

# The Meaning of Life

A Question in Search of a Question



# A Question. . .

- \* What is the meaning of life?



# . . . and some Questions about this Question

- \* What would a satisfactory answer to this question look like?
  - \* Some bad but not therefore stupid answers, taking the question extensionally :
    - \* Having a good job
    - \* Having a good family
    - \* Having lots of friends
    - \* Accomplishing something world historical: discovering general relativity, being the first person to run a four-minute mile, discovering a cure for Aids, composing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in d
- \* What answer—what kind of answer—is this question, taken intensionally, seeking?
  - \* Perhaps this: given that a meaningful life is a valuable life, what feature or features bring value to life?
- \* What question, after all, does this question mean to pose?



# One Ever-Available Answer

- \* Nihilism: Nothing
  - \* Life is meaningless, because bereft of all value.
  - \* In fact, nothing has any value; any supposition otherwise is a form of narcissistic self-delusion.
- \* The question thus has a false presupposition, namely that there is some meaning, something of value, to life.



# Doomed

- \* If ever available, this answer is difficult to take very seriously, at least where subjective values are concerned.
  - \* In fact, we do *value* many things: love, friendship, simple joys and pleasures, a rare 1961 St.-Emilion (in fact, for note, the current value of a magnum of 1961 Cheval Blanc, St.-Emilion is \$10,829). . .
  - \* We look forward to things; we miss things we value which are no longer present to us (the dead and departed among others); we lament opportunities missed; we rejoice; we travel to Salzburg to listen to opera, and find ourselves deeply moved there by a production of *Parsifal*.
- \* Valuing some things and disvaluing others seems our lot in life: perhaps we are doomed to find some things meaningful?



# Pulling Back

- \* Perhaps our question is really a question about the value of these things we value:
  - \* Are they *really* valuable?
  - \* What makes them valuable?
  - \* Is being *valuable* simply to be valued, to be desired?
- \* Is there nothing which grounds these values, making them valuable, something beyond their being desired, contingently desired, for whatever collection of local reasons?
- \* Perhaps, then, this is a question about *ultimate* value: what is it, if anything, which confers value on the sundry things we happen to value, which renders them worthy of being valued?



# Two Perspectives

- \* It is noteworthy that the list of things valued seem to have subjective value: their being value consists at least in part in their *being regarded as valuable* by a being with suitably directed intentional and affective states.
- \* So, perhaps our question is really a question about the existence of some value or values which are objectively valuable and which, as it were, anoint our subjectively valued states and activities as worthy of being valued.



# Doomed Once More?

- \* ‘The uneasy relationship between inner and outer perspectives, neither of which we can escape, makes it hard to maintain a coherent attitude toward the fact that we exist at all, toward our deaths, and toward the meaning or point of our lives, because a detached view of our own existence, once achieved, is not easily made part of the standpoint from which life is lived.’ —Nagel (*VN*, 209)



# A Discord of Sorts

- \* ‘The subjective view is at the core of everyday life, and the objective develops initially as a form of extended understanding; much of what it reveals can be used instrumentally in the pursuit of subjective aims. But taken far enough, it will undermine those aims: to see myself objectively as a small contingent, and exceedingly temporary organic bubble in the universal soup produces an attitude approaching indifference.’ —Nagel (*VN*, 210)



# The God Option

- \* ‘The wish to live as far as possible in full recognition that one’s position in the universe is not central has an element of the religious impulse about it, or at least an acknowledgment of the question to which religion purports to supply an answer. A religious solution gives us a borrowed centrality through the concern of a supreme being.’ —Nagel (*VN*, 210)



# Two Problems of Birth

- \* From the objective standpoint:

- \* Extreme contingency: our births—yours, mine, everyone's—are radically contingent, accidental almost.

- \* Same again, then, for our existence, which was, after all, ushered in by our birth.

- \* 'We are here by luck, not by right or necessity.' —Nagel (*VN*, 211)

- \* Utter unimportance: from any objective standpoint, it really would not have mattered one iota had we not existed at all.

- \* This remains so even given the list of the quotidian items of value given above.

- \* This 'forces on us a kind of double vision and loss of confidence which is developed more fully in doubts about the meaning of life.' —Nagel (*VN*, 214)



# Nagel's Take

- \* 'In seeing ourselves from outside we find it difficult to take our lives seriously. This loss of conviction , and the attempt to regain it, is the problem of the meaning of life.' —Nagel (*VN*, 214)



# The Final Good *for Humans*

- \* X is a final good for humans when, and only when x. . .
- \* . . .is desired for its own sake.
- \* . . .is not desired for the sake of anything else.
- \* . . .is such that everything else is desired for its sake.
- \* . . .is self-sufficient and complete.



What might that be?

All agree:

This is *happiness*.



Unfortunately, so much is. . .

Perfectly

Platitudinous



# Two Conceptions of Happiness

- \* A Subjective Conception of Happiness:

- \* S is happy *iff* all of S's desires are satisfied.

- \* Happiness just is desire satisfaction.

- \* An Objective Conception of Happiness:

- \* S is happy *iff* S flourishes, where flourishing involves actualizing S's essential potential.



# Problems for the Subjective View

- \* It is entirely possible (because it is actual) to have one's desires satisfied without living the best life possible for a human being.
- \* It is equally possible (though less obviously so) that one can be wrong about judgments pertaining to one's own happiness.
- \* That is, one can mistakenly believe that one is happy, or, more controversially even be happy without realizing it.



# A Function Argument Derived from Aristotle

1. The function of any given kind  $x$  is determined by isolating  $x$ 's unique and characteristic activity.
2. The unique and characteristic activity of human beings is reasoning.
3. Hence, the function of human beings is (or centrally involves) reasoning.
4. Exercising a function is an activity—where, in living beings, this will be the actualization of some capacity of the soul.
5. Hence, exercising the human function is an activity of the soul executed in accordance with reason.