wagner's identity as a composer was independent of his identity as an immoral person, Hitler's identity as a powerful political leader was not independent of his identity as a monster — it was by doing most of the evil things he did that he became and continued to be the Nazi leader. True, but this does not affect my point as long as the two identities of Hitler are distinguishable. Imagine that Wagner had to make others suffer in some strange way and see their responses whenever he needed inspiration to write an opera; his life could still be meaningful by virtue of being a

composer but not by virtue of being an immoral person. For some this may be too fine a distinction to make. All I can say is that the distinction is not for exonerating Hitler, but for doing justice to the evaluation of the meaningfulness of his life.

Is it, then, possible for a person's life to be meaningful by virtue of being an immoral person, or by virtue of being the one who has done this or that evil thing? I believe that this is not possible for us, given the place of morality in our lives. I do not have, however, the space here to try to establish this, and can only point out that even if someone can identify himself with and value his identity as an immoral person,³⁵ it is difficult to imagine that others would (non-instrumentally) value him as an immoral person.

9.3 Case Three: The Miserable Scientist

Imagine a scientist who satisfies (G1)-(G5) by virtue of being the scientist he is. His life is, on my account, meaningful; but is it also a happy life? It depends, of course, on what a happy life is supposed to be. If a person's life is somewhat happy as long as he gets some kind of gratification from his life, and if the satisfaction of (G1)-(G5) necessarily gives the person who satisfies the conditions a kind of gratification to some extent, then a meaningful life must be somewhat happy. But this conception of happiness may be too modest to be what people mean when they speak of the pursuit of happiness or, as the title of one of Bertrand Russell's popular books puts it, the conquest of happiness.

In any case, a meaningful life does not imply happiness beyond the kind of gratification related to (G1)-(G5) that I have just mentioned. It does not imply a life that goes well, or the satisfaction of most of one's desires, or a high quality of life. Imagine that our scientist is physically like Stephen Hawking and mentally like Arthur

Schopenhauer, and that all of his scientific projects eventually failed. According to my account his life can still be meaningful, for his situation is compatible with his satisfying (G1)-(G5). Surely in such a miserable situation it is not easy for the scientist to have a meaningful life, but it is not impossible. On the other hand, a meaningful life so miserable is not evidently desirable; as Harry Frankfurt puts it, “[i]t might be better to live an empty life than to generate or to endure so much suffering and disorder” (Frankfurt 1992: 85). To think otherwise is to romanticize human nature.

9.4 Case Four: The Neglected Composer

Gustav Mahler is nowadays universally deemed an important composer, but his music was widely scoffed at in his own day and for a long while after his death. He certainly satisfied (G1)-(G3), but let us suppose that he did not, in his lifetime, satisfy (G4) and (G5) by virtue of his identity as a composer. Should we then say that it is indeterminate whether his life was meaningful by virtue of his identity as a composer? I think we should say that it was indeterminate *in his life time*, but it is not indeterminate any more now that many people value his identity as a composer — he satisfied (G4) and (G5) *posthumously*.

This means that the ‘others’ in (G4) and (G5) does not refer only to A’s contemporaries, though most people are not fortunate enough to have others in the future to affect the meaningfulness of their lives in this way. A person’s life, then, can *become* meaningful after his death. In this respect it is like the influence a person’s life can have: a person’s life might have no influence on a large number of people in his lifetime, but have a great influence long after his death.³⁶

This point about (G4) and (G5), and hence about (P4) and (P5) as well, can be

very important to one's attempt to answer the personal question about meaningfulness. In Mahler's case, what partly motivated him to persist in composing music might be his unwavering conviction that people in the future would value his identity as a composer, a conviction that he expressed most strongly in his famous declaration 'My time will come.' And he was right. We can say that his strong belief in his posthumous satisfaction of (P4) and (P5) contributed to the very satisfaction of the conditions.

9.5 Case Five: The Cult Leader

It seems that a cult leader who attracts some followers can easily satisfy (G1)-(G5), even if what he advocates are some preposterous ideas such as those of Marshall Applewhite, leader of the doomsday cult Heaven's Gate, who interpreted the Bible as referring to extraterrestrial visitations and committed suicide together with more than thirty followers in 1997 (believing that their 'souls' would be picked up by an alien space ship). If Applewhite sincerely believed what he advocated, identified himself with and valued his identity as the cult leader, his followers valued this identity of his as well, and both of them have reasons for valuing his identity, then apparently his life was meaningful according to my account of a meaningful life.

If we do not think Applewhite's life was meaningful by virtue of his identity as the cult leader, it should not be because we think the ideas he advocated are false. For it seems that we would think that a person's life can be meaningful by virtue of, say, his identity as a Christian even if we ourselves believe that Christianity is based on mostly false ideas. If we have any reason for thinking that Applewhite's life was not meaningful by virtue of being the cult leader, it appears to be this: the ideas he advocated were so preposterous that he and his followers had to be insane not only to believe them, but also

to willingly allow them to dominate their lives; and a person's life cannot be meaningful by virtue of an identity that involves insanity, for insanity is incompatible with the normal mental capacity that is necessary for identifying oneself with and valuing one's or others' identities. This way of looking at the matter may be controversial, but it at least shows that the notion of a meaningful life, like the notion of moral responsibility, is not as clearly applicable to those who are insane or mentally abnormal as to those who are sane or mentally normal.

Some may think that the kind of insanity a cult leader might be thought to suffer from is not obviously incompatible with the mental capacity that is necessary for identifying oneself with and valuing one's identities. If an 'insane' cult leader still has such mental capacity, then he is not insane in the above sense and may be able to satisfy (G1)-(G3), but we might still think that he does not satisfy (G4) or (G5) because his followers, if not insane, are manipulated by him to such an extent that they should not be considered truly valuing his identity as their leader or having reasons for valuing it. In any case, I am not arguing that a cult leader must be insane; I am simply trying to explain what reason we can have for thinking that the life of a cult leader is not meaningful. We could be wrong in thinking so with respect to a particular cult leader, though we probably will not admit that we are wrong until we see him as something other than a cult leader, such as a religious leader (and it is a good question what the difference actually is).

10 Dismissing the Cosmic Question

I have mentioned that most of those who ask the personal question about meaningfulness ask it when their lives are in crisis. We can now explain why this is so. If a person keeps

failing, or has a devastating failure, in doing what she has been doing as x , she may question whether x is what she really is, whether she really values her being x , whether she really has reasons for valuing x , whether others really value her identity as x , or whether others really have reasons for valuing her identity as x .³⁷ She may fail in such a way that she asks these questions about all the identities that she thinks she identifies herself with, and she may then understand the questions to be about her life as a whole: What is the meaning of my life? Is my life meaningful? Is my life worthwhile? Is my life of value? A positive answer to the personal question about meaningfulness in terms of her identity as x will most likely keep her going as x ; a positive answer in terms of an identity that she *had* may motivate her to go back to this old identity; and a promisingly positive answer in terms of an identity that she is capable of having may motivate her to try to take up this new identity. She may, however, answer the personal question thoroughly negatively, and what she will do as a result then depends on her personality and temperament — suicide is a possibility, but for some this is always only an abstract possibility that will never be actualized.

When a person answers the personal question negatively under the circumstances that her life is in crisis and thinks her life is meaningless, she would not suppose that it has any implication for the meaningfulness of others' lives generally. She would still be able to see some people's lives as more or less meaningful; it is just that *her* life is not. As a matter of fact, many people do think that their lives are meaningful: one may see one's life as meaningful simply by virtue of being a devoted father, or being someone's beloved, or being a person with many good friends, or being a teacher, or being a philosopher. Some of these people are right about the meaningfulness of their lives; even

a person who sees her own life as meaningless can understand why these people's lives are meaningful.

However, when a person looks at human lives in a peculiarly philosophical or metaphysical way, which does not have to be stimulated by difficulties or failures in her life, she may come to ask what I have called 'the cosmic question about meaningfulness': what is the meaning of life? And when she asks the question in this frame of mind, it is very natural for her to arrive at a negative answer: life is meaningless. Such an answer does not mean only that her life is meaningless; it means that *everyone's* life is meaningless. What is this peculiarly philosophical way of looking at human lives? And how does it lead us to a negative answer?

For those who are vividly aware of our being, as it is usually put, tiny specks in an unimaginably vast universe, it may be tempting to think that such awareness of our extreme smallness is what leads us to see our lives as meaningless. But obviously meaningfulness has nothing to do with the relative size of our existence. If I think my life is meaningful, I would not think otherwise simply because I had come to believe that the universe had become several hundred million times bigger. As Frank Ramsey so pithily puts it, "[t]he stars may be large, but they cannot think or love" (Ramsey 1925: 249). Some may think smallness implies insignificance, but this is simply not true. Our extreme smallness relative to the vastness of the universe may make our lives insignificant *to the universe*, but our lives do not have to be significant to the universe to be significant. Besides, a life that is significant in some way may still not be meaningful, such as the life of a comatose person whose unusual DNA is the key to the cure of a serious disease.

Thomas Nagel has offered a much more interesting account. According to Nagel, if we look at our lives from “a point of view outside the particular form of our lives,” a point of view that is “always available” and “natural to us humans” (Nagel 1971: 14, 21), we will “find it difficult to take our lives seriously” (Nagel 1986: 214) and our lives will be threatened with meaninglessness. Nagel thinks this is because from that detached or external point of view, we “recognize what we do as arbitrary” by seeing that “the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity” (Nagel 1971: 15). The detachment is thus “nihilistic,” the arbitrariness “cosmic,” and the meaninglessness “objective” (Nagel 1986: 215, 222).³⁸

This is all very appealing, and I have many things to agree with in Nagel’s account. I certainly agree with Nagel that “[s]erious problems about the meaning of a life can arise entirely within it, and these should be distinguished from the completely general philosophical problem of the meaning of life” (Nagel 1986: 215); this is indeed the distinction between the personal question and the cosmic question about meaningfulness. I also think that the metaphors of externality and detachment are the right ones to use here, and that the external or detached point of view allows us to see human lives completely generally. But I am not so sure that it is the pursuit of objectivity and external justification that leads us to see our lives as meaningless from the detached point of view.

Nagel may be right that “by detaching more and more from our own point of view” (Nagel 1979: 208) we will have a more and more objective view of the world, but it does not mean that whenever we detach ourselves from our point of view we are

pursuing objectivity. Detachment may simply be psychological in nature, that is, the result of one's being in a particular psychological state (though the psychological state can be methodologically induced). Besides, when we look at our lives from the internal point of view and see our lives as meaningful, it does not have to be because we see what we do in our lives as justified. So when we see our lives as meaningless from the detached point of view, it does not have to be because we see what we do in our lives as unjustified.

Instead of further criticizing Nagel's account, I would like to offer one that is not incompatible with his. I think we should focus on the fact that from the detached point of view we see human lives *completely generally*. This is an aspect of the cosmic question about meaningfulness that it shares with the epistemological question of whether we know anything about the world. When we ask the epistemological question, we are asking about human knowledge (of the world) in general, not this or that piece of knowledge, and not this or that person's knowledge. And it is typically in philosophizing that we think in such completely general terms.³⁹

When we see human lives completely generally, we thereby see them totally impersonally — it does not matter whose life it is, and this is why it seems to make sense to speak of the meaning of life without referring to any individual lives. From this point of view, I see even my own life impersonally, as if it was not my life but just *a* human life among many. It is in this sense that the point of view is detached: I am psychologically detached from my own life. I also feel, from this point of view, as if I looked at human lives as someone who is not a member of the human species, as if I was a higher being. It is in this sense that the point of view is external: external not just to my

own life, but also to all human lives. If we understand the detached or external point of view this way, the explanation of why it is available to most human beings is that the psychological state and the imagination involved are possible for most human beings.

When I am psychologically detached from my own life, I alienate myself from it, and hence from all my identities which make me the owner of that life. I thus feel as if there were no identities that I could identify myself with, which is what partly explains why I so naturally do not see my life as meaningful from the detached point of view. Furthermore, when I look at human lives externally as if I was a higher being, I cease to see the most important differences between human lives and other forms of lives, such as lives of lower animals. This is why it is, from the external point of view, so natural to liken human lives to lives of lower animals and to experience, as Nagel expresses it, “that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand” (Nagel 1971: 15). Seeing human lives this way is like watching a silent film with no protagonists and no story lines, a silent film in which there are only movements of faceless human beings. And such a film cannot be anyone’s biography or autobiography.

So when we look at human lives externally, we are, for the moment, blind to the fact that they are biographical lives, for being biographical is what distinguishes human lives from lives of lower animals. Indeed, if it does not matter whose life it is when we ask the cosmic question about meaningfulness, which is about human lives generally, our biographies should become irrelevant here since it is our biographies that distinguish our lives from one another’s. But if we do not see human lives as biographical, we will be tempted to see them as meaningless in the way in which we see lives of lower animals as meaningless.

This answers our questions ‘What is the peculiarly philosophical way of looking at human lives?’ and ‘How does it lead us to see human lives as meaningless?’, and it is clear that the answer is inspired by the above account of the personal and the general questions about meaningfulness. We should now see that this peculiarly philosophical way of looking at human lives is misleading. It is misleading not only because it is an important fact that most human lives are biographical, but also because if we do not see human lives as biographical, we should not see them as meaningless either. As I have argued, non-biographical lives are neither meaningful nor meaningless; they are not subject to this kind of evaluation. We therefore have a good reason to ignore the philosophical problem of answering the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’⁴⁰ This is in a way a solution to the problem.

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NOTES

¹ For a survey of how the question is understood and tackled in recent literature, see Metz (2002).

² I am indebted to Robert Stewart for suggesting the name ‘the cosmic question about meaningfulness.’

³ See, for example, Baier (1957), Feinberg (1980), Wolf (1997), and Wolf (2007).

⁴ Some philosophers who try to answer the question ‘What are the conditions for a meaningful life?’ do not presuppose that the conditions they suggest can be satisfied by some human lives. The question they try to answer is for this reason not what I here call ‘the general question about meaningfulness.’

⁵ An anonymous referee thinks the analogy breaks down here because a negative answer to (1) implies a negative answer to (3), while, as I will try to show, a negative answer to the cosmic question about meaningfulness may not imply a negative answer to the personal question. In response I would like to make three points. First, the relation between the cosmic and the personal questions about meaningfulness is *prima facie* analogous to that between the epistemological questions (1) and (3) in this respect, which is why, as I pointed out in the opening paragraph, the cosmic question seems to trivialize the personal question. Second, even if the analogy breaks down in this respect, it does not mean that the analogy *totally* breaks down. The two sets of questions are still analogous at least in the following respect: in both sets a positive answer to the first question does not imply a positive answer to the second question. And third, there may be a way of construing (1) and (3) such that a negative answer to (1) does *not* imply a

negative answer to (3). The Kantian distinction between the transcendental and the empirical can fill the bill: transcendently we do not know anything about the world, but this is compatible with the truth of my claim that I know (empirically) this and that about the world; so can a contextualist account of knowledge: (1) is asked in the philosophical context and the answer may be ‘No,’ but this is compatible with my knowing this and that in the everyday context.

⁶ See Quine (1969).

⁷ (2) is about the *causal* conditions for human knowledge, while the general question about meaningfulness is about the *constitutive* conditions for a meaningful life. In this respect the two questions are not analogous. I owe this point to Niko Kolodny.

⁸ I think Camus confuses the personal question with the cosmic question when he remarks that “[t]here is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide” (Camus 1955: 11). No one would (decide to) commit suicide *simply* because of a philosophical conclusion.

⁹ This seems to be the case of Tolstoy in his *A Confession*, though he asks not only the personal question but also the general question and the cosmic question. See Tolstoy (1987).

¹⁰ After writing this I realized that William James refers to some of the people who are bothered by the question ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ as suffering from “speculative melancholy” and notes that some of them “have cast away all metaphysics in order to get rid of hypochondria” (James 1895: 42, 48).

¹¹ Robert Nozick in his discussion of the meaning of life distinguishes eight kinds of

meaning(fulness), and there may be more (see Nozick 1981: 574-575). For an attempt to look for a concept of meaning(fulness) common to the major theories or conceptions of a meaningful life, see Metz (2001). Although Metz fails to find such a common concept, he suggests that those theories or conceptions are united by family resemblances, for they all address some of the questions in a group of related questions. This suggestion would render the notion of meaningfulness less obscure only if there was a clear way of relating the questions in the group or determining whether a question should be put in the group, but Metz gives us only examples of such questions (“questions such as the following: how may a person bring purpose to her life, where this is not just a matter of pursuing happiness or acting rightly? How should an individual connect with intrinsic value beyond his animal nature? How might one do something worthy of great admiration?” (150-151)).

¹² The question ‘Is my life worthwhile?’ may be taken to express some other questions, such as ‘Is my life enjoyable?’, ‘Is my life beneficial?’, and ‘Is my life useful?’, but these questions are, I think, too narrow to reflect the concerns of those who ask the personal question about meaningfulness.

¹³ An anonymous referee objects that since the sense in which every life has value simply because it is a life cannot supply the answer to the question of whether one’s individual life is meaningful, this constitutes a reason not to identify ‘Is my life meaningful?’ with ‘Is my life of value?’. I agree that we should not treat the two questions as the same when the value of a life is understood in that general sense, but what I am suggesting here is that there is another sense of the value of a life in which the answer to the question ‘Is

my life of value?’ is not necessarily ‘Yes.’ It is in this sense that ‘Is my life of value?’ is a personal question, and that this personal question can be taken to be what the question ‘Is my life meaningful?’ means.

¹⁴ From now on I will use ‘meaningful,’ ‘worthwhile,’ and ‘of value’ interchangeably to predicate of a life.

¹⁵ Such understanding does not have to be accompanied by any sense of self-importance or egocentricity.

¹⁶ When revising this paper, I chanced upon Peter Singer’s reference to the distinction made by James Rachels between a life that is merely biological and one that is biographical (see Singer 1993: 126). Rachels also characterizes the distinction as that between *being alive* and *having a life*. I am not sure whether Rachels’ notion of a biographical life is exactly the same as mine, but it seems to me that they are very similar, for Rachels also emphasizes the narrative aspect of such a life: “It is the story of [a person’s] history and character, her aspirations and disappointments, her activities and projects and personal relationships” (Rachels 1993: 73). For a detailed discussion of Rachels’ notion of a biographical life, see Ruddick (2005). I would like to thank Robert Jones for helping me locate the texts in which Rachels discusses his notion of a biographical life.

¹⁷ The *evaluative* content of the ideal biography and that of the ideal autobiography may, however, be different. As will be seen, such difference is relevant to the meaningfulness of the life concerned, for according to my account the evaluative content of one’s ideal biography and that of one’s ideal autobiography should overlap at least to some extent if

one's life is to be meaningful. I am indebted to an anonymous referee for raising an objection that helps me see the need of distinguishing between the descriptive and the evaluative content of a biography or an autobiography.

¹⁸ This is comparable to the understanding that only a being who can tell right from wrong would ask questions about the moral rightness or wrongness of actions, and only actions of such a being are subject to the moral evaluation of rightness or wrongness.

¹⁹ From now on 'life/lives' should be taken to mean 'biographical life/lives' unless the context suggests otherwise.

²⁰ Besides, what I mean by 'value in itself' is not the same as what some philosophers call 'intrinsic value' when they argue that the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic value should be separated from the distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental value. According to these philosophers, to say that something has intrinsic value is to say that it is its own *source* of value; non-instrumental value is not necessarily intrinsic in this sense. For a helpful discussion, see Korsgaard (1983).

²¹ But ruling out such an answer, as we will see, does not imply that a person cannot answer the personal question positively by appealing to her religion.

²² A view of this kind can be much more sophisticated than this, such as the one advanced by Harry Frankfurt. Although Frankfurt thinks that the meaningfulness of one's life is a matter of "selecting final ends," he argues that "a certain final end of much less inherent value might require invigoratingly complicated and wholehearted attention; adopting that end, then, would fill the person's life with purposefulness, and in this respect his life would be more meaningful" (Frankfurt 1992: 86-87), for "the activities in

which we pursue our terminally valuable final ends [do not] have only the instrumental value that is characteristic of means” but “are themselves terminally valuable” (91).

²³ See, for example, Kekes (2000).

²⁴ I am not, however, suggesting that helping others is in itself sufficient for making my life meaningful.

²⁵ It is not necessary for our purposes here to look into the metaphysical problem of personal identity through time; suffice it to say that this conception of what defines who I am is compatible with most philosophical theories of personal identity through time. It does not contradict, for example, the Lockean theory, for one of my most important identities is being the person who has the memories that I have.

²⁶ Although Wolf proposes that “a meaningful life is one that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value,” she later on qualifies the proposal by adding that a person whose life is meaningful has to “proudly and happily embrace” such projects, to “identify with what she is doing” (66). Wolf would not, I suppose, object to (P1). I am indebted to an anonymous referee for clarifying Wolf’s position.

²⁷ For simplicity, I will, unless otherwise indicated, use ‘my identities’ to mean ‘identities of mine that I identify myself with’ and ‘value’ to mean ‘value non-instrumentally.’

²⁸ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for urging me to compare what I say about identities with Korsgaard’s notion of practical identity.

²⁹ This is somewhat misleading because a person can satisfy (G1)-(G5) without ever

thinking of writing an autobiography. In any case, the epitome should not be taken to imply that a person who is illiterate or lives in a culture with no literary tradition cannot have a meaningful life, for it states only a sufficient condition but not a necessary condition for a meaningful life.

³⁰ According to my account, if a person satisfies none of (G1)-(G5), then her life is meaningless even if some of what she did or some of her identities have objective value; her life cannot be meaningful without her valuing and identifying herself with some of her identities. What if she satisfies (G1)-(G3), but not (G4) and (G5), while some of the identities involved have objective value? This will be an indeterminate case: her life is not completely meaningless, but it is not clearly meaningful either, or at least not as meaningful as if she had satisfied (G4) and (G5) as well.

³¹ (G1), (G2), and (G4) can be satisfied to different degrees, and a person's life is impressively meaningful if she satisfies these three conditions to a great degree (plus satisfying the other two conditions). A person can also have an impressively meaningful life by having *many* identities that allow her to satisfy (G1)-(G5).

³² Taylor does not hold such a view in his later writings on the topic; see, for example, Taylor (1987).

³³ This seems, by the way, also true of the case of David Wiggins's pig-breeder, who "buys more land to grow more corn to feed more hogs to buy more land, to grow more corn to feed more hogs ..." (Wiggins 1976: 100), if the pig-breeder, without divine mercy, identifies himself with and values his identity as a pig-breeder.

³⁴ For example, Frankfurt thinks that "[d]evoting oneself to what one loves suffices to

make one's life meaningful" and that Hitler's life was meaningful even though "[t]he Nazism to which Hitler devoted his life was a dreadful evil" (Frankfurt 2002: 248-249). Although Wolf disagrees with Frankfurt's view of a meaningful life and hence with his judgment about Hitler's life, she agrees that immoral people's lives can "chock full of meaning" (Wolf 2007: 67). John Cottingham argues, by contrast, that an immoral life cannot be meaningful because immoral activities "have to be conducted at the cost of sealing off one's rational awareness and emotional sensibility" and "to pursue meaning in these inhuman ways risks being self-defeating" in the sense that the conflict between the immoral activities and the need for "human conversation, emotional warmth, the cultivation of friendships, [and] family ties" would "create a psychic dissonance" leading to "either a breakdown of his ability to continue [the immoral activities] or a breakdown of his ability to live a fulfilling home life" (Cottingham 2003: 27-28). I find this unconvincing, for four reasons: first, one's life can be meaningful without one's *pursuing* meaning; second, it seems that some immoral people are highly rational and emotionally sensitive even when they are engaging in immoral activities; third, it is not clear why meaningfulness cannot coexist with psychic dissonance; and fourth, there is no reason to believe that such psychic dissonance will inevitably result in a breakdown.

³⁵ Don Giovanni might be an example.

³⁶ There are also cases in which people come to believe that an identity of a particular person that was once valued, such as the identity of Antonio Salieri as a composer, was overvalued or should not be valued at all. According to my account, the life of such a person was still meaningful because he had satisfied (G1)-(G5), though his life would

have been even more meaningful if he had been able to satisfy (G4) and (G5) continuously.

³⁷ As I mentioned in the case of the miserable scientist, a meaningful life does not have to be successful or happy. The point here is that failures can trigger reflection on the meaningfulness of one's life, but the reflection could result in one's conviction that one's life is meaningful regardless of the failures.

³⁸ And we will see our lives as absurd, Nagel suggests, if we see the conspicuous discrepancy between the objective meaninglessness of our lives and the seriousness we ascribe to our lives from the subjective or internal point of view, a point of view which we cannot live without.

³⁹ An anonymous referee points out that sometimes people feel their lives are meaningless because of a lack of cosmic meaning even without being philosophers. I agree. A person does not have to be a philosopher in order to philosophize sometimes. The referee's point may be that my diagnosis of why we answer the cosmic question about meaningfulness negatively does not cover all cases, but the example he or she gives is not one that cannot be covered by my diagnosis: a person "who loses a loved one, or comes to reflect on the fact that the earth will go dead in the fullness of time, may feel there is no point in day-to-day activities in light of this fact." If a person thinks her life is meaningless because of losing a loved one, this can be explained by her seeing herself as losing an identity that she identifies herself with and values very much. If she thinks her life is meaningless because she reflects on the fact that the world will come to an end, she is treating all lives equally in the light of such a fact and thereby does not see those lives

as biographical lives.

⁴⁰ We do not have a corresponding reason to ignore the epistemological question, for it really does not matter whose knowledge it is when we ask whether we know anything about the world.

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