

On my analysis, to live as a human being at all is to live by faith, in the sense that one lives by what I call "a basic confidence in the meaning of life." This is the confidence that there is a meaning to human life prior to and independent of such meaning as we human beings ourselves may give it or take it to have. That to be human is in some way to give life meaning or to take it to have such seems as certain, for instance, as that one cannot be human as each of us is without believing certain things or taking them to be true. But when we say that something is true, we do not mean simply that we believe it or take it to be true, but that, prior to and independent of our believing it or taking it to be true, it is worthy of our belief. In much the same way, when we trust that life has a meaning, as I believe each of us does and must, if only implicitly, we do not mean simply that we give <sup>life</sup> it a certain meaning or take it to have such, but that, prior to and independent of what any of us takes it to mean, it has a meaning that is worthy of our confidence.

Because each of us lives a human life only insofar as we trust in its meaning, one of our vital questions as human beings is the existential question concerning this meaning. *That* life has a meaning is, indeed, beyond question, since any questioning, just like anything else we could possibly think, say, or do, necessarily presupposes our confidence that it does. But *what* this meaning is is the object of a genuine question. In fact, of all our vital questions, our existential question about the meaning of life—not *whether* it has meaning, but *what* its meaning is—is the most vital. There is nothing surprising, then, about the prominence of this question and of the various attempts to answer it throughout human history. Clearly, if anything may be said to have a secure place in "the great conversation" in which it is our nature as human beings to engage, it is our discussion with one another about the meaning of life.

The primary means through which this discussion has for the most part been pursued are the various religions, insofar as they have allowed for what we have more recently come to speak of as "interreligious dialogue." But in addition to all of the traditional religions, axial as well as archaic, the revisionary religions of modern secularity, and even modern secularism, have now assumed their places in the conversation. I speak of secular and even secularistic religions because, on my use of the term, "religion" is

properly defined purely functionally as the primary form of culture, or "cultural system," through which human beings in a given society explicitly ask and answer the existential question about the meaning of life. Assuming, then, that, in some societies, at any rate, one or another of the various modern humanisms, evolutionary or revolutionary, does, in fact, function in this way for at least some human beings, one has reason to speak of secular and even secularistic religions as providing the primary means for the ongoing discussion of the meaning of life. Also included in the conversation, of course, are all the theologies and philosophies whereby the claims of the various religions as well as of all of the so-called secular forms of culture have been more or less critically validated. But theologies and philosophies are unlike religions in being secondary forms of culture and, therefore, are not primary but only secondary means for asking and answering the existential question.

Broad as it is, however, the conversation can hardly be extended so broadly as to include the kind of "hard secularism" more commonly referred to as "nihilism." Although hard secularists typically contradict their own completely negative outlook by at least implying that there is some way, after all, in which a human being ought to live, they exclude themselves from the ongoing discussion about the meaning of life by explicitly denying that there is any such meaning and that some way of existing humanly is authentic. Because of these sweeping denials, hard secularists deny the validity of the whole discussion and thus of any and all answers to the existential question, whether religious, theological, or philosophical, and whether traditional or revisionary.

One could reason, of course, that hard secularists also implicitly include themselves in the great conversation insofar as they at least imply that there is some way, after all, in which a human being ought to live and attempt to support their position by rational argument. But allowing such reasoning ought not to obscure that discussion of the existential question, like the great conversation generally, has its limits.

The same is true, in my judgment, of being an American, in the sense in which this is understood in the founding documents of the Republic and

in such authoritative interpretations of these documents as Abraham Lincoln's. Although the Constitution disestablishes all religions, in the sense of all answers to the existential question, it may at the same time be said to establish this question itself, together with all that it necessarily presupposes about human nature and authenticity. Alternatively, one may say that what the Constitution establishes is neither religions nor the existential question to which religions are all answers, but, rather, the way of reason as the only way in which an American as such can live. Thus, whatever questions Americans need to ask and answer in order to govern themselves, including the existential question, must be asked and answered in a rational way, which is to say, in such a way as to accept no answers as valid unless and until they are critically validated by common human experience and reason.

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