

## INTRODUCTION

The popular image of the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ within contemporary secular culture is a comic one. The comedy is tinged with embarrassment and disdain, and from Monty Python to Douglas Adams, has traded on the supposedly hopeless obscurity of the question. This is a product of a wider cultural phenomenon in which terms like ‘deep’ and ‘profound’ are increasingly sneered at – even by philosophers – except when applied to the achievements of science; since science has come to dominate our intellectual aspirations. The question of the meaning of life, however, is closely associated with religion, which has often been at odds with science. And another reason for its bad reputation is that there are pathological connotations to obsessing over it. According to clinical psychologist Raymond Bergner, worrying about the meaning of life is a ‘relatively common’ problem for people, which arises as ‘part of a broader clinical syndrome, such as depression, alcoholism, posttraumatic stress disorder, or obsessive-compulsive personality disorder’. To treat it, he recommends promoting new patterns of behaviour, while discouraging clients from seeking an intellectual solution.<sup>1</sup> Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the question has been shunned, since it seems as ‘deep’ and ‘profound’, but also as thoroughly non-scientific, as any question could be. And the defensive strategy that has been developed is to laugh at it; which always works well when dealing with something that has touched a nerve.

We are invited to laugh on the grounds that the question is hopelessly obscure. For if nobody really knows what it means, there is no need to take it seriously; it can safely be left to those silly philosophers to pontificate over endlessly and pointlessly. However most philosophers do not bother with it these days either, and it was philosophy that supplied the intellectual ammunition for dismissing the question as obscure, uninteresting, or just plain unanswerable;

for even the philosophical profession has not been immune from this anti-philosophical cultural trend.<sup>2</sup> A conspicuous tragi-comic element of the trend, in fact, has been the phenomenon of philosophers turning against philosophy; a dominant theme within the profession since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with some of its most influential figures showing little or no reticence about this – on the face of it – absurd agenda.<sup>3</sup>

However the question is as serious as your life and its intention is anything but obscure; though the form it has acquired has potential to mislead, which some have willingly latched onto. For asking ‘what is the meaning of life?’ leads immediately to a question everyone understands, namely ‘why do human beings exist?’ These questions are distinct because the former presupposes there *is* a reason we exist, in order to consequently ask what ‘meaning’ – in the sense of value – this reason provides to human life. But before you can begin to ask this *philosophically*, you must first ask whether there is any reason we are here at all; which is why the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ leaves space for ‘there isn’t one’ as an appropriate response. If you forget to ask this – and thereby forget that aspect of the question’s significance which has accounted for its longevity – then it is transformed into either a theological question concerning which particular meaning God has invested in life, or else the distinct question of what we value about our lives, to which innumerable, comparatively more anodyne answers are possible: loving relationships, the pursuit of knowledge ... many things seem clearly valuable in this mundane sense. But the sense intended by the traditional question makes essential reference to the reason human beings exist; otherwise it would never have gained its reputation as one of the ‘great imponderables’.

Now there are undeniably many different senses of the word ‘meaning’, as some philosophers would interject at this point, and so the question clearly has plenty of scope for obscurity.<sup>4</sup>

But this is irrelevant, because there is only one obvious philosophical question in the area, to which senses like ‘value’, ‘significance’ and ‘purpose’ are easily related. The question did not drop from the sky as an enigma to be deciphered, but is rather a natural question which we know human beings have been asking since at least the beginning of civilisation and were probably asking long before that (see Chapter 3). The question boils down to: what is the value of human life which accounts for us being here? Or less carefully but more naturally: what are we here for? We know the meaning of computers in this sense; they accomplish tasks for us, and that is why we made them. So given that people exist, and care about their existence more than any other kind, we naturally wonder if there is any reason for it.

Assuming both that there is, and that it makes our lives valuable, we ask: what is the meaning of life? Now this assumed meaning of human life might be moral; for the reason we exist might be to achieve something morally good. But it need not be: the value of our existence might rather be found in our contribution to an unfathomable cosmic plan which bears no relation to human notions of morality, but is nevertheless valuable in some other way. The answer to the question might be thoroughly obscure, then, but the question is not.

Now equipped with scientific knowledge, we might try to answer it by saying that the reason we exist is that a chance chemical reaction occurred on Earth about 3.5 billion years ago, and this ultimately led to the chain of biological evolution which resulted in us. However this just pushes the question back a stage, because we must then ask why those fertile environmental conditions once existed. And to answer this we must ultimately ask why reality itself exists. The question has not changed in pursuing it backwards, because we are only asking why reality exists (in this context) because we want to know why human beings exist. For humans are a part of reality, and so if there is a reason the whole thing exists, it will tell us why we exist. Nothing else could.

The tantalising possibility this raises is that if there is such a reason, then it might attribute a purpose to our lives. We might be here to *do* something, and so discovering the reason might persuade us to change our lives. This possibility is bound to fascinate us, even though it is just a possibility; for the reason for existence as a whole may have nothing to do with human beings. And even if we are implicated, simply existing might be enough: the meaning of our lives might consist in *being* valuable, rather than having the capacity for *doing* something valuable. And there may not be a reason anyway. But once we take up the question of why we exist, we can hardly ignore the possibility of a purpose. To be told only that we exist for a reason without reference to purposes would not be enough, since it would leave us wondering whether it has practical implications for our lives. Hence the only options capable of resolving the issue on its own terms are that reality exists for a reason (which either does or does not attribute purpose to human life), or that reality does not exist for a reason.

I have been emphasising the impersonal question of why human beings exist. This is simply because it is what the question of the meaning of life concerns; I do not regard this as a controversial philosophical claim, but rather a statement of the obvious, despite the fact that professional philosophy went to considerable lengths during the last century to make it seem otherwise. But the impersonal nature of the question does not rule out there being a very personal reason for any particular human being to ask it. For when we ask what the meaning of life is, a large part of the motivation is evidently to discover what the reason for each of our own, personal existences is, and thus whether that existence – yours or mine – serves some purpose.<sup>5</sup> I do not suppose for a second that this is all we are interested in; or more exactly, I do not suppose this has been the sole interest for the vast majority of people who have asked the question with any seriousness. But nevertheless, I think we are all egotistical

enough for the question to inevitably have a major personal emphasis. What we want to know is whether there is any sense to human beings existing, and by extension what – if any – sense there is to *me* existing as an example of a human being; the latter question may be a large part of the draw, but to answer it we must address the former one.

This is a profound question; a deeply philosophical one. Compare it to the question: ‘how can I get some more meaning in my life?’ To ask this is to ask what I can do to get more out of my life, in order to make it more fulfilling and rewarding. Or if our aspirations are higher, it might be to ask what kind of things I need to do in order to get others, and ultimately myself, to judge that I have lived a worthwhile life. This kind of question might be answered effectively through the decision to take up a new hobby, find a partner through an internet dating agency, or become involved in charitable work or politics; these are the kind of things a sensible friend might suggest if you went to them with the worry that your life is meaningless. Now I ask you: what could be more obvious than that we have now moved onto a different issue? Unlike some philosophers I do not scorn the obvious. For although it can be boring, it can also be refreshing, especially when trying to find something out. If I am trying to remember where I left my keys and suddenly realise it is obvious, then that is great; problem solved (probably).<sup>6</sup> And when an intellectual issue has become swamped in obscurity, obviousness is particularly refreshing because it reveals that a sensible idea has not yet been completely drowned out by extraneous cultural factors. That is exactly the situation with the distinction between the question of the meaning of life, and the essentially social question of how to make our lives more meaningful. These are endlessly conflated within our culture, but thankfully the conflation remains obvious; to those prepared to look. The former is a deep, natural and ancient question, while the latter is a relatively recent cultural product.

This is not to say that the questions are unconnected; if they were then their motivated conflation would not have been possible. They are connected because the social issue of meaningfulness began to emerge in response to the waning of the firm intellectual hold which religious answers to the question of the meaning of life once enjoyed; a process which began in earnest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A new generation of atheists became concerned by the simple inference that without God to give life meaning, then life must be meaningless. Within the essentially religious culture they occupied, this seemed like a terribly bad thing; as it would be for the sinner who lived a meaningless life in defiance of the essentially good meaning that God provides it with. Rebelling against this apparent condemnation of all we care about, then, they circumvented the inference and concluded instead that mankind needed to take control of its own destiny, and provide life with freely chosen human meaning; the intervention strategies some alighted upon were to cast a dark shadow over the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> Through the philosophical influence of Marx and Nietzsche, especially, as well as many other factors, the idea that life has a social meaning established itself within our culture, and prepared the ground for confluences between the original question, and the new question of how to maximise social meaningfulness. The eventual product was that it became normal for people to evaluate their lives in terms of social meaningfulness, and to worry that they might not be getting enough of it. Memories of the older question were neutered by dismissing it as something of interest only to religious believers, or else to philosophers in their absurdly obscure ruminations. The choice came to seem to be between either God or people providing life with meaning, and once the former was ruled out, the only interesting issue that seemed to remain was that of determining the best ways for people to make their own meaning.

This practical question does not strike me as terribly philosophical, which is not to deny, of course, that asking it can sometimes be very important to people. If you are dissatisfied, then

addressing your problems in terms of the meaning in your life might be a useful tool to take you beyond your immediate concerns, and place your life in a broader, social context. But the issue of social meaningfulness has another connection to philosophy, other than its genesis from 19<sup>th</sup> century overreactions to the prospect of nihilism. For the ancient question of what ‘the good life’ is for a human being is not far removed from this modern concern: both ask how we should act to fulfil our potential. This central question of moral philosophy, however, was traditionally asked in the metaphysical context of the nature of reality, and as such, within the context of the meaning of life. Claims about how we should live flowed from a characterisation of reality and the human place within it. The modern question, by contrast, is shallow: it can be pursued without the need to dig down to the roots of what, if anything, it is about reality that means we should pursue certain kinds of social meaning. I agree that social meaning should be left at the surface, as it happens; but this view is a product of the metaphysic I shall later develop, and my present point is just that you do not need to think about the meaning of life to concern yourself with social meaninglessness. It is an issue that might preoccupy you even if a philosophical thought had never entered your mind; if it had never occurred to you that there might be a meaning of life which favours *different* activities to those our various societies consider meaningful.

The motivation for this conflation, which has convinced many contemporary philosophers that the issue of social meaning is the only interesting one in the area (if they even recognise the distinction), has a number of sources. The close association between the question of the meaning of life and religion – in a world in which science has achieved intellectual hegemony – is an important one. Thus substituting the question of social meaning provided a route to leaving religion behind, while still paying lip-service to a question so natural that we cannot help thinking there must be something to it.

But the psychologically deeper reason was that religions make us think about disconcerting issues such as the frailty of life and the inevitability of death. By secularising the question of meaning, so it seemed, these uncomfortable issues could be put out of mind, and the question could be made more conformable to the carefree, life-affirming ethos that the advances in living standards we owe to science have produced. This factor also made the transition to a less *philosophical* question of meaning attractive, since philosophy can take us to the same uncomfortable places, albeit without any guarantee of religious consolation. And scepticism about philosophy, with its suspiciously verbose and impractical ways, also played a part; this understandable scepticism has been around since ancient times, such that we find Polybius, for instance, berating philosophers with ‘such facility at inventing specious arguments that they debate whether it is possible for people in Athens to smell eggs cooking in Ephesus, and wonder whether they might be home in bed, dreaming these discussions of theirs in the Academy, rather than talking like this in real life’.<sup>8</sup>

However the major intellectual influence that has brought the traditional question to be conflated with the issue of social meaning, and consequently marginalised in favour of the latter, has been the assumption that nihilism is *bad*. This is rooted in religious thinking. Religious leaders still espouse the idea that without the meaning God gives to life, there can be no standards of moral conduct; but few non-believers find this equation of atheism with moral chaos remotely plausible. Despite this, however, the assumption that nihilism is bad has exerted massive influence within secular culture. Unthinkingly adopted, it has licensed the dubious inference that since nihilism cannot be true (since that would be horrible) we should only consider a social notion of meaning that people can build up for themselves. Of course, placed in the light of day, it is obvious that even if nihilism would indeed be a



disaster, that does not mean it is not true. But the inference has rarely been placed in the light of day; that is not where it has done its work.<sup>9</sup>

However we do not need to be brave to accept nihilism. And we certainly do not need to follow those morbid philosophers who occasionally crawl out of the woodwork, using nihilism to justify all manner of life-denying, hateful views; views which say more about their advocates than about life. For nihilism is not bad. It cannot be. If reality is meaningful, then the meaning of human life might be good, bad, or neither. Thus if reality exists for a reason, this might reveal that human life serves a good purpose. Or it might reveal that some or most of reality serves a good purpose which human life runs counter to. Or it might be that the reason has nothing to do with human notions of good and bad. But if there is *no* reason that reality and hence humans exist, then there is no good meaning against which the meaninglessness of human life might be counted as bad in comparison. So if nihilism is true, it cannot be good or bad. Rather, nihilism's implication that life is meaningless is best viewed as simply a fact about life, not fundamentally different in kind from the fact that life evolved on Earth; except that the former is a philosophical fact.

Now it might be objected that we only need a possible contrast for 'bad', such that we could still significantly say that nihilism is bad so long as we can imagine human life having a good meaning; nihilism would then count as bad compared to the life we might have had. But then, we can equally imagine human life having a bad meaning, against the standard of which nihilism would be good. So I do not think this objection will get us far: it seems clear that if there is nothing good or bad about reality existing (in the relevant sense of a good or bad *reason* for it existing), then the fact that life is meaningless cannot itself be classed as good or

bad. That we can imagine alternatives is irrelevant, because none of them has any claim to being the standard against which we evaluate the meaninglessness of reality.<sup>10</sup>

None of this implies that things cannot be good or bad *within* life; murder is bad, as I see it, because there is a well-informed social consensus to evaluate it as bad. The consensus is not wrong because there is no good reason for humans to exist, because now that we do we have found plenty of good reasons to carry on. Even a moral objectivist should agree that the issues are different. They might hold that certain facts about the universe make things objectively good or bad, and perhaps even make human life – or reality as a whole – good or bad. But to hold that it could be objectively bad that reality exists for no reason is a very different kind of claim. It could not be rooted in the existence of physical pain, for instance, which is the prime candidate for something objectively bad. For nihilism does not and could not hurt anybody. The *realisation* of nihilism might cause pain, but then, any fact about the world might be counted as bad on that criterion; a man might react to the realisation that he is short by becoming a military despot, for instance. Nihilism is quite unlike a fact such as that nuclear weapons have been invented, where it is the possible consequences of this fact, rather than the mere grasping of it, that are bad. So I do not think the possible bad consequences of realising a fact provides a good criterion for capturing what we mean in saying that the fact itself could be bad; for on that criterion, all facts could be good or bad, even those of mathematics. So given that I can also see no potential in moral accounts other than consequentialism for classifying nihilism as a fact that could be bad, I think we should conclude that although the existence of life might be, its existence for no reason could not.

If life has a meaning, then, this could be bad. But nihilism cannot be. To say that life is meaningless is to say that it is valueless or worthless; but only in the sense that value is not

essential to what it is. It is not to say that we are worthless in the socially contextual sense that would amount to a condemnation. For although our nature is not intrinsically valuable, we value many things, including ourselves. We might not have done so, so this value is not essential to what we are, or to the other things we value. But our capacity to think about and value anything has made us contingently valuable. The philosophical realisation that value does not flow inevitably from our nature – a nature which makes value possible – has practically no prospect of reversing this valuation; life is simply too compelling for a philosophical view about the nature of reality to have that kind of effect.

Whether nihilism is actually true or not is quite another matter, of course; for life might have a meaning. But like many others I can see no good reason to think it does. Unlike most, however, I am happy to call myself a ‘nihilist’ as a consequence. This use of the word captures the main core of meaning it has picked up, and thus employed, it usefully labels an important philosophical position. Plus I like the sound of it; so I think it is worth salvaging from the confusion it has attracted.<sup>11</sup>

Now at this point, I can imagine some readers – especially philosophers of the kind I generally see eye-to-eye with – reacting as follows:

OK, I agree with you that nihilism is true (I already knew that); and also that it’s a fact about us that has been neglected in philosophy, especially the analytic tradition. And perhaps you’re right that it’s been shied away from in the public arena because people picked up the wrong impression. But then, once you’ve pointed that out, there isn’t really anything more to say, is there? Life is meaningless, and that’s it. It doesn’t lead anywhere interesting, as you’ve effectively conceded yourself: it doesn’t show

that life is terrible ... or that anything goes ... or anything like that. So it's a philosophical dead-end. It's boring.

But nihilism is not just any old fact: it entails that everybody's life is meaningless, and hence that *your* life is too. This must strike you as more significant for the way you think about the world than the vast majority of philosophical ideas you have come across, if not all of them; if it is not like that for you as it is for me, then perhaps I should start taking solipsism seriously. It is a thought which resonates throughout the understanding whenever you genuinely think about it, transfiguring everything while changing nothing.

But it still might not lead us anywhere in philosophy, no matter how much personal significance it may have for us. I shall be arguing that it does, however. In a sense, it leads everywhere in philosophy. The question of the meaning of life, to which nihilism provides the answer, is the keystone of philosophy: it locks the rest of its traditional preoccupations in place, and allows them to bear weight in an intellectual culture dominated by science.

Without it, these other concerns fall apart and fragment, losing the form that makes them credible. This view about the nature of philosophy – and, more substantially, my attempts to answer a cluster of traditional metaphysical concerns in light of it – takes up much more space in this book than nihilism; though nihilism will never be very far from the surface. Nihilism is more important, but there is not much to say about it except in the context of these other issues that lend it substance. It is boring; essentially so, in a sense that should become clear in the discussion of boredom in Chapter 1. But it is anything but boring when philosophical understanding is your goal. Philosophy takes place in a meaningless life, and since I cannot believe this is peripheral to it, I have tried to ensure that mine explicitly does.

The importance of the question of the meaning of life to the rest of philosophy starts to emerge when we reflect on the following fact: that there is less understanding of the nature of philosophy than of any other major discipline. There are disciplines whose area of concern is not common knowledge, of course, but in these cases an internet search can quickly fill the void. This tactic will not work for philosophy, however, for all you would find are more or less completely uninformative statements, most typically that philosophy asks the ‘most fundamental questions’. By stark contrast, if you want to know what palaeontology is, you can quickly discover that it is the study of life before the Holocene Epoch, which proceeds primarily through the study of fossils. This simple statement provides crucial insight into what the discipline is all about, which its typical analogues for philosophy conspicuously fail to do. For ‘fundamental’ does not mean anything until it is philosophically explained.

Fundamentality in philosophy and physics are different, after all, and even the philosopher who claims that physics describes the fundamental nature of reality is implicitly distinguishing them; by making the philosophical claim that the two are co-extensive.

Recognising this, the neophyte wanting to know what is distinctive about philosophy may delve into philosophical accounts of fundamentality. But they will soon discover that many philosophers have no concern for it; and that some deny there is such a thing!

Many well-educated people know some philosophical ideas, just as they know some ideas from physics. But knowing some philosophical ideas does not tell you what they have in common to justify calling them all ‘philosophical’. It is crucial to answer this obvious question, however, if the perspective from which philosophers make statements about the world is to be understood and respected outside of its own internal debates. And they increasingly are not these days; among the general public, but more stridently among scientists, for whom a vehement attack on philosophy has come to seem almost par for the

course in their popular books, before they go on – more often than not – to step outside of their area of expertise to make their own philosophical statements. This regrettable circumstance is quite understandable, given that clear information about what philosophy amounts to is not available, and that much of what scientists are likely find under the ‘philosophy’ label seems to be – and sometimes is – posing challenges to science.

This situation could be remedied by answering the obvious question. But few philosophers have tried, because most became convinced over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the question is an empty one. They became convinced that philosophy is exceptional in lacking the ordinary unity other disciplines possess: some kind of unified subject-matter. A particularly extreme form of this conviction was voiced by W.V.O. Quine, who thought the term ‘philosophy’ was of interest only to university administrators and librarians.<sup>12</sup> Albeit less extreme, the best-known statements on the nature of philosophy have followed similar lines. These have included the views that philosophy is united only by its methodology; that philosophy is a genealogical linkage of the writings of historical figures; that philosophy is too controversial to define; or that philosophy deals with topics that cannot yet be dealt with by science. None stand up to much scrutiny, as I shall show in Chapter 3. But within the cultural climate in which they emerged, they were enough to persuade philosophers that the issue is not worth thinking about, in contrast to proper, first-order philosophical problems. Not knowing or caring what is philosophical about these problems, or actively thinking there is nothing to say on the matter, did not seem to matter to the problems themselves. But it mattered tremendously. It further marginalised philosophy’s voice.

The disdain philosophers developed for the question of the nature of their discipline took place within a wider cultural trend in which philosophers – like everyone else apart from the

faithful – were also disdainful of the question of the meaning of life. But since the question is pivotal to the discipline, as I shall argue, they thereby began to lose touch with what they were doing and why they were doing it; the *doing* became all that mattered. In a culture where science seemed to have claimed the sole right to describe the true nature of reality, those philosophers who did continue to think about the nature of their subject usually concluded that it must itself be a kind of science; or else a kind of literature. But since it did not seem to be either, they made up all kinds of excuses for why it did not need a nature of its own. Perhaps it possessed only a science-like methodology, but no real subject-matter. Or perhaps it was just a kind of writing which made reference to certain past figures and themes (the latter now known to be fictional).

But the theme that makes sense of the discipline is the one that philosophers were busy trying to ignore or degrade. For only the question of the meaning of life unifies the two main branches of the discipline: its ‘practical’ concern with ethical questions, and its ‘theoretical’ concern with knowledge and reality. It is the only thing which makes sense of why people called ‘philosophers’ would discuss *both* morals and metaphysics. This is the main consideration favouring my thesis, but there are many other mutually supporting ones – to be discussed in Chapter 3 – which all point to the same conclusion.

In light of this conclusion, I begin to address some of the traditional problems of philosophy in a manner that takes into account the issue of the meaning of life. For in this way, they can be reconnected with this central, natural concern in such a way as to remind us why we were ever interested in the first place. I think this approach of trying to bring philosophical problems back to their centre is a step in the right direction if philosophy is to regain its own distinctive cultural voice. But even if the problems are interesting enough on their own merit,

or approaches to them have progressed so far beyond any impetus they received from concerns about the meaning of life, that resurrecting this connection will not help us solve them; even if that were all true, I still think the approach would be valuable. For it at least allows us to see why the great philosophers of the past connected these issues, and thereby enables us to see these problems in a new and hopefully interesting light. I think it does much more, but that alone would justify the effort.

This is the approach I have taken to the central metaphysical topics of consciousness (Chapters 4-5), time (Chapter 6) and universals (Chapter 7). My selection of these topics does not indicate that I think they are the most important ones in philosophy. And it certainly does not indicate any intention to put forward an exclusionary conception of philosophy. There have been far too many of those already; they typically accompany some innovative new approach to philosophy, as a manifesto to the effect that *this* (whatever it is) is the only proper way to do philosophy, and *these* (whatever they are) are the only legitimate topics. Rather, my conception of philosophy is completely inclusive: it covers everything that is standardly recognised as philosophy, from whatever tradition.

My selection of consciousness, time and universals has another motivation entirely. It is because together they provide a metaphysical picture of reality in the context of which the centrality of the question of the meaning of life to philosophy can readily be seen. What they reveal is that the reason these topics have been a battleground of persistent interest in philosophy – within the unlikely setting of the cultural dominance of science – is the issue of the meaning of life. In terms of their connection to this issue, you can see why differing views on these topics have remained compelling, despite the nagging thought that science really ought to be in sole charge of telling us what consciousness and time are (the problem



of universals is a special case because it has no scientific parallel). There are many other topics that can be informatively related back to this issue, and I would like to discuss as many of them as possible; but these are the three which I have found to most effectively bring into focus my central thesis about the persistence and autonomy of philosophy.

Consciousness provides my route in. The problem of consciousness arises because we cannot fit it into our scientific picture of the world. This shows that metaphysics will not stop at an affirmation of science, because the physicalist metaphysic provided by this unduly deferential conception of philosophy is untenable. We cannot sustain the pretence that consciousness does not exist, or that science in anything like the form we understand it could resolve the philosophical perplexities it generates. Philosophers try hard to pretend this, and can acquire a state of mind in which they no longer have to pretend. But it only takes a simple reminder to get the ball rolling again, such as Frank Jackson's thought-experiment about the woman in a black-and-white room whose scientific education leaves her unprepared for a world of colour; 'ludicrously simple' as John Searle put it, but still capable of sparking off endless complex debates. I speak as a once-committed physicalist; what I can now see was essential to my physicalist conviction remains in place in this book.<sup>13</sup>

What drives on debates about consciousness, I shall argue, is that once it is grasped that it will not fit into a scientific world-view, most philosophers become frightened. This is because they think philosophy is supposed to complement science. And what is worse, if you believe reality outruns the physical, then you seem to have strayed into the realms of religion: you have opened up the possibility that there is a meaning of life. Religious philosophers are happy with that, of course, and some brave souls feel no fear in describing reality in their own way, either scorning or ignoring science, or demanding with naïve optimism that it take

account of their insights; this is the kind of self-confidence philosophy could do without. But most philosophers worry about the apparent clash with science, because they do not want to stray into territory occupied by religion and traditional metaphysics. So some keep trying to show that consciousness can be explained by science (or else does not exist); while others find that consciousness forces them to disagree. The clash is between the passionately felt need to avoid giving ground to those who believe in a meaning of life, and the almost irresistible urge to state the obvious truth. Once you understand that, and can see it reflected across philosophy's traditional debates, then you can understand why those debates have seemed interminable; and also why they need not, but probably always will.

The way out of this impasse is simply to realise that even if reality transcends the world of science, we have no reason to think this makes it any the less meaningful. So we had no reason to resist this philosophical move, except for an unjustified lack of confidence in philosophy based in lack of awareness of what it is. The fact that consciousness does not make sense in the world of science forces us to move beyond science, but the assumption that this has religious, anti-scientific implications calls us to stay where we are. However this assumption is wrong: there are philosophical implications but no anti-scientific ones. To be sure, it opens up the *possibility* of a meaning of life – which those of faith will welcome – but it provides no reason to believe in one. In backing away from a meaning of life, then, philosophers have inadvertently been backing away not from religion but from philosophy. For it was philosophy, rather than any other field of endeavour, which saw through our apparent need for a meaning of life; it achieved this not because of any special philosophical methodology, but because it is an ancient tradition of human thought. People eventually worked out that what seemed to matter to us does not. We got there because of science, but this was philosophy's triumph; science has had its own even greater triumphs.

The argument I will present to make sense of consciousness – and subsequently also time and the problem of universals – is that we must recognise that reality transcends the human perspective; a philosophical concern which properly understood has no scientific implications. This is the ‘Transcendent Hypothesis’ presented in Chapter 5 – which is the key to this book. Now many philosophers have thought that claims to transcendence, of the kind that have predominated in the history of the discipline and continue to draw people to it, are confused and ultimately cannot be made sense of. The lesson I draw from these arguments, however, is simply that you must tread very carefully. A.W. Moore – who rejects transcendence (though not the concept of it<sup>14</sup>) – argues persuasively that if you claim reality transcends the perspective from which we can make sense of it, then this claim itself starts to look like something we cannot make sense of.<sup>15</sup> However if we can make sense of transcendence *within* the human perspective, then it is perfectly coherent to extrapolate from this to the possibility of something outside. This something may or may not be capable of being made sense of, but if its existence would make sense of why there are things we cannot otherwise make sense of from within the human perspective, then we would have found a reason to believe in it from within that perspective. This is the line I shall pursue.

I now take myself to have introduced this book: the reader should have a good idea of what to expect, although the substance of the Transcendent Hypothesis and the solutions it provides will only emerge as the book progresses. My aim, as should be clear, is to show that philosophy can regain the self-confidence it lost in the face of science, by realising that what it does is largely independent of science. And the best way for it to do this, I think, is to reclaim its centre by embracing the question of the meaning of life. This may allow it to become less culturally peripheral. Scientists should not, as is currently the case, be writing

the only truly popular and hence culturally influential books about ‘the nature of reality’, for there is both room and need for another kind of book on that topic. And I strongly suspect that the philosophical kind could at least hold their own. For there are a lot of people nowadays who say they are not religious, but that they still think everyday life and science is not all there is: that they are spiritual people. This is an interest which philosophy could be rationally developing. It is a philosophically astute one.<sup>16</sup>

Before this introduction ends, however, I will discuss the recent literature on the meaning of life, since this might be of interest to philosophers and students who are working in the area. Other readers may prefer to skip ahead to Chapter 1 at this point.

## **Appendix**

This literature strikes me as heavily infected with the conflation I began by diagnosing. Even when the real problem is acknowledged, the discussion almost always seems to end with social meaning providing the solution; the solution to avoiding nihilism, that is. Or else the real problem is either dismissed as uninteresting or extraneous, or not acknowledged at all; sometimes not even recognised, from what I can tell. This is not always the case, but that is the dominant state of play.

It would be bad if nihilism were true, one author tells us, ‘in light of the fact that, well, life is meaningless’.<sup>17</sup> This is the most candid example I have come across to of how thoroughly taken for granted the badness of nihilism is among many contemporary philosophers. And the attitude is typical; in spite of the fact that there have been philosophers such as Camus and E.D. Klemke, for instance, who thought, on the contrary, that nihilism is good.<sup>18</sup> That it might

be morally neutral that life is meaningless, given that reality does not exist for a moral reason, has apparently been an option unworthy of attention. However the reason these alternatives are so often summarily dismissed, when even considered, is easy enough to see. It is that the traditional question itself has either been dismissed or conflated, and social meaning is the focus. With this focus, the badness of nihilism (construed as an absence of social meaning), starts to look like a reasonably understandable starting point. For everybody knows that it is bad to lack social meaning, do they not?

Antti Kauppinen tells us that ‘it is a commonsensical idea that it is better to lead a meaningful rather than a meaningless life’, which is a standard premise for philosophers working in this area; his perfunctory acknowledgment of the traditional question (‘this metaphysical or cosmological question of meaning need not deter us here’) is also typical.<sup>19</sup> But is it really commonsensical that it is better to lead a socially meaningful rather than socially meaningless life? If we say ‘significant’ rather than ‘meaningful’ – which on the face of it looks like a reasonable substitution – then it seems clear that although Adolf Hitler lived a life of exceptional social significance, it would have been better if he had not. Hitler, true to form, has proved a serious bone of contention in this debate. John Kekes and Paul Edwards, for instance, think his life was meaningful, whereas Kaupinnen and Thaddeus Metz think it was not; and it is easy to see which side other players in this field would fall on.<sup>20</sup> This disagreement seems pretty radical!

A simple way to explain it would be that one side thinks ‘meaningful’ has moral connotations and the other side does not. If you think it does not, and is just a matter of social impact, then it is obvious that Hitler had an exceptionally meaningful life; that seems plausible. But then again, to say that somebody’s life is meaningful seems like a compliment (because we often

have in mind *good* meaning), so since we hate Hitler, we had better say that his life was meaningless; that seems plausible too. However although I think this explanation is essentially correct, there is another factor at play. For those who think Hitler had a meaningful life typically do not emphasise the notion of social impact (though this example would not come up if it were not in the back of their minds). Rather, they emphasise subjective engagement with projects. Kekes's entry point into the issue is the crisis J.S. Mill experienced as a young man, when all his projects suddenly seemed pointless; he had lost his subjective engagement with them. And Edwards thinks subjective engagement is all that matters. Thus he says: 'We are inclined to say, "If his life had meaning to him, then it had meaning – that's all there is to it." We are not inclined (or we are much less inclined) to say something of this kind when we speak of the worth of a person's life.'<sup>21</sup>

On this type of account, then, having projects that engage you is all that is required for a meaningful life; so Hitler qualifies. This ties in nicely with concern about the 'meaning-crises' that plague people's lives. However the other side of this debate, which thinks that social meaning has to be moral – or at least socially commendable in some way – also typically insist on a subjective component. Since this side believe that a meaningful life needs objective value, they motivate the addition of a subjective element on the grounds that even if your life did have an objective meaning, it would not be *your* meaning unless you identified with it.<sup>22</sup> Hence somebody living according to God's plan would still not be living a meaningful life unless they made it their own; which of course they could not if they did not know what it was. This is often taken to be a damning objection to religious accounts of meaning. So in the debate that has crowded-out recent discussions of 'the meaning of life', there are, on the one hand, proponents of the purely subjective view, who require only that we engage with our projects; and on the other, proponents of the combined objective and

subjective view, who think that a meaningful life consists in engaging with objectively worthwhile projects. The latter, whose position is epitomised by Susan Wolf's slogan 'Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness', have become the dominant faction.<sup>23</sup>

The insistence on subjective engagement which pervades these debates makes it quite clear that the traditional question is no longer on the table; though the frequent references these authors make to God indicate that they often still think it is. For if God has a plan for us, I can see no reason why we would need to know it in order for it to make our lives meaningful; not unless our knowing about it is part of God's plan. Unless that or something like it is the case, however, we could be living meaningful lives in a manner to which we were completely oblivious; we might be subjectively engaged with or disengaged from this meaning, but it would still be there. It would be what we are here for, and hence *our* meaning, whether we knew this or not; to think otherwise is evidently to confuse metaphysics with epistemology. Only if the meaning of life dictated that we *must* subjectively engage with certain goals would it make a difference; but then that would simply be part of the objective condition. And the only reason to think that would be if you had some religiously inspired conviction about what the meaning of life actually amounts to. Without this, the issue of subjective engagement is simply neither here nor there.

Given that this debate is concerned with social meaning, then, what must be driving the requirement of subjective engagement is the worry about what happens when people lose it and have a crisis. But even then the issues look distinct, as some philosophers have noticed, since there seems to be a clear distinction between your life seeming to be socially meaningless and its actually being so.<sup>24</sup> Otherwise it is hard to see how a therapist might

persuade her depressive patient that his life is actually full of social meaning, and thereby persuade him to re-engage with it. Due to a disruption in his engagement, of the kind personal tragedy can bring about, he might simply have forgotten how valuable his various projects are to him, and need a reminder; he would not have lost the meaning in his life and then regained it, just temporally disengaged from it. Or he might not have forgotten at all, for the motivation for his engagement with social meaning might have been put into doubt by a worry about the question of *the meaning of life*. That is what happened to Tolstoy, whose reflections on the meaning of life *begin* from the acknowledgement that his own life had accrued exceptional levels of social meaning.<sup>25</sup>

When we disengage from social meaning, then, we might seem to have lost it when it actually remains. But accounts of social meaning in terms of subjective engagement alone cannot account for this divergence between appearance and reality. Neither can they account for it the other way around, and hence make sense of the judgement that a boy who eats, sleeps and breathes computer games is actually living a socially meaningless life; in spite of the fact that he is completely engaged by these games. People do make this kind of judgement, and they seem perfectly sensible to me. That said, it seems equally sensible to say that the games are what give this boy's life its meaning; that, as an objective matter of fact, playing the games are what he values about his life. Or that whether he values them or not, they provide his life with meaning because that is what he spends most of it doing. It depends on whether you are thinking of social meaning as something determined by social impact, by what people value, or by what they do. Depending on the context, we may think of it in any of these ways.

In any case, it is clear that those who think subjective engagement is necessary and sufficient for social meaning are only providing an account of when life *seems* to have social meaning.



And not a very good one at that, since it might *seem* to someone that their life is full of social meaning even though they were currently having trouble subjectively engaging with it. There are two senses of ‘seeming’ here: seeming as manifest but defeasible conscious presentation, and seeming as judgement. A disruption in social engagement can put social meaning into question, since it allows us to step back and look at it differently; projects ‘seem’ meaningless in the former sense. But it does not automatically ‘seem’ to negate it in the latter sense, for it is perfectly possible for a rational agent to judge that it remains in place even though it is not motivating them as it once did.

Those who combine subjective engagement with an objective criterion do allow for divergences between appearance and reality, because they include an objective criterion. But because they also insist on a subjective criterion, they thereby lapse into incoherence. What these theorists have failed to realise is that if you combine a subjective with an objective criterion, then the subjective condition inevitably takes the upper hand. For if a highly socially engaged and morally exceptional life can fail to be meaningful because of a lack of subjective engagement, then a socially meaningful life itself becomes a kind of subjective engagement with the world, albeit one with an objective condition of satisfaction. It becomes rather like a perceptual state – a way of accurately seeing the world. But in that case, this approach is landed with a similar problem to the first.

To see this, suppose we have somebody with all the right objective ingredients for a meaningful life, but who fails to be engaged by them. On this kind of account, such a person simply *must* be right in judging their life to be meaningless; their lack of engagement provides an infallible, subjective guarantee of this judgement. They know they are not engaged by their projects, whether or not they ought to be, and on this kind of account their

life cannot have social meaning without such engagement. However judgements about meaninglessness seem no more infallible than those of meaningfulness. These accounts acknowledge that we can be wrong about the latter by including an objective criterion; thus I can be subjectively engaged by my projects, and judge that my life is meaningful, but if my projects are not worthwhile then my judgement is wrong. But in that case, it is hard to see why error would be impossible in the case of the former, given that we are presumably judging the absence or presence of the same thing. How could I be (potentially) infallible about whether my life is meaningless, but always fallible about whether it is meaningful? Now judgements about *seeming* meaningfulness (or meaninglessness) might be thought infallible, for the same reason as any judgement about how things subjectively seem; namely, that it cannot falsely seem that it seems a certain way, because within the subjective sphere, seeming to seem is the same as seeming. So I conclude that these accounts have tacked an account of meaningfulness (which they have misconstrued as a necessary condition for meaningfulness) onto an account of seeming meaningfulness (a bad one), and called this ‘meaningfulness’. But of course, once you have an account of meaningfulness, then you are already there.<sup>26</sup>

It seems to me that these debates have not only completely missed the significance of subjective engagement to the question of the meaning of life – explaining this will be a principal theme of Chapter 1 – but have also been seriously misled by it in regard to social meaning. In fact, I think the former and latter are connected, because the reason these authors instinctively fixate on subjective engagement is that this is what best protects them (and all of us) from a powerful and natural motivation to address the question of the meaning of life. In particular, it protects them from the prospect of nihilism, which they assume is bad. So since

they have conflated the issues, they assume that subjective engagement must be the key to keeping our lives socially meaningful.

If we now return to the Hitler question with the red herring of subjective engagement put out of play, we can see that what the issue really boils down to is whether you think social meaning is a matter of what a person values about their life, what a person actually does with their life, the social impact of their life, or the *good* social impact of their life.<sup>27</sup> But to take this question seriously, we must first assume there is a consistent, context-free notion of ‘a meaningful life’ (in the social sense). Maybe there is not. Maybe some people would say that Hitler had a meaningful life in the context of a historical discussion, but not at a funeral when a loved one has just been commended for living a meaningful life. Maybe the ‘good’ connotation is lacking in China but critical in South Africa. I am inclined to agree when Tim Oakley says that ‘People simply do not in any consistent way attribute meaningfulness to individual lives.’ But the fact is that I simply do not know; and neither do the majority who assume the opposite. Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith think ‘the word “meaningful” is obviously a vague term’, but they are still interested in ‘what ordinary folk actually mean by the expression in question’. So why not ask them?<sup>28</sup>

In saying this, I am not taking a stand on the merits of experimental philosophy. My point is rather twofold. Firstly, whatever you might think about traditional philosophical concepts like knowledge or truth, the concept of a socially meaningful life simply *looks* culturally specific; as culturally specific as any concept could look. Even without my addition of the word ‘socially’ this should be obvious, given that it concerns the projects people engage with; and people engage in different projects in different cultures. So it hardly makes sense to ignore the possibility that this concept can only be clarified with reference to communities; which

these debates always do. And secondly, philosophers do not need to speculate about what people mean by a socially meaningful life, since there is a well-established branch of empirical psychology which investigates exactly that. It takes cultural specificity fully into account.<sup>29</sup> So if your interest is in the actual concept, its importance to people, and in helping people who feel their lives are meaningless, then this is clearly the place to look. Even if you think philosophical analysis can penetrate ordinary usage to discover a single, underlying formula for a meaningful life, it still seems clear that such analyses should begin from real data, rather than from an individual philosopher's intuitions; intuitions that can radically conflict, as the Hitler question amply demonstrates. And yet you would do well to notice that this area of psychology even exists from looking at the philosophical debate.<sup>30</sup>

I do not know that there is no underlying consistency to attributions of social meaningfulness, then, but it seems unlikely; and even more unlikely that the philosophers in this debate could find one with their adopted method of running through a series of imaginative examples and counterexamples plucked from any area of life that happens to cross their minds. They have as much chance as if they were trying to find the acultural essence at the root of concepts like *cool* or *nerdish*, I would have thought. But these efforts are not just pointless; they are often objectionable – and not just because they divert attention from the real issue. If you think social meaning is a matter of what you value, or simply what you do, then there is nothing objectionable in that. Similarly, there is nothing objectionable about the view that social meaning is determined by *any* kind of social impact; Hitler will score highly, telly-addicts will not, and the comparison need not be unfavourable. In all these cases, there is nothing else to say unless you are foolish enough to expect precision in these judgements.<sup>31</sup> However those who opt for *good* social impact, and then try to specify it exactly, have gone down the objectionable path of ranking people's lives. Ordinary people who have never harmed a fly

suddenly find their lives condemned as meaningless by philosophers – who always make room for philosophy to be a particularly meaningful pursuit, I have found.

David Wiggins once warned about the danger that philosophers would set themselves up as preachers if they presumed to discover a single formula for good social meaning; the ‘Holy Grail’, as he put it. Unfortunately, his warning was not heeded.<sup>32</sup> Thaddeus Metz, who is the most prolific contributor to these debates – and also their most enthusiastic proselytizer – actually uses the words ‘holy grail’ in reference to his own formula; with no irony I can detect, and no basis for it in his position either.<sup>33</sup> Metz avoids the incoherence of Wolf’s subjective-objective account by denying that subjective engagement is necessary for social meaning. But he still thinks it is incredibly important, because he thinks social meaning is a matter of applying rationality to the ‘fundamental conditions of human existence’; presumably the idea is that you cannot help doing this at least a little if the deeds you perform are good enough, irrespective of how bad your attitude is. So social meaning is still an attitude to the world, albeit objectively construed and without any subjective guarantees. However Metz follows Wolf’s methodology and aims exactly, by stating paradigm-cases of meaningful lives (e.g. Mandela, Picasso, Einstein) and then working through an apparently endless stream of intuitions in an attempt to isolate the meaningful factors. By this means, he finds that some activities add meaning to life (art, science, philosophy), some detract from it (prostitution), and some are neutral (eating chocolate). And he thinks a meaningfulness calculus can be produced in this way, with scores for anything we might do.<sup>34</sup>

The moralising intentions of this exercise are barely disguised. Metz tells us, for instance, that if ‘someone had a talent for chess but did not like it, or were not pursuing it, an objectivist [like himself] might recommend that he change his mind’. Chess and anything else

Metz thinks is good has to be tied in with his ‘fundamentality’ formula, no matter how tenuously (e.g. minimalist art), since that tells us the kind of things we *should* be doing. Rock stars, fashion models, jet-setting playboys and the like, have little chance of achieving a good meaning-score; because they are not the kind of people Metz admires. And the vast majority of people, who go to work and do their best to get by, can pretty much forget it. Being disabled depletes your score, and fundamental physicists have one up on their colleagues in the applied sciences (perhaps Metz should get into metaphysics). And so it goes on.<sup>35</sup>

All these intuitions, he thinks, are backed up by physical patterns in the world. Well in that case this could presumably all become an exact science; so when the natural scientists get around to measuring the patterns, it might be a nice idea to start putting meaning-counters on tomb-stones. Then, when visiting cemeteries, we could immediately see how well people had done; and given that your score can apparently change after death, it would be bound to liven the places up.<sup>36</sup> But to take this idea seriously for a moment, any physical pattern for social meaning must have been created through our behavioural interactions, along with the concept to think about it; as Metz accepts. In the case of social meaning, however, there is nothing asocial for that concept to latch onto. When concepts are built around natural phenomena such as our perceptual capacities, or biological pain and our natural aversion to it, then an appeal to natural essence may have some plausibility. But social meaning has nothing of the kind, and so given that social practices vary widely and continually change, I think we can safely assume that there is no unified natural pattern; a substantive, pancultural, conceptual unity supervening on the physical world is already unlikely enough. And in any case, in the event of a misguided attempt to isolate such a pattern, scientists would begin with its manifestations in the various behaviours of as broad a cross-section of people as possible; their focus would not be upon Metz’s brain.

Let us now turn to the good guys: philosophers who recognise the clear distinction between the question of the meaning of life and issues about social meaning, and rather than dismissing the former, actually try to answer it.

Even in these cases, social meaning sometimes manages to creep in. An instructive case to consider is that of Robert Nozick. Nozick's answer to the traditional question begins with a distinction between value and meaning.<sup>37</sup> Value, he tells us, is achieved by integration within boundaries, as for instance when a painting integrates its diverse elements into a unified whole, or a scientific theory exhibits the unity of natural phenomena. Meaning, on the other hand, always reaches beyond limits: something meaningful within one context loses this meaning when we move to a wider context. And this is what makes the meaning of life problematic: our activities seem meaningful within life, but we can find no wider context in which life itself is meaningful.

This distinction is contrived, however, because meaning is always *to* somebody or something until we reach the base level of meaning-in-itself; but the kind of value Nozick discusses seems no different, in that integration and unity are valuable to us, but have no obvious value outside the context of life. The universe does not value our paintings or scientific theories. In any case, we soon see why the distinction has been contrived. Nozick goes on to observe that 'the regress of questions about meaning' could be halted by the 'meaningful-in-itself existence of the unlimited' – 'unlimited' because then there can be no extraneous reason for its existence – and this is why religions have been thought to provide the answer. But he also sees that 'we must not confuse what we desire with what is the case', and that nihilism provides an alternative answer. To accept the latter, however, would exhibit 'stern integrity in

the face of temptation'. Not unless you assume that nihilism is bad, of course; but in any case, Nozick should have concluded his discussion here.<sup>38</sup>

Instead, he puts aside the thought that meaning might not be grounded in wider meaning (and does not consider that it might not need to be), and looks to the idea that the ground of meaning might be value, rather than more meaning. He argues that 'What bestows meaning by connection must itself be nontrivial', and so the 'chain that grounds meaning cannot terminate in something worthless'. So it is a *necessary* condition for whatever grounds meaning to be nontrivial. Then he concludes that, 'it need not end with something that somehow is intrinsically meaningful; it can rest upon something valuable. Thus the apparently inexorable regress is stopped.'<sup>39</sup> So now it is a *sufficient* condition; and value fits the bill. But of course, we might accept that the ground of meaning would have to be nontrivial, since the reason for the existence of the universe hardly sounds like a trivial matter. But that does not mean that anything nontrivial could do it, since it would have to explain why we are here – which Nozick's 'value' does not. Driven on by the assumption that nihilism is bad, however, Nozick manages to stumble onto his desired conclusion that the meaning of life is found within life; in the value of our projects, and hence social meaning.

David Cooper finds the question of the meaning of life just as obvious and natural as I do, I am pleased to say, and has a similar appraisal of attempts to push it aside in favour of the social meaning. His concern with nihilism, however, is the understandable one that although the lack of any meaning of life would not undermine the social meaning of our activities, it might still negatively affect it through 'the feeling that significance leaches out from those activities, which now become as pointless, empty or frivolous as what they contribute to.' I address this concern in Chapter 2. His solution is to appeal to an ineffable mystery which



provides the measure of human existence – something ‘beyond’ the human but still intimate with it; emphatically not ‘outside’ or ‘transcendent’ to the human perspective, because Cooper rejects such metaphysical claims. So human life can be meaningful in virtue of “‘responding” to what is mysterious’, and nihilism results when you fail to respond appropriately. I think nihilism is just a fact, and that Cooper thinks it needs to be avoided because he overestimates the importance of philosophy. But these are relatively subtle differences, to be evaluated when my position is on the table.<sup>40</sup>

John Cottingham is similarly clear about what the question is, and that social meaning will not answer it; as philosophers who come at it from a religious perspective typically are. Like Cooper he thinks we need a meaning of life, but Cottingham accepts the more straightforward answer that there *is* one, and that our lives become meaningful by responding to it through ‘intimations of a transcendent world of meaning that breaks through into the ordinary world of our five senses’.<sup>41</sup> The issue then comes down to whether you think there is transcendent meaning or not; I entirely agree that it does, and so do others. Joshua Seachris, for instance, carefully demonstrates the *ontological / normative* component of the question; as I would put it, that you cannot provide an appropriate answer without talking about the reason we exist (or the lack of one). And Joe Mintoff recognises that religious accounts provide ‘the very best example of what a theory about the meaning of life should look like’; but since he does not believe in any of them, he unfortunately winds his way back to social meaning.<sup>42</sup>

My favourite philosopher writing about this question in recent times is Milton Munitz.<sup>43</sup> Not only did he recognise the transcendence of reality, which he calls ‘Boundless Existence’, but he was also a nihilist; once you get that far, the rest is just details. Thus he sees that the question must be answered in terms of transcendence, and that there are ‘many routes’ to

affirming it (he opts for cosmology); but he does not think it provides us with a meaning of life. And he also sees that there is no unitary social meaning that might be considered a substitute. My only serious qualm is that he thinks nihilism is *good*, in showing that we can ‘take life with less than total seriousness’; this idea is addressed in Chapter 2.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, I like Nicholas Waghorn’s recent book on the meaning of life; it displays a weird, almost Neoplatonic reticence about making any claims, which is quite appealing. Waghorn sees that social meaning is obviously not going to satisfy our curiosity about the meaning of life, though by qualifying the relevant meaning as ‘ultimate’ (others make similar qualifications) he makes an unnecessary concession to the other side; the question is about the *meaning of life*, after all. Quite unlike me, however, he thinks the question is deeply ambiguous and ultimately cannot be made sense of. But since he thinks *nothingness* cannot either, and that any positive answer could never provide a final resting place for our curiosity, he thinks nothingness is our best bet; this does not make him a nihilist, superficial appearances to the contrary. By taking the question away from grotesque moralising, and into the realms of metaphysics and conceptual limits, this is a laudable attempt to buck the trend.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Bergner 1998: 73, 79-80.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Ayer 1947.

<sup>3</sup> I have in mind Wittgenstein and Rorty in particular. The latter, by arranging it so that after his death a sociologist (Gross 2008) would dissect his philosophical life and thought into a series of career moves (concerning prospects for promotion, spotting a niche to make it into the world of public intellectuals, etc.) made his ultimate anti-philosophical statement. In this way, he bettered Wittgenstein. Attempts to make philosophy more like science have been a more reticent – and thereby more influential – part of the same trend.

<sup>4</sup> An excellent survey is provided by David Cooper (2003); who would not make this objection.

<sup>5</sup> I shall later say ‘overall purpose’; simply as a safeguard against possible misunderstandings.

<sup>6</sup> You then have to check if the keys are really where you think; but it is the best possible start.

<sup>7</sup> I have in mind the influence this idea seems to have had on eugenicists in late 19<sup>th</sup> century France; see Hecht 2003. The idea was morally salvaged by Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, whose highly influential *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Frankl 1946) became the founding document of empirical psychology’s interest in attributions of social meaningfulness.

<sup>8</sup> Polybius 2nd century B.C.: 441.

<sup>9</sup> With the conflation in place, you might unthinkingly assume that if nihilism is true, then there can be no social meaning. But nihilism is obviously unable to prevent us from engaging in the activities we value. I shall discuss the related but more sophisticated worry that accepting nihilism might spoil our attitude to life in Chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> It might be argued that since our standards of good and bad come from within life, then this provides the contrast. But there are both good and bad things within life. And anyway, when we are not using these standards to think about how life would be if it did have a meaning, it

---

is not clear that comparisons make sense. It would be odd to say nihilism is good compared to murder, or bad compared to charity, for instance.

<sup>11</sup> I think that fear of decay, loss and death, which I take to be fairly common (especially among philosophers), has an intimate connection with the hope that reality has a good meaning that extends beyond physical life. I also think that anger at injustice plays a role for some people. But fear (or anger) obviously provides no evidence for believing in such a meaning, and the related worry that it might matter what we think ('if you don't believe it, you won't get it') displays concern with a more particular – and thus even less likely – kind of possibility; albeit one deeply rooted in our history. It is a fear that does not impress me: 'whaddya gonna do?', as Tony Soprano would say. But still, I can see the selfish appeal of a well-timed deathbed conversion, when madness would not matter to you.

<sup>12</sup> Quine 1975.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson 1982; Searle 1992: 118. The best I could do for physicalism was presented in my 'Conceptualizing Physical Consciousness' (Tartaglia 2013), which was the belated final product of my PhD (2001). I am afraid to say that by the time I had perfected it (a valuable process) I had long since ceased to believe in it: I will never do anything like that again.

<sup>14</sup> Moore 2012: 589-90; see also 579. I think Moore is right to make this concession, but for much stronger reasons than he gives. For it seems to me that you cannot have metaphysics without the concept of transcendence; whether transcendence itself is being affirmed or denied (perhaps only implicitly).

<sup>15</sup> This argument comes out most clearly in Moore's criticism of Kant; see *ibid*: 141.

<sup>16</sup> For why it is important for philosophy to regain cultural influence, see Chapter 8.

<sup>17</sup> Murphy 2010: 137; for a similar example, see Morris 1992: 50. To find out just how terribly bad nihilism can be thought to be, see Casey 2004 or Metz 2013: 152.

<sup>18</sup> Camus 1942: 53; Klemke 2008: 193.

---

<sup>19</sup> Kauppinen 2012: 345-6, 352.

<sup>20</sup> Kekes 2000: 30; Edwards 1967: 127; Kauppinen 2012: 361; Metz 2013: 5 (though he never returns to say it, by the end of his book we can safely assume that Metz thinks Hitler's life was worse than meaningless; it had *negative* meaning).

<sup>21</sup> Kekes 1986, 2000; Edwards 1967: 127 (see also p. 125, where 'meaning' and 'zest' are equated). See Taylor 1970 for a similar view.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. Levy 2005; Pritchard 2010; Metz 2013. For the origins of this idea, see Ayer 1947 and Nagel 1971 (the latter is discussed in Chapter 2).

<sup>23</sup> Wolf 1997; see also Wolf 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Oakley 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Tolstoy 1880.

<sup>26</sup> To spell this out, if judgements about the presence of meaning are fallible, then judgements about its absence must be too; if we are judging the same thing. To say that we can both fallibly judge that our life lacks meaning (when it subjectively engages us) or infallibly judge the same thing (when it does not), shows that the judgement must have a different basis in each case. The basis of the latter judgement can only be seeming meaninglessness (construed as subjective engagement). But then, only a purely subjective criterion of actual meaningfulness could motivate making seeming meaningfulness a necessary condition on actual meaningfulness. Mixed theorists think they are rejecting any such criterion, but they are actually just incoherently combining it with an objective one; the incoherence only reveals itself in the limiting case where only the subjective criterion counts, because otherwise it is trumped by the objective condition. The analogy with perception breaks down because perception representationally graduates with the world it represents, but engagement with meaning graduates both with the world and our attitude to the world; between X being '(maximally) worth doing' and '(maximally) not worth doing'. Thus if your conscious state is

---

not of the appropriate subjective kind for accurate perception, there is either no perception, the perception is misleading, or we might perhaps retreat to the notion of unconscious perception. If it does not consciously seem that I am perceiving a tree, then, this rules out my perceiving a tree unless we can say that what I take it to be a lamppost is really a tree I am (mis)perceiving, or that I am unconsciously perceiving a tree. But social meaning cannot be a similar kind of state, because conscious disengagement rules out meaning: it cannot be that your state is misleadingly or unconsciously directed upon a meaningful life. That this is ruled out makes it clear that in the infallible cases (those to which the objective condition is irrelevant), it is only the conscious component that is being analysed, i.e. seeming meaninglessness. And that the mixed account is incoherently and inconsistently treating seeming meaninglessness as the sole criterion of actual meaninglessness in these cases.

<sup>27</sup> I can think of other plausible options; but these are enough for present purposes.

<sup>28</sup> Oakley 2010; Brogaard and Smith 2005: 455, 444.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Steger, Kawabata, Shimai and Otake 2008; Mason 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Kauppinen 2013 is a very rare exception.

<sup>31</sup> This is not to deny that there might be philosophically interesting things to say about social meaning in these senses; I am just saying that they require no further explication. For instance, maybe what is morally bad about some forms of deception is best understood as deceiving people about the social meaning of their lives, as I have recently (2015) heard J.J. Valberg argue. But I have discovered nothing similarly interesting in the literature reviewed here.

<sup>32</sup> Wiggins 1976: 377-8. Perhaps Wiggins' warning was too abstruse. But Steven Cahn's succinct response to Wolf's influential preaching really should have put an end to this kind of thing (Cahn 2006). Cahn relies heavily on rhetorical questions to express his exasperation and incredulity; nothing else should have been required.

---

<sup>33</sup> Metz 2013: 249.

<sup>34</sup> Metz 2013: 146-7, 234. Nozick once toyed with this idea in passing (Nozick 1974: 50) but had enough sense not to pursue it.

<sup>35</sup> Metz 2013: 165, 231, 149, 217.

<sup>36</sup> Metz 2013: 91-3, 171-2, 247-8.

<sup>37</sup> Nozick 1981: 571-619; Nozick 1989: 162-9.

<sup>38</sup> Nozick 1981: 606, 609, 610.

<sup>39</sup> Nozick 1981: 610.

<sup>40</sup> Cooper 2003: 126-30, 133, 140; see also Cooper 2002 and 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Cottingham 2003: 100.

<sup>42</sup> Seachris 2013; Mintoff 2008: 68.

<sup>43</sup> I discovered his work in summer 2014 and was amazed at how Munitzian a book I had written.

<sup>44</sup> Munitz 1986: 19, 282. Munitz sometimes expresses his message about social meaning in an unnecessarily ambiguous manner (Munitz 1993: 113); but nevertheless his position is clear enough.

<sup>45</sup> Waghorn 2014.