

Postscript: The Blue Flower

The phrase, ‘the meaning of life’, seems problematic to many contemporary philosophers; standard labels for other areas of philosophical interest, such as ‘free will’, ‘the mind / body problem’ or ‘personal identity’, have not generated similarly sustained disquiet. Nevertheless, it is emblematic of philosophy in the public domain. It provided a focal point for some classic British comedy in Douglas Adams’ *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* novels and Monty Python’s film, *The Meaning of Life*, and the theme continues to the present day with Karl Pilkington’s documentary series, *The Moaning of Life*. But the public interest is not always detached and amused: invitations to ‘explore the meaning of life’ have attracted over one million Britons (out of a total of sixty-five) to attend the Anglican Church’s ‘Alpha Course’.¹ This kind of attention is part of what makes the issue unsettling to some philosophers, who think of their discipline as an essentially technical one, akin to a science or branch of mathematics, and who consequently worry that the question of the meaning of life is not only hopelessly imprecise, but also essentially religious – or at least of ‘spiritual’ intent. But even among the increasing number of contemporary philosophers who do try to address ‘meaning of life’ issues, there remains considerable unease about the world-famous formula which inevitably packages them.

This unease is neatly encapsulated in the following passage from Susan Wolf,

What is so wrong with the question? One answer is that it is extremely obscure, if not downright unintelligible. It is unclear what exactly the question is supposed to be asking. Talk of meaning in other contexts does not offer ready analogies for

¹ Bell 2013.

understanding the phrase ‘the meaning of life.’ When we ask the meaning of a word, for example, we want to know what the word stands for, what it represents. But life is not part of a language, or of any other sort of symbolic system. It is not clear how it could ‘stand for’ anything, nor to whom. We sometimes use ‘meaning’ in nonlinguistic contexts: ‘Those dots mean measles.’ ‘Those footprints mean that someone was here since it rained.’ In these cases, talk of meaning seems to be equivalent to talk of evidence, but the contexts in which such claims are made tend to specify what hypotheses are in question within relatively fixed bounds. To ask what life means without a similarly specified context, leaves us at sea.²

So Wolf’s concern – and we think it is the standard one – is that since meaning is a paradigmatically linguistic notion, and there is no obvious similarity between life and language, it is consequently very odd, and perhaps even nonsensical, to ask about the meaning of life; as opposed to, say, the meaning of a sentence in an unfamiliar language. Wolf goes on to grant that we do, in addition, speak of meaning in the Gricean sense of ‘natural meaning’ – we say that the clouds mean rain, for instance.³ But in such cases, she thinks the context makes it clear what we are talking about, whereas in the case of life, no such context is apparent.

All this is readily disputable. For a start, you might think we have other rich and legitimate notions of meaning apart from linguistic and natural meaning.⁴ But even if we stick with just these two, it does not seem too hard to make sense of the question. Perhaps, for instance, it

² Wolf 2007: 794.

³ Grice 1957.

⁴ Cooper 2003.

invites us to compare human life – with all its comings and goings, strivings, successes and failures – to a linguistic code in need of deciphering. Thus we wonder what the whole thing means: what wider significance we should read into the ‘book of life’. For although we can understand the individual episodes of life within the social settings which contextualise them for us – thereby allowing us to ‘read’ them with ease – it is nevertheless far from clear what theme, if any, can be discerned in life as a whole. We might ask the same question of a particularly convoluted modernist novel, and be similarly open to the possibility that there simply is no overall theme. So on the face of it, the question can readily be made sense of by analogy to linguistic meaning. The same might be said of natural meaning. If I point upwards, and ask what those clouds mean, I will typically be presupposing the context of weather. And similarly, it seems that to ask what life means, in the natural meaning sense, would also be to presuppose a context: one in which the existence and nature of human life indicates something of cosmic significance. Perhaps we know little of this context, or even whether there is one; but then, the person who asks what storm clouds indicate cannot know much about the weather either. A typical inquiry into the meaning of the clouds would indeed presuppose the context of weather, but it would also amount to an inquiry into the nature of that context.

Wolf does not linger over her phraseological reservations, as some philosophers do, since she knows perfectly well what is intended; as she goes on to say, to ask about the meaning of life is to ask ‘why we are here (that is, why we exist at all), with the hope that an answer to this question will also tell us something about what we should be doing with our lives’.⁵ Given that this seems to be common knowledge, then, the fact that philosophers do so often

⁵ Wolf 2007: 794.

question, puzzle over and criticise the stock phrase, strikes us as a curious state of affairs.⁶ It is as if the question had been delivered to the world's philosophers in a magical envelope that fell from the sky, and, knowing beforehand what the question would be about, they were baffled by the choice of words. Since the phrase must rather have been developed by people for reasons, we thought we would look into the question of how this transpired. The answer turned out to be considerably more interesting and philosophically substantive than we were expecting.

The phrase originated in German ('Der Sinn des Lebens') among Fichte and his students during the final few years of the 18th century. Most of the 'Jena Romantics' were Fichte's students at some point: Novalis, the Schlegel brothers (Friedrich and August), Schleiermacher, Tieck, Schelling and Hölderlin. Of these, it seems we owe the phrase specifically to Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel; given that they formed part of an exceptionally close-knit intellectual circle, it might have been coined by either – or indeed, one of the others. Nevertheless, it was Novalis – the philosopher, poet and mystic who died at just 28 – who seems to have been the first to write it down. This was in a manuscript composed between late-1797 and mid-1798, in which he wrote that: 'Only an artist can divine the meaning of life'.⁷ The manuscript was not published, but in 1799, the phrase featured prominently at the end of Schlegel's *Lucinde* – a strange and melodramatic book, oozing with romantic love, which Isaiah Berlin memorably described as 'a pornographic novel of the fourth order'.⁸ The passage reads as follows:

⁶ We shall not name names; we mention Wolf only because she expresses the concern so succinctly and does not proceed to make a meal out of it.

⁷ Novalis 1797-8: 66.

⁸ Berlin 1966b: 114.

Now the soul understands the lament of the nightingale and the smile of the newly born babe, understands the deep significance of the mysterious hieroglyphs on flowers and stars, understands the holy meaning of life as well as the beautiful language of nature. All things speak to the soul and everywhere the soul sees the loving spirit through the delicate veil.⁹

Although *Lucinde* went on to be influential, it was comprehensively slated when it first appeared in print; its public reception was so dire, in fact, that Schleiermacher was moved to publish a book of *Confidential Letters on Schlegel's Lucinde*, in which he set about refuting the most common criticisms.¹⁰ Schleiermacher, who is represented in the novel as the character Antonio, was not its only admirer, however: Fichte absolutely loved it. By September 1799 he was already reading it a third time, and declaring it one of the greatest products of genius he had ever encountered.¹¹

It was during 1799, the year of Fichte's infatuation with *Lucinde*, that he composed one of his most influential works, *The Vocation of Man*. He wrote it in a non-academic style, with the intention of making his ideas more easily accessible; especially in comparison to his foreboding *Science of Knowledge*, which was the founding philosophical text for the Jena Romantics – originally completed in 1794, it remained under revision until 1801 due to Fichte's ongoing dissatisfaction with the presentation.¹² However, although the tumultuous romantic stylings of *The Vocation of Man* certainly do show Fichte making a concerted effort

⁹ Schlegel 1799: 129.

¹⁰ Firchow 1971: 3-4. The slating was to continue: the 'Seducer's Diary' in Kierkegaard's *Either / Or* (1843) is a parody of *Lucinde* (Robinson 2008: 278-9). The meaning of life ('Livets betydning') is a central preoccupation of *Either / Or*.

¹¹ Firchow 1971: 14.

¹² Preuss 1987: ix; Gillespie 1995: 76.

to be engaging and accessible, the philosophy itself is no stroll in the park. So despite his best efforts, readers still complained; Schleiermacher was particularly scathing.¹³

Fichte did not use the phrase within this highly stylised presentation of his conceptually challenging philosophy – or anywhere else, for that matter; although many years down the line, he did come close, in lectures of 1812, by speaking of the meaning of mankind's existence ('Sinn seines [man's] Daseins').¹⁴ Nevertheless, *The Vocation of Man* thematically turns on the connection between meaning and life (Fichte uses 'Bedeutung', the other German word for 'meaning'). Thus he tells us that the sceptical reflections he relates disconcerted him so much that he 'cursed the appearance of day which called me to a life, the truth and meaning of which had become doubtful to me'. He ultimately regains his confidence in the meaning of life through faith in an infinite and benevolent will, and, contrasting the spiritual and sensible domains, says that, 'the former alone gives meaning, purpose, and value to the latter'.¹⁵ As Schlegel wrote, in a similar vein (this time using 'Gehalt' – content), 'Only in relation to the infinite is there meaning and purpose; whatever lacks such a relation is absolutely meaningless and pointless'.¹⁶

'The meaning of life' made its first appearance in English in Thomas Carlyle's novel *Sartor Resartus*; Carlyle was influenced by Schlegel and knew *Lucinde* well.¹⁷ It tells the tale of a fictional German philosopher (whose name, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, means 'Zeus-born devil's dung'), and was intended, in part, as a parody of German idealism. The British always

¹³ Preuss 1987: xii-xiii; Breazeale 2013: 1-2.

¹⁴ Fichte 1812: 23. This is cited in both Gerhardt (1995: 815) and Fehige, Meggle, and Wessels (2000: 21), where in both cases it seems to have been mixed up with Fichte's much better-known 1798 work of the same title.

¹⁵ Fichte 1800: 27, 99.

¹⁶ Schlegel 1800: 241.

¹⁷ Carlyle 1833-4: 137; Vida 1993: 9-22.

found it funny, it seems. Nevertheless, Carlyle was a great admirer of Fichte, saying of him that, ‘so robust an intellect, a soul so calm, so lofty, massive and immovable, has not mingled in philosophical discussion since the time of Luther’.¹⁸ Carlyle had previously written an influential essay on Novalis, which commends German romanticism to the British as a source of much-needed cultural enrichment, and portrays Novalis as the advocate of a ‘clothes philosophy’, according to which ‘Nature is no longer dead, hostile Matter, but the veil and mysterious Garment of the Unseen’.¹⁹ Teufelsdröckh, in *Sartor Resartus*, is the author of a ponderous tome entitled, ‘Clothes, Their Origin and Influence’. Carlyle’s novel exerted great influence on many eminent writers, such as Emerson and Walt Whitman.²⁰

A final element to the historical tale concerns the symbiotic partner of ‘the meaning of life’, namely: ‘nihilism’. Fichte started work on the *Vocation of Man* after moving to Berlin in 1799, which he did at the invitation of Schlegel, who rented him some rooms; Novalis and Schleiermacher were also living there at the time.²¹ Fichte was ready for a move because he had just been dismissed from his Professorship at Jena on the charge of teaching atheism. In the public controversy surrounding this affair, Friedrich Jacobi had published, also in 1799, an open letter to Fichte in which he accuses his idealist philosophy of ‘nihilism’ (and for being ‘the most horrible of horrors’, for that matter.)²² So it seems that within the space of about one year, the familiar terminologies of ‘the meaning of life’ and ‘nihilism’ had both made their debuts: the former courtesy of the original romantics and the latter courtesy of their discontents.

¹⁸ Cited in Andrews 2012: 728.

¹⁹ Cited in Maertz 2004: 351-2.

²⁰ Tarr 2000.

²¹ Preuss 1987: viii; see also Estes 2010.

²² Gillespie 1995: 66.

As far as we are able to ascertain, then, Novalis probably coined the phrase, Schlegel placed it in the public domain with *Lucinde*, Carlyle took it from *Lucinde*, and it thereafter spread far and wide. So much for the question of providence. But why did ‘the meaning of life’ suggest itself within that particular intellectual milieu? Questions about why we are here, what value there is to us being here, and whether our existence serves any purpose, have been asked for at least as long as philosophical questioning has been written down; this present volume should make that plain enough. Moreover, the Jena Romantics clearly had a particular interest in such issues; Schleiermacher completed a book called *Über den Wert des Lebens* (On the Value of Life) in 1792, for instance.²³ But why start to talk about the *meaning* of life? Why did ‘meaning’ suddenly seem like the right word?

The groundwork had been laid long before by the notion of reading the ‘book of life’, which as mooted earlier, remains a natural way to connect the phrase ‘meaning of life’ with the philosophical issues it has come to stand for. This traditional notion has been traced back as far as Bonaventure in 1273 – for if God is the ‘author’ of reality, it makes sense to try to ‘read’ his handicraft – and it is a notion which would have been perfectly familiar to the early romantics; Kant, for instance, had written of how God ‘gives meaning [Sinn] to the letter of his creation’.²⁴ Perhaps the most famous use it has ever been put to, however, is in Macbeth’s nihilist speech about life being, ‘a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing’; and it is noteworthy that an influential translation of Shakespeare into German appeared in 1765 in which this was translated using ‘Sinn’: a life ‘signifying nothing’ was a life ‘without meaning’.²⁵ August Schlegel was an important Shakespearian scholar. A more direct link is to be found in a letter from Goethe to Schiller, dated 9 July, 1796, in which Goethe responds

²³ Gerhardt 1995: 815.

²⁴ Fehige, Meggle and Wessels 2000: 20; Kant cited in Stückrath 2006: 72.

²⁵ Fehige, Meggle and Wessels 2000: 21.

to Schiller's suggestion that he ought to have been more explicit about the philosophical ideas in his novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, by saying that he had intended to say more about 'Leben und Lebenssinn': about life and life's meaning. Then on 22 July, we find Schiller writing to thank Goethe for sending the fish which provided the centrepiece of a meal he had with the Schlegel brothers; they were spending much time together at the time.²⁶

The key to understanding why the meaning / life connection particularly resonated at this time, however, is Fichte's philosophy – which Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel were both deeply immersed in. Novalis considered Fichte 'the inventor of an entirely new way of thinking'; Schlegel considered his philosophy one of the three 'greatest tendencies of the age' (along with the French Revolution and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*); and Isaiah Berlin, who had an enduring fascination with the romantic movement, its roots and consequences, was always clear that Fichte was 'the true father of romanticism'.²⁷ The philosophical issue of the day which most concerned Fichte was that of how to undermine the deterministic materialism which had flourished in the French Enlightenment, alongside the universalist, utopian social agendas of the *philosophes*. This materialism had gained impetus in the modern era both from Spinoza's metaphysics and the successes of the new mathematical sciences; Fichte's deep disquiet with it, on the grounds that it degraded the drama and value of human life, is readily apparent from the outset of *The Vocation of Man*. Fichte's original attraction to Kant's transcendental idealism, in fact, was that he saw it as a sceptical defence against materialism – sceptical, because it said that the things-in-

²⁶ Goethe 1794-7: 209, 220. Between 1795 and 97 Schiller and August Schlegel were working together on a journal, *Die Horen* (Paulin 2016: 69). Given that Goethe was talking about 'Lebenssinn' in 1796, for which he may as well have substituted, 'Der Sinn des Lebens' (and might have in person), perhaps it is he who deserves the credit, rather than Novalis. It was Goethe, incidentally, who secured Fichte's professorship at Jena (Paulin 2016: 71).

²⁷ Novalis 1797-9: 49; Schlegel 1798-1800: 190; Berlin 1983: 58.

themselves, true reality, could not be known. However, Fichte wanted to move beyond this scepticism; like the other great German idealists who developed their ideas from Fichte's initial inspiration, he thought Kant had stopped short at the threshold of metaphysical insight. This motivation inspired Fichte's strikingly original conclusion that true reality was, in a sense, his own will – understood as a limited manifestation of the infinite will. As Novalis put it, 'We live in a colossal novel (writ *large* and *small*)'.²⁸

The solipsistic resonances of this position have not been missed. Bertrand Russell called Fichte's conclusion 'a kind of insanity', and Louis Sass, in his book, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, suggests that it quite literally was.²⁹ Sass, a clinical psychologist, thinks the ideas expressed in Fichte's metaphysical idealism are symptomatic of schizophrenia; or, at least, schizoid personality disorder. Hölderlin, the great poet of the Jena Romantics, did indeed suffer from schizophrenia for the last forty years of his life.³⁰ Certainly, Novalis sounds perfectly mad when he writes of a future time in which, 'the human being will be truly independent of nature, perhaps even in a position to restore lost limbs, to kill himself merely by his will', and when he will 'compel his senses *to produce* for him the shape he demands – and he will be able to live in *his* world in the truest sense'. But Novalis also says that, 'Communal madness ceases to be madness and becomes magic'; and you might think that suitably aided by technology, the quest for human will to acquire the kind of magical powers Novalis envisaged is a defining feature of our own world; this is a point we shall return to at the end.³¹

²⁸ Novalis 1797-9: 135.

²⁹ Sass 1992: 81-2, 302-4, 313-7; Russell 1945: 651.

³⁰ Sass 1992: 24-5.

³¹ Novalis 1797-9: 75, 61.

A radically different, but similarly reductive explanation of Fichte's position, is provided by Berlin. He thought Fichte's metaphysic was ultimately an institutional manifestation of a wider social disquiet felt among Germans at the time, as a result of the economic, cultural, intellectual and military dominance of France over the German-speaking peoples. The Germans felt belittled, and in philosophy and art, they kicked back with romanticism: they poured scorn on the shallow conformity of the French Enlightenment's belief in universally valid values from which we must seek guidance in constructing the perfect society, artwork or scientific understanding. For values, according to the romantics, are not inherited or discovered, but rather created by an act of will; as such, what really matters in life is originality, self-expression, creativity, being authentic to our own autonomously generated visions, and ultimately, freedom. Thus 'the concept of a stable, intelligible structure of reality which calm observers describe, classify, dissect, predict' – a concept embodied by materialism, as well as by the progressive, utopian politics of the *philosophes* – was 'a sham and a delusion, a mere curtain of appearances designed to protect those not sensitive or brave enough to face the truth from the terrifying chaos beneath the false order of bourgeois existence'.³²

A third, and this time, non-reductive kind of explanation for Fichte's radical position – which might even be compatible with the previous two – could be sought in his complex chains of metaphysical reasoning. But however we seek to explain it, Fichte's conclusion that the appearance of an independent nature which is able to exercise restraint over our wills, is itself the result of will, had some extremely far-reaching implications. The implication Jacobi saw early on was 'nihilism'; the word had been used before, but Jacobi's usage was the first to

³² Berlin 1975; quotation from p. 232.

squarely relate to our contemporary notion of nihilism as a position on the meaning of life.³³ Jacobi used this word because in his view, Fichte's metaphysic entailed that *nothing* exists beyond human will – neither nature nor God. Will had been allowed to annihilate everything else. Michael Gillespie has argued that it was this Fichtean idea at the root of romanticism which led to 'the death of God and the deification of man', and that as such, Nietzsche misdiagnosed the roots of nihilism.³⁴ Nihilism resulted not from religion's unsustainable projection of all value into an illusory transcendent world, such that a faltering of belief in higher realities was destined to precipitate a collapse of value itself; but rather from the essentially romantic notion of our ability to will value into reality – a notion which Nietzsche himself endorsed, mistaking it for an antidote to nihilism when it was actually its source. For human will operating in the absence of any non-human restraint on what it should will, is ultimately what nihilism amounts to.

Fichte, however, had *faith*; this is made abundantly clear in *The Vocation of Man*, which was written during the atheism controversy that scarred his life. The book argues that all human understanding is ultimately rooted in the practical and moral imperatives of will; in acts of conscience guided by a faith that our endless individual strivings are in accordance with an infinite and benevolent will. So Fichte did not think he was abandoning human will to the void, since he had faith that human will is an expression of something greater; 'faith', in the sense of a free, ultimately unjustifiable positing of something greater.

³³ Gillespie 1995: 65-6.

³⁴ Gillespie 1995: 99.

In Novalis, this essentially Fichtean notion of will reaching outwards in faith is identified with *love*. We should not seek to discover the design of the world, says Novalis, since ‘we are this design ourselves’ – we are ‘Personified *all-powerful points*’. Love, however, ‘popularises the personality’, making ‘individual things *communicable* and *understandable*’, such that beginning with the will’s self-love (‘Who would not like a philosophy whose germ is a first kiss?’), we can move outwards towards ‘the one true and eternal love’.³⁵ This was the thinking behind the symbol of the blue flower which Novalis bequeathed romanticism through his unfinished novel, *Henry of Ofterdingen*; it was most likely inspired by Schlegel’s fascination with Buddhism, in which the blue lotus, often shown only partially open, symbolises expanding wisdom.³⁶ The novel concerns the eponymous Henry’s quest for the flower he first dreams, then ultimately plucks; a quest to merge dream with reality. The blue flower subsequently came to be the romantics’ symbol of yearning for eternal love; but given that love was ‘the key to the world and to life’ for Novalis, it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to say that it symbolises a yearning for the meaning of life.³⁷

Now until the middle of the nineteenth century, there were two main senses of ‘Sinn’. The first was the psychological meaning of a faculty of awareness or receptivity, such that in English we might speak of a ‘sense of beauty’, for example. The second was linguistic meaning.³⁸ Both naturally suggest the phrase ‘the meaning of life’ in the context of Fichte’s philosophy. In the first, psychological sense, the phrase suggests a receptivity and natural attunement within the practical willing that is constitutive of human life; a receptivity to the greater will of which the individual is but a limited expression. And in the second, it suggests

³⁵ Novalis 1797-9: 58-9.

³⁶ Novalis 1802; Germana 2017: 104-07.

³⁷ Novalis 1797-9: 107.

³⁸ Stückrath 2006: 72 ff.

– equally – the ideas of *reading* the outward appearance of life for the infinite, holy will it ultimately expresses, and of *writing* our own meaning into reality. The former was already well-established, as we have seen. It was the notion of *writing* the book of life which was the distinctively romantic contribution.

The importance Fichte placed in the conjunction of both the individual creativity needed to narrate your own life, and a sensitivity to the wider holy plot in which it has its place, is in evidence in Novalis's statement that 'Only an artist can divine the meaning of life'. We must become creative artists, but with the sensitivity, or receptivity, required to 'divine' the infinite will. Emphasising the need for creativity, Novalis tells us in the same manuscript that 'Life must not be a novel that is given to us, but one that is made by us'.³⁹ And emphasising the need for receptivity, Schlegel writes of the soul coming to understand, 'the deep significance of the mysterious hieroglyphs on flowers and stars ... the holy meaning of life as well as the beautiful language of nature'.

So it seems 'the meaning of life' appealed to the romantics because the phrase suggested the idea of creating our own life stories in accordance with the divine will. The meaning of 'Sinn' later expanded, in the course of the 19th century, to take in the notions of value and purpose, and as the phrase caught on, it became distanced from its idealist origins, to become the conventional place-holder we now use to ask, as Wolf puts it, 'why we are here (that is, why we exist at all), with the hope that an answer to this question will also tell us something about what we should be doing with our lives'.

³⁹ Novalis 1797-9: 66.

But even though the phrase now has a life of its own, there are still lessons to be learnt from its origins. For the humanistic notion that we must make our own meaning in life, which is the secular orthodoxy of our day, is actually not far removed from the original, romantic idea. This is noteworthy, because it is now generally thought that we must make our own meaning *because* there is no meaning of life – or, as it might otherwise be put, that there is no meaning of life *except* what we put into it. Thus the phrase the ‘meaning of life’ is taken to embody a false and essentially religious belief that there is a fixed meaning, out there and waiting to be discovered. This idea was certainly a major inspiration to the original romantic notion, as was its nihilistic counterpart; but the humanistic notion of ‘making your own meaning’ is more germane to the thinking that inspired the phrase. In fact, the humanistic notion is essentially the same as the original romantic one, except without the metaphysics which made sense of the original: for life really could have its own intrinsic meaning if reality itself is a willing of its own meaning. The contemporary humanist notion, by contrast, is typically upheld without any explicit thought given to metaphysics, and against the implicit metaphysical backdrop of materialism. If materialism were true, however, it would be hard to see what ‘making our own meaning’ could possibly amount to, other than producing certain physical patterns that we call ‘meaningful’ – thereby immediately raising the question of who gets to decide which patterns are to be called ‘meaningful’, given the extreme unlikelihood of there being any universal, ahistorical agreement to be found in such matters.

Fichte, at the start of *Science of Knowledge*, says there are two types of human being: those who have raised themselves to consciousness of freedom and those who have not.⁴⁰ This kind of elitism, embodied in Novalis’s first mention of ‘the meaning of life’, lingers on in the contemporary humanistic notion of meaning in life as an incremental good; which tends to

⁴⁰ Fichte 1797: 15.

suggest that ordinary people are all but precluded from living particularly meaningful lives. Moreover, Fichte was a keen advocate of acquiring ever-increasing mastery over nature by means of science and technology. He thought that matter, as a projection of will, should be infinitely malleable by will, and that as such, the resistance it puts up to our autonomously conceived goals needed to be continually broken down, by technological means, in our drive to moral freedom.⁴¹ Again, this idea seems perfectly resonant with the contemporary humanistic notion that human beings must make their own meaning; and it is an idea which is further reinforced by the materialism that typically underlies such humanism. ‘*God wants there to be gods*’, wrote Novalis; but fading concern with what God wants has not stopped humans from wanting exactly the same thing.⁴² Perhaps the original notion of a meaning of life never really left us after all.⁴³

⁴¹ Gillespie 1995: 95-9.

⁴² Novalis 1797-9: 76; see also 126.

⁴³ We would like to thank Martin Müller for his help with some of the German sources.

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