

What is it to ask about life's meaning?

Each moment of life has meaning both as fulfillment of (earlier) moments that have gone before and as preparation for (later) moments that are to come after. But, then, the meaning of each moment of life is life itself, life having no meaning or purpose beyond life, even though life *now* has meaning or purpose for life later on, and *my* life (or yours) has meaning or purpose for the life of others.

To ask about life's meaning, then, is to ask about purposes or plans relating moments of life to other such moments: What should the present moment do for future moments? And what should I (or you) do for others?

But what do people mean when they say that life is meaningless? Are they denying that we can make plans or form purposes for the future and at least sometimes or partially carry them out? Hardly. But perhaps they are thinking of death, of our mortality. When we are dead, will it matter what purposes or plans we have had, or whether or not we have carried them out? It will not matter to us, nor, for all we know, will it matter to our posterity, all of whom are likewise destined to die.

But if death and impermanence thus raise a question about the meaningfulness of life, the same is true of natural forces that seem quite unrelated to the ideal of justice that is so important to our <sup>moral and</sup> political life and according to which people are to be dealt with in accordance with their deserts, their past actions, good or bad. Because nature seems quite indifferent to this ideal, human beings have looked for some ulterior, hidden justice in what happens to individuals, in their fortunes and misfortunes—whence Asiatic ideas of karma and Western ideas of providence as well as of final retribution in heaven or hell. When faith in the ulterior, hidden justice expressed by such ideas collapses, there are apt to be complaints about the meaninglessness of life.

Thus there are at least two questions about life's meaning: (1) Is there any purpose or plan that will not be finally frustrated by death and the impermanence of all things human? and (2) Is there, in reality, apart from

human beings, any regard for the difference between good and bad, wise and foolish, behavior, when long run consequences are taken into account?

There is also a third question: Why are human beings such a mixture of good and bad, wise and foolish, etc.? Why can't we all be sensible and good? And why are so many of our purposes and plans frustrated?

To answer these questions, let it be said, first, that there is not—and could not be—any such ulterior, hidden justice as some persons take to be a necessary condition of the possibility of a meaningful life. What happens to us is—and must be—partly a matter of blind chance. Nor is this in any way a defect in the universe or in God. For chance is inseparable from freedom, and without freedom, and therefore without chance, there would be no life and nothing good at all. Nevertheless, there is an aspect of providence in reality, in that there is one cosmically creative and cosmically beneficent power, even though it is not all-determining or in the usual sense "omnipotent." That there are probabilities and real, if only statistical, laws is providential. The chance aspect of existence, though real, is limited, and the limits are set by divine power and wisdom, which, though not all-determining, is all-influencing.

As for the question raised by the wickedness and folly of human beings, etc., it is sufficiently answered by adverting to the inherent difficulties in being human, given that we are animals so loosely controlled by instinct.

Finally, the question raised by death and the impermanence of all human affairs is answered by adverting to a mysterious unity of all things, thanks to which life is not meaningless in spite of death and impermanence. The best way to understand this mystery is by the concept of God as the eminent form of life or of living, and thus as satisfying the two theological requirements of (1) likeness to life as we otherwise know it, and (2) superiority to all other living things, actual or possible. Thus the one purpose or plan that death cannot frustrate is the purpose or plan of serving God's life by serving all other lives.