

## The Least Unsatisfactory Answer to the Question 'What is The Meaning of Life?'

Istanbul Lecture  
T. J. Mawson

What answers have *you* heard to the question, 'What is the meaning of life?'

Whatever the diversity in the answers you have heard, I hazard a commonality in your attitude towards these answers. I hazard you believe that none is entirely satisfying.

So, that's my psychological contention about you – you feel dissatisfied with every answer you have been given to the question, 'What is the meaning of life?' Of course, you'll know your individual psychologies better than I do; you then are going to be the best judge of the truth of what I've said in your own individual cases. But, whilst my contention may well be wide of the mark in any individual case, in general, I suggest, it holds true and so I hope that what I have said so far will resonate with most even if not quite all of you; and I hope that even those of you to whom it doesn't apply (should there be any) will agree that there are many to whom it does apply.

\*\*\*

My overarching claim in this lecture is that you are right to feel dissatisfied with every answer that has been given and every answer that can be given to the question 'What is the meaning of life?' No part of my aim in this lecture, you may infer, is to remove that dissatisfaction by giving you a satisfying answer to the question 'What is the meaning of life?' But what I do hope to do is to facilitate you in becoming satisfied with your ongoing dissatisfaction; I want to help you become pleased with yourselves for being displeased; and I want to do this by outlining the structure of what would be the least unsatisfactory answer that could be given to the question, 'What is the meaning of life?' and diagnosing why even it must be unsatisfactory.

Here's what may be for you an analogous situation. Perhaps you, like me, find many computer software applications deeply dissatisfying. But let's suppose you are brought to realize why it is you find a particular one dissatisfying; you are brought to realize that you find it dissatisfying because it is trying to perform a number of different and in-tension functions at once – for example, trying to have easy-to-navigate menus, but also trying to cover every possible action someone might wish to perform using it. Your realizing why you're dissatisfied with this particular application doesn't make it any more satisfying (it is still as frustrating to use as ever), but it may make you satisfied with your ongoing dissatisfaction. And that's what I'm aiming at here. Kant famously closes one of his works by saying of a certain philosophical issue that it is one which we cannot comprehend; yet, he says, we can comprehend its incomprehensibility – we can't understand it, but we can understand why it is we can't understand it. And this – he says - is the most we should expect from a Philosophy that finds itself at the limits of human reason. Similarly, I maintain that whilst we'll never be able to remove our dissatisfaction with answers to the question 'What is the meaning of life?', nevertheless, by coming to realize why it is that we'll never be able to remove it (by coming to realize why *not even God* could

remove all of it), we can become satisfied with our dissatisfaction. And that's the best we should expect when thinking about the meaning of life.

Let's see then how I get on in turning your simple dissatisfaction into satisfied dissatisfaction. When I get to the end of my prepared remarks, you again will be a better judge than me in your individual cases of whether I've succeeded in my aim or not.

\*\*\*

Why then do I think answers to the question 'What is the meaning of life?' are inescapably dissatisfying? There are a number of reasons, ones analyses of which I have articulated at greater length in various writings and of which I shall give a brief overview now.

The most fundamental is the thesis which I have called the 'polyvalence' thesis. This is the thesis that there are several legitimate meanings of 'meaning', and indeed of 'life' in the question 'What is the meaning of life?' and thus when one asks, 'What is the meaning of life?', one asks an assemblage of largely overlapping, but significantly different, questions at once. To list but a few of the concerns which find their home in the question 'What is the meaning of life?':-

In asking the question, one is asking what, if any, consequences there are of an aspect or period of an individual's life, the individual's life as a whole, humanity's life, or life *per se*. (*n.b.* there is ambiguity in the word 'life'.) One is asking what, if any, purposes are served (or exist whilst failing to be served) by life in one or more of these senses. One is asking what significance, if any, in a greater scheme of things life in one or more of these senses has. 'Why are we here?' 'Why am I here?' One is asking what, if any, ideals are instantiated in an aspect or period of a life or life in one or more of the larger senses – 'What, if anything, does it 'stand for'?' One is asking what, within life in one of these senses, is desirable or valuable in itself, what – if anything - makes life worth living, worth going on with, for the individual or group living it. One is asking whether one's life is in some sense emotionally or spiritually satisfying or could become so, or perhaps whether it is or could be the proper object of such an emotion/mood even if it is not yet had/may never be had.

These are just some of the questions that find expression in 'What is the meaning of life?' Having briskly stated merely some of 'the' question's meanings, my polyvalence thesis is not thereby justified in anything but the most impressionistic of ways. But I trust that each of the questions I have just given will have elicited in you thoughts that might gain expression in 'Yes, that *is* in part what I was asking when I asked "What is the meaning of life?"' and thus supported the polyvalence thesis.

The polyvalence thesis gives us then at least a partial explanation of our dissatisfaction with answers to 'the' – 'scare'-quotation marks around the definite article now - question of the meaning of life. If there are indeed so many questions of the meaning of life sheltering under the umbrella of 'the' on-the-surface-unitary question 'What is the meaning of life?', that explains as justified our dissatisfaction with answers to 'the' question. We're dissatisfied because 'the' question is really

many questions, so any single answer to 'it' will be at best only a partial answer. And partial answers are always dissatisfying. As this lecture will itself no doubt exemplify.

\*\*\*

If the polyvalence thesis is right, then the methodology that should suggest itself in investigating 'the' meaning of life is as follows:-

We should disambiguate the various meanings of 'meaning' and 'life' as they figure as we ask 'the' question of life's meaning. We should show how, under the various interpretations of 'the' question we are hence enabled to disaggregate, we are or are not in a position to judge of life that it has meaning or does not have meaning and perhaps the extent to which it has or does not have meaning. And, finally, in those senses of 'the' question where we are in a position to make judgements of the meaning of life, we should make those judgements, give the answers. That would give us a set of answers to the set of questions which constitute 'the' question, 'What is the meaning of life?' It would be an incomplete set of answers – our philosophical limitations are very plausibly great enough to prevent us from completing the task. But still, this list considered as a whole would be the least unsatisfactory answer; we could see it to be such; and that seeing of it as being such would, one might think, make one at least somewhat satisfied with the unsatisfactoriness of it.

'So is *that* it?', one might now ask. 'If we disaggregated the various legitimate meanings of 'the' question of the meaning of life; if we either, and as would be ideal, (a) discovered in turn the answers to each of the questions into which the original was thus broken down or, as we must suspect would be likely for some of these questions, (b) discovered that answers were not available to us (and if (b) then, as would then be as ideal as the non-ideal circumstances allowed, discovered a philosophical explanation of why the answers were not available to us); if we did all that, would we *then* reach a fully 'satisfyingly dissatisfying' list of answers to the questions?'

No. To see why, let us imagine that we have in front of us a summary of our findings as we have made them using the methodology sketched hitherto. We can think of it as laid out in the form of a chart. Down one side is a complete list of the different legitimate meanings that can be given to 'the' question 'What is the meaning of life?' and, alongside each one, we have either (a) an answer or (b) a blank. In the case of a blank, we have either a philosophically satisfying explanation of why we are not in a position to answer 'the' question as so interpreted, one which explains why its answer must remain in this sense mysterious, or another blank. Let us imagine that the chart has been completed and now stands in front of us awaiting our inspection. What in broad terms may we know in advance that we will find as we look at it?

First, whilst in advance of actually having conducted the investigation that has led us to be able to draw up such a chart, we cannot be sure that each of the entries in it will not strike us as equally cogent to our undifferentiated concerns as expressed in our original question, 'What is the meaning of life?', we rightly suppose that they will not be. So, for example, the question, 'Is there any significance to our lives which death does not void?' is, I imagine, more central to our concerns as we ask 'What is the meaning of life?' than is 'Are there some ways of living my life which would as it happens be more subjectively satisfying to me than others?'; though both form a part

of what we are asking about when we ask ‘the’ question, the former is more important amongst our concerns than the latter. We shall hence wish to rank entries in the chart, by reference to how central these interpretations are to our concerns as we express them in asking ‘the’ question. We might think of those questions and answers that are higher up the chart as being the senses of the question which are determinately more central than those lower down.

Secondly, whilst in advance of actually conducting the investigation that has led us to such a chart, we cannot be sure that these answers to ‘the’ question will not be completely separate – metaphysically and conceptually - from one another, we rightly suspect that they will not be. It is hard to believe that it is a mere accident of language that has resulted in all these meanings being carried by what is, on the surface, one question. And, if we were to conduct the investigation, we would see that this suspicion is well grounded. This issue generates more difficulties than the first.

As we unpacked these various meanings, we would if philosophically informed (a big ‘if’ and one to which I’ll return repeatedly in what follows) notice various sorts of relationship between the different senses in which life (in its various senses) may or may not be meaningful (in various senses). These relationships mean that ‘the’ original question cannot be broken down into other questions the answers to which are then left entirely loose and separate from one another, to be ordered in the chart merely by reference to their individual centrality to our original concerns when raising the question of life’s meaning. As we looked down the chart, we would find relationships such as the following: an individual’s life can only have meaning in sense *p* if it also has meaning in sense *q*; but it can only have meaning in sense *q* if humanity’s life in general has meaning in senses *q* and *r*. And so on. These sorts of relationships then might, on reflection, lead us to wish to ‘pull up’ or ‘push down’ some things on such a chart. One would find oneself wanting to say things like, ‘I would have said that meaning in sense *p* was not very central to my concerns, whereas meaning in sense *q* was very central, but now I realize that one’s life having meaning in sense *p* is a necessary condition of its having meaning in sense *q*, I shall need to revisit that issue.’ We may call this the ‘second’ re-ordering, to distinguish it from the first (where we ranked simply by philosophically uninformed consideration of the centrality of the disambiguations to our original concerns as we first raised the question), though of course it is unlikely that these rankings would be done discretely as a two-stage process. And finally (in this context), returning to that big ‘if’:- we cannot be perfectly philosophically informed (at least *ante-mortem*), so some of these relationships will be epistemically obscure to us - we will not know how strong (if existent) the ties are between certain items on the list. How to represent this in our imagination? Perhaps we might imagine looking at the list through glasses with grease spots on the lenses. We could also use the aspect of the analogy that is us looking at the list through grease-spotted glasses for the implication of our philosophical limitations as I commented on them earlier, that we may not be able to answer certain of our component questions or provide philosophically satisfactory accounts of why we cannot answer them, that some entries on our list might be blanks. Our philosophical limitations mean both that we shall not be able to fill-in some answers and that we shall not be able to see how some items on the list are related to others. In short then, there would be a number of features of the list which we could not see clearly – at least *ante-mortem*, due to our philosophical limitations. And that’s dissatisfying to any philosopher, at least *ante-mortem*. Supposing that that ranking

had been accomplished and we saw this list of answers with whatever degree of acuity our *ante-mortem* philosophical resources allowed, we would not be done with reasons for dissatisfaction even yet.

\*\*\*

Some of the relationships which investigation revealed would drive wedges between differing senses in which life in one or more of its senses could be meaningful in one or more of its senses. It is from this point that yet another spring of potential dissatisfaction bubbles up. As we re-ranked the chart by reference to our philosophical discoveries in this area, we would realize that there is no way for life in every sense of the term to be fully meaningful in every sense of the term we might wish it to be, and this is a qualitatively new source of dissatisfaction, in that it is dissatisfaction stemming from one's appreciation of a feature *of life*, not a feature of 'the' question one is asking about 'it'. To become satisfied with one's dissatisfaction with answers to 'the' question of the meaning of life as it emerges from this source then would require a different move from any canvassed heretofore.

The claim that there is this sort of tension between different meanings of life is a substantial one – it could certainly be denied without contradiction. I've asserted it and my case at this stage depends on it, so it would be good were I to have an argument for it. By way of supporting it, I shall offer merely what I take to be an example of the sort of tension which I have in mind. Here then are two sorts of meaning, each of which an individual's life may have to a greater or lesser extent, although – I shall maintain – one only at the expense of the other.

On the one hand, one's life might have the sort of meaning that Jean-Paul Sartre discusses: freed from any other-imposed plan, one is able to exercise ultimate self-creative autonomy over one's life, being responsible to nobody other than oneself for how one lives and what purposes one adopts. That's one sort of meaning – the meaning that one's life can have to the extent that one is, as one might put it, free to choose one's own meaning for it. The historical Sartre was himself hobbled in making progress on this issue by his locating his understanding of this sort of meaning in a landscape desolate of the sorts of objective values that might make it worth having – one's left free to do whatever one wants in a world where nothing is worth doing. But one has no need to follow him into such wastelands; one can instead transplant Sartrean meaning into a more hospitable objectivist but pluralist habitat – several ways of living are objectively valuable and it's meaning-generating to have freedom in choosing between them. So, that's how I'm understanding Sartrean meaning in what follows. Sartrean meaning, so understood, is one sort of meaning one's life may have; or so I contend.

But then, on the other hand, if there's a God, He has a plan for life – for humanity's life; and for our own individual lives too. Quite how fine-grained a plan this is – or we should want it to be – is an issue to which I shall return in a moment; there's room for a spectrum of opinion here. But – painting with a broad brush at this stage – if there is a God, then one's here for something, something not of one's own choosing then, but of God's choosing; and thus one's life potentially has meaning in the sense of fulfilling a purpose in an appropriate larger scheme of things, this plan of God's for one. On Theism, all our lives have some general purposes – to learn to love God and

our fellow man and – ultimately – to join in a perfectly loving communion with one another and to worship God forever; and some of our lives – or actions or periods within our lives - may have some specific purposes too – vocations, we might call them.

Now my point at the moment is that of logical necessity one can only have one of these sorts of meaning at the expense of the other. Not even an all-powerful God could make it true of us that we were entirely unconstrained by any other-imposed purpose and thus able to choose in whatever way we wished what meanings we allocated to our lives and yet *also*, at the same time, make it true of us that we were part of a larger scheme of things, with responsibilities – roles to play in that scheme. Not even God could give us both these meanings to the fullest extent we might reasonably want each of them if we considered them in isolation. And that's in itself somewhat dissatisfying. But it is, I suggest, also a sort of dissatisfaction with which we can become satisfied when we realize that not even God could do anything about it.

\*\*\*

My last point has been that some sorts of meaning in life can only – of logical necessity - be 'bought' at the expense of others and hence not even God could give us the full amount of every sort of meaning. If He exists, He'll just have to have struck a balance on our behalf. Or perhaps – for some things at least - He'll have left it up to us where to strike the balance. If there's not a God, then the balance will have been struck to a large extent by mindless factors beyond our capacity to influence, but these may well have left us with some options about where within the structure they impose other balances may be struck. This series of points might then raise the following questions. If we suppose that there's a God, where would it be reasonable to hope He's fixed the balance, or where would it be reasonable to ask Him to fix it – just how much of a special divine-imposed purpose - a vocation – should we ask God for, if we suppose He exists but hasn't yet fixed all these matters (that is supposing the falsity of meticulous providence)? If we suppose that there's not a God, where would it be reasonable to hope that these mindless factors have fixed the balance; what scope, if any, have they left us for determining within those parameters a secular version of vocations; and how should we use that scope, if it exists? What might we best hope for here?

I want to suggest that *sometimes* there is no determinate answer to these questions due to incommensurability of value and consequent unrankability of action, outcome, and life; and I shall suggest it by way of an example which I hope will be illustrative. The example supposes that there is a God doing the balancing, but the essential features could be carried over to a scenario in which there is not.

So, let us suppose for a moment that there is a God and let us suppose that it was particularly important in the Divine Economy that exactly one of two brothers go and preach to the residents of Nineveh, but that either brother would have fulfilled the purpose equally well. I am, you will infer, drawing this example from a story that finds its place in all the Abrahamic religions. Being from a Christian background, I shall call these brothers 'Jonah' (יונה) and 'Jonas' (a name of my own creation), but, if you are from an Islamic background, you may wish to substitute in your imagination

‘Yunus’ (يونس) and ‘Yunas’ for ‘Jonah’ and ‘Jonas’ as I tell the story. God had to choose one of these brothers for the job and He chose Jonah. After some to-ing and fro-ing and an incident in the belly of a big fish, Jonah fulfilled God’s purpose, Nineveh repented; and the story had a happy ending.

My main point now is that God’s choosing Jonah was in a sense bad news for Jonah and in a sense good news for him. The bad news first. Jonah had to work whilst his brother, Jonas, was free to go on holiday to a place they’d often talked about as ‘the perfect getaway location’, Tarshish. Jonah – who may well have quite-permissibly committed himself to a vision of the good life involving holidaying in Tarshish - found that, of a sudden, more of his essence was being made prior to his existence, as Sartre would have put it. That wasn’t where he’d have struck the balance. He had less scope for permissible self-creative autonomy as a result of this unwelcome intrusion of a vocation. So, God’s choosing Jonah was in a sense bad news – meaning-wise - for Jonah. But in another sense God’s choice was bad news – meaning-wise - for Jonas. Jonas didn’t get to be a prophet; to use his next few months to fulfil knowingly a purpose in some appropriate larger scheme of things, to save a whole city from destruction. Jonas just spent these months on a beach and has since been forgotten about entirely. Jonah’s story lives forever. So, each of Jonah and Jonas has lost out, in various senses of meaning, by God’s making the decision that he has – striking the balance in two different places for the two different brothers. And also, each has gained by His doing so.

My contention is that it is plausible that neither life was meaning-wise determinately better than, the same as, or worse than the other. If that’s not already plausible, I suggest it could be made so by tweaks to the thought experiment; if, for example, you think that Jonah’s life is clearly more overall meaningful than Jonas’s, just throw a number of other in-themselves-meaning-generating aspects into the story and onto Jonas’s side of the scales.

The claim which I’m venturing now then is that there might not always be a determinate way of weighting the various senses of meaning which might need to be traded-off against one another and thus there might not always be a determinate way of ranking possible lives for others or for oneself. There seems to be incommensurability and unrankability. That is, in any case, what I hope the thought experiment has established. And of course I hope it’s established that the same issue arises if there’s not a God, but only at the outermost limits mindless factors fixing the possibilities and then, closer in, things such as an earthly employer, a spouse, children, political or ethical demands, and so on potentially narrowing them yet further.

So, by way of summing up this sub-conclusion, here is a question to which I suggest the answer is ‘No’.

If an individual’s life may have more meaning in a particular sense,  $x$ , only at the expense of its having less meaning in another sense,  $y$ , is there *always* a way in which they may be ranked and it be determined that, say, a life meaningful in manner  $x$  is, despite that, less ‘deeply’, as we may put it, meaningful than one meaningful in manner  $y$ , *ceteris paribus*? (Deepness here is being used as a measure of the meaning’s intrinsic desirability *qua* meaning.)

Despite what I've just said about how it's not always the case that there is such a way, using the Jonah and Jonas example to illustrate the point (I hope), nevertheless, for at least some values of  $x$  and  $y$ , it seems to me we *do* have reason to suppose that one *is* in fact deeper than the other; we have reason to believe that some lives, which are only partially meaningful in one sense, *are* more deeply meaningful than others, which in turn are fully meaningful in other, perfectly legitimate, but – our reflective intuitions tell us – shallower senses. And so I suggest we *can* rank *some* possible lives on the grounds of their meaningfulness. We think (and are right to think) that the charity worker who knowingly brings minimal but non-negligible good into the world before dying and being forgotten about leads a more deeply meaningful life than the infamous mass-murderer whose crimes are later made subject of much popular culture, even though the killer's life had more meaning in some senses of meaning - significant causal consequence, for example – than the charity worker's life.

So, for some life choices we shall not have sufficient reason to prefer one over the other on grounds of meaningfulness, but for others we shall.

\*\*\*

Let us suppose for a moment in our imagination that all we have discussed hitherto has been accomplished. And let's imagine-away our epistemic limitations with regards to the subject-matter of Philosophy. We take off those grease-spotted spectacles and look at metaethics and metaphysics with a *sub specie aeternitatis* acuity. There are no blanks on our list of answers to 'the' question and we are able finally to re-order our findings according to deepness as defined. The list is now ordered solely according to the principle of deepness, as we've allowed our earlier judgements of centrality to our pre-reflective concerns to be in some cases misguided – we earlier didn't care about the right things, or care enough about them; the effects of that are now corrected. Given incommensurability and unrankability, the list will be only partially ordered – there will be fuzziness in that sense in certain areas, but that there will be fuzziness in that sense will be a result of the incommensurability and unrankability, not of our glasses making look fuzzy that which in reality is not. As just discussed, if we return to look at the chart now, we may put an issue which faces us as our noticing that meaning in certain senses can only be 'bought' at the expense of meaning in other senses and thus we may wish to think of 'trade-offs' between differing types of meaning. The precise way in which some of these trade-offs have been made for us will have been determined in advance of any choices we may make; for example, the trade-off between Sartrean meaning and meaning in the sense of fulfilling a purpose in an appropriate larger scheme of things will already have been fixed at the cosmic scale by whether or not there is a God (or something more or less functionally equivalent in the relevant respects, a polytheistic reality, say) and how fine-grained His (or their) purposes for us are. If there is no God (or gods), then, at the outer limits, things will have been fixed by more mindless factors. But, either way, others may not have been fixed. Situations may arise then which raise in one's mind the *practical* question of how one would be best advised to trade-off meaning in one sense for meaning in another. The chart we are now imagining ourselves in possession of will of course be ranked with the deeper senses of meaning higher than the shallower ones, but it would be implausible to say that it was worth sacrificing *any* amount of a shallower sort of meaning in order to achieve *any* increase in a deeper one, however slight that increase might be. So, in addition to deepness, we shall wish

to consider what we might call *overall* meaningfulness and consider how best to construct this notion out of the materials to hand. One natural thought to have when considering this would be to wonder if it might be done mathematically, with some formula describing a function that appropriately weights the different sorts of meaning, giving heavier weightings to the deeper sorts, and thus combines them into a quantity which we then do best (by the standards of making our lives as overall meaningful as possible) to try to maximize. But, on reflection, one will wish to resist this natural thought for the following two reasons.

Firstly, and as already observed in the Jonah and Jonas case, there is incommensurability of value and unrankability, which will make such a solution impossible. Secondly, some sorts of meaning seem to require the eschewing of a strategy of maximization altogether. There is a parallel to be drawn here with the Paradox of Hedonism; those who tried in each of their choices to maximize their lives' overall meaningfulness would end up leading less overall meaningful lives than at least some of those who directly aimed at something else.

This being the case, it is at least possible (and I would contend plausible) that the notion of overall meaningfulness even for one who has all epistemic barriers removed - seeing all relevant metaethics and metaphysics *sub specie aeternitatis* as we have put it and seeing clearly the chart we have been imagining - would not yield a determinate answer for at least some 'trade off' issues due to incommensurability and, even supposing commensurability, it wouldn't lead to determinate guidance at a decision-procedural level in all cases for Paradox-of-Hedonism-type reasons. This inescapable lack of sufficient-reason-rationality for at least some of our life choices is, I submit, likely to prove an additional source of dissatisfaction for us, but, again, I submit, the sort of dissatisfaction which it may generate is one about which one may become satisfied once it's inescapability has been diagnosed. That, at any rate, is my hope. And so, having diagnosed it, I move on.

\*\*\*

By this stage, one is likely to be at least somewhat discouraged. Rather exhaustedly, one might ask, 'Is *that*, at last, it? If we disambiguated the question; if we got our metaethics, metaphysics, and in general all relevant philosophical facts straight (of course, this is impossible for creatures of our epistemic abilities, at least *ante-mortem*); if we ranked our chart by reference to how, on ultimately perspicacious philosophical investigation, *deep* these various senses of meaning were revealed to us to be (appreciating as we did so that, due to incommensurability/unrankability issues, the final ranking could only ever be partial, fuzzy as I put it); if we looked at all the trade-offs internal to issues of life's meaning; and if we worked out, as determinately as the issues allowed, formulae with which to maximize meaningfulness for those trade-offs where the notion of maximization was appropriate (whilst appreciating that maximization would not be the right notion to employ in all cases for incommensurability reasons and for Paradox-of-Hedonism-type reasons at the decision-procedural level, when trying to achieve a life of what we may by then have called 'overall meaningfulness'); if we did *all* that, would we *then* be finished with reasons for dissatisfaction?'

No. We would not be finished with reasons for dissatisfaction even then. But we would, finally, have found the least unsatisfactory answer to ‘the’ question ‘What is the meaning of life?’, and thus the dissatisfaction which we would continue to feel would not now take as its proper object the answer which we had before of us; it would instead refocus itself on ‘the’ question.

\*\*\*

The final reason for dissatisfaction is that, once all the above work had been done (not that, as we have seen, it can be done - this side of the grave at least), we would realize that ‘the’ question of the meaning of life is not as significant a question as we had hoped it to be. There are many things in life that we rightly value alongside and in some circumstances above its meaningfulness. We have already seen the issue of trade-offs arising internal to considerations of meaningfulness (trading meaning in one sense for meaning in another), but this is a trade-off of a qualitatively new kind. It may be better for us, not just if we trade-off some meaning in one sense in order to achieve greater meaning in a deeper sense, but if we do not lead all-things-considered the most overall meaningful lives that we can lead. A relatively overall meaningful life may well be worse for a person than a relatively overall meaningless one. (Plausibly Van Gogh’s life was worse for him than that led by whoever happens to be the richest playboy currently at a gaming table in Monte Carlo as I am speaking, but Van Gogh’s life was more meaningful than is this playboy’s.)

The question of the meaning of life is an important question, but it is not the only important question; it may be in some sense an ultimate question, but it is not the only ultimate question in the sense that the answer to it dictates the answers to all other questions of importance. The meaning of life is not to know the meaning of life and thus even someone who did know the meaning of life better than another might well end up leading a less meaningful life than that other. What is perhaps more surprising, but is also, I suggest, the case, is that a person who knew the meaning of life better than another might end up rationally *choosing* to lead a less overall meaningful than that other. This is because the truly wise try first and foremost not to lead meaningful lives, but to lead good lives and meaningfulness is but a proper part of that. But to establish that and to talk about the dissatisfactions attendant upon trying to lead a good life would require much more time than we have available to us today.

So, I found you dissatisfied. I leave you dissatisfied.

Whether or not I have made good on my initial promise to facilitate you in becoming satisfied with your dissatisfaction – of that, you must be the judge.

17.04.26. 15.24