Introduction: What Makes Life Worth Living?

Identity and Self-Expression

The question "What makes life worth living?" assumes that life is or can be worth living. Perhaps this is an unwarranted assumption. The question "Is life worth living?" comes first. The question is not "Is life lived?" or even "Do people seek to live out their lives?" Nor is it "Do people care about going on—possibly for as long as possible—sometimes even longer than is sensible?" These are easy questions.

We live our lives in the sense that we spend time not dead. And by and large people try to go on, to survive. But this proves nothing about worth. Mosquitoes spend time not dead, and they too will do what it takes to live as long as they can. Is it worth anything to live out a mosquito's life? Objectively, the answer is probably yes. It contributes ecologically to the planet that mosquitoes live lives. Does it matter to the individual mosquito? Does it matter subjectively? This is not a question that should worry us since mosquitoes don't worry about it. They can't. But we have minds, and we can ask the question "Is life worth living?" and if it is, "What, or what sorts of things make it so?" And the answers matter to us.

For us, the objective fact that we live out our lives—and even the fact that we have passion to do so (perhaps the result of biological imperatives)—proves nothing. One can do worthless things. I do them all the time. One can even have passion for worthless things. Perhaps a life is one extended worthless thing.

Why entertain this depressing thought? The answer is that it forces reflection on the question "Is life worth living, and if it is, what makes it
so?” Why is reflection on this question worthwhile? I'm not sure how to
answer. It may well be that a life can be worth living even for an unreflect-
itive agent, unreflective generally, or unreflective enough to be befuddled
by this two-part question. Asking the question may even move a life that is
worth living to fear and trembling, to sickness unto death, to the edge of
despair; and not because the life is not worth living. It may be that the
person to whom the question is addressed can't see her way to the answer
that her life in fact reveals. She cannot articulate value or worth and
wrongly thinks value and worth are not there.

On the other side, the question may move us to consider what matters,
how it matters, and why it matters. Matters might, if we are lucky, add
up to value, to worth.

The question “Is life worth living and if it is, what makes it so?” is hard
enough. It is connected to a more basic and equally bewildering question.
“What does it mean to live a life?” Again, there is a trivial sense in which we
know the answer: To live a life is to spend time not dead. Some people
choose death quite deliberately while they are alive. Their suicide is partly
constitutive of their life. Perhaps the question, intended as it is existen-
tially, can be put this way: Do we live our lives? Do we in any sense make
ourselves and control our characters and destinies, or are we just puppets,
live puppets—whose lives are lived, but not lived or directed by us—the
organisms who live these very lives by being, as it were, alive? The question
is about living in some stronger sense than simply being alive, and it
involves issues of self and agency.

Some philosophers distinguish between things that have some prop-
erty—for example, value—intrinsically and things that have the property
derivatively. Money is worthless until we make it worth something. Happiness
is said to have worth in and of itself. Suppose this is true. Would it
follow that a life with many happy times in it was worth living? Not neces-
arily. Properties of parts do not confer the property on the whole. My
parts are small, I am large. Happy times, even many of them, might not
constitute a worthwhile life. But I am skeptical in any case that a life’s
meaning could be intrinsic—could come from just being alive or from
something that has value, no matter what. Life’s meaning must derive
from things other than just being alive. Happiness is probably one of the
things that confers worth, but it is not enough. After all, one might pervers-
ely find happiness in evil things. Perhaps happiness is not necessary even.
One might live a life largely devoid of happiness but still live a good and
worthwhile life—even as seen from the subjective point of view.

Suppose, however, that happiness is normally a desired component of a
life worth living, what else is needed? Having an identity and expressing it.
This is the answer that strikes me as most promising: self and self-
expression. The idea is romantic, Western, Nietzschean even. But it is also non-romantic, non-Western, Buddhist even. To make myself a "not-self," to work at creating in myself a mode to transcend caring about mundane things is a form of self-expression, as is suicide. But normally in the West and in the East, having a self and expressing it is not a matter of doing things alone, or doing them only your way, or of being Zarathustra-like. Many, probably most, worthwhile forms of self-expression, require others in crucial ways. Even the decision of the cloistered Christian monk or nun or the ascetic Buddhist arahant to remove himself or herself from certain dependencies on other people requires that there be social practices in place—certain economies of desire, for example—that are thought to be worth transcending. Sometimes stopping caring about money, fame, and sex are thought to be worthwhile because these things take time and energy away from more worthwhile human things: love, friendship, peace of mind, for example. Other times, the attempt to shift one's orientation from mundane desire is not motivated by the desire to connect with other, more worthwhile, human goods, but with the transcendent—God, or something of that sort.

Wherever one looks, or so I claim, humans seek, and sometimes find worth in possessing an identity and expressing it. This is why I think having a self and expressing it reign when it comes to answering the question of what makes life worth living. Of course, self and self-expression are not sufficient for living well, but they are necessary. If something—if anything, that is—is necessary for a life worth living, it is this: that I develop an identity and that I express it. The idea awaits refinement since, of course, not any identity or form of expressing it will do. But you get the drift.

It is important that I not be understood as promoting a particular conception of self or identity, especially not some controversial individualistic one. Philosophers from Aristotle to the present, as well as anthropologists, have taught us that in every culture, becoming a self capable of expressing anything of worth requires a community, as does self-expression. Furthermore, what an individual is like and what he or she seeks to express may be things of largely communal or largely personal value. This will be a matter of great contingency, as will the degree to which a particular individual develops powers of self-authorship and occupies a world in which she can use these powers in creative ways (luck matters—indeed, it matters far too much). What will not be contingent, I am claiming, is that there will be individual selves and that if they find meaning and worth, it will be through self-expression. This, I claim, is true of Nietzscheans, Libertarians, Buddhists, and Benedictines. It is as true of Mother Teresa as it is of Madonna.
The Death of the Subject

I'll be alone when I die. Or better: Dying is something I will do alone. Or better: My passing from being alive to being dead is something that will happen to me alone. This is true even if loved ones are there for the event. When I die, I'll be nothing. But for the time being, I am something rather than nothing.²

One thing that would undermine the idea that this subject of experience will die, as well as the ideas about the importance of self and self-expression would be if there were no subjects, no agents. If there were no subjects there would be no selves, and if my self was nothing it could hardly die, and self-expression would be illusory. The very thought I just had, "that for the time being I am something rather than nothing," might be considered to be some sort of mistake. Indeed, there is talk in the air of the "death of the subject." Why think there are no subjects? There are three standard sorts of arguments that one sees in the postmodern literature.

First, there is a metaphysical argument that promotes the idea that I am merely a location at which and through which, like all other locations, certain things happen. The universe just is a complex causal network and what is "me" is just a location, one among an uncountable number of other locations—locations that sub specie aeternitatis just nudge each other from place to place.

Second, there is a sociological argument according to which I am just a bunch of roles melded together in the here and now, as differentiated and complex and situation-specific as the various social niches that I occupy require me to be. Homo sapiens learns how to be a "self," but a self is no more than a name like "the university," which names nothing in particular, but only a disparate collection that seems to possess, but invariably lacks, any more than nominal unity.

Third, there are developmental, life span sorts of arguments according to which "I" am a series of self-stages. There is no I, no ego, no self, that is me over time. "I"—now in raised-eyebrow quotes to indicate that grammar is causing trouble—have a name. It stays the same. But my body changes, my beliefs, my desires, my projects, and commitments, my interpersonal relations change radically over the course of life. Owen Flanagan is the name, but changing is my game. The illusion of identity or sameness is just that: an illusion. Its cause is that all these changes happen incrementally. But just as it does not follow from the fact that 2 is not far from 1, nor 23 from 22, nor 6,000,000 from 5,900,000, that 6,000,000 is not far from 1, so too it does not follow that Owen Flanagan at 45 is remotely close to Owen Flanagan at 1 or even at 20.

Strategically, and ever so briefly, here is how I recommend dealing with all three arguments. First, concede the last argument. There are subjects,
they change, some more than others, across a variety of dimensions over the course of a life. The argument proves nothing about the death of the subject, only that subjects are not identical over time. But those philosophers are right who have taught us that self-sameness is not what matters. Continuity and connectedness matter, not strict identity. Second, there is something to the social-role argument. Before and after we gain powers of self-authorship we express ourselves in ways particular situations call upon us to be. But even supposing that I am nothing more than some package of socially responsive roles, I am still something rather than nothing. So the argument hardly establishes the death of the subject; it simply makes the subject a social construction all the way down. But houses are completely constructed, and they exist. Being constructed hardly makes something into nothing. Usually it is the other way round.

Third, regarding the metaphysical argument: It is based upon two tricks at once: one, it evokes the specter of determinism to undermine the idea that there are metaphysically free subjects; two, it paints a picture in which “I” am caused by things, but never cause anything. Even if there are no metaphysically autonomous agents, there still might be agents. A finch may not be metaphysically free, but it expresses its needs and satisfies them when it finds and eats from my bird feeder. Furthermore, even under the deterministic picture, each thing that is an effect is in turn a cause, a something-that-makes-other-things-happen. So the existence of agents, in the sense of systems with beliefs and desires and complex motivational economies, who do things is hardly undermined by the argument. Furthermore, even if nothing matters sub specie aeternitatis, the fact remains that evolution has resulted in the existence of organisms that have temporally extended lives and are self-organizing and self-moving in certain well-understood ways.

Death-of-subject arguments, even if interpreted generously, do not show that there are no subjects of experience nor that there are no agents. Depending on the type of argument, they deflate our conception(s) of subjects and agents, but they hardly destroy these conceptions—indeed they presuppose invariably that subjects and agents exist.

The arguments just rehearsed are heard among poststructuralists and postmodernists who are enchanted with human contingency and disenchanted with the idea that a person might be essentially constituted by an immutable soul or transcendental ego. I share the enchantment and disenchantment, respectively, but resist the conclusion. There is another quarter from which worries about self and meaning and worth continue to be heard—the ferment here is caused by the attempt to mix the scientific image of the cosmos and of biological evolution with more traditional pictures of persons. I’ll explain a bit.
Why Me?

Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there anything at all? And why in particular am I among the things that there are? Here are two answers:

1. An omniscient, omnipotent, all-good, and all-loving God decided in his infinite wisdom that the universe and its creatures should exist. He created humans in his own image. He endows us with immortal souls, souls that will join him and all the other saved persons if we use our free will to follow the right path, to worship him, and follow his moral commandments.

2. It is an inexplicable and irrational feature of things that there is something rather than nothing, that there is anything at all, and that there are particular individuals. But once there was something purely natural up and running, the aftermath of the Big Bang perhaps, then we can give some sketchy accounts of how life emerged on earth, and how natural selection worked to produce *Homo sapiens*, a new kind of animal.

One feature the stories have in common is that they both start by positing an originary force that seems to answer, but does not answer the original question. They both say that there just always was something rather than nothing. To which the original question can then be posed: Why anything at all? And why this, a God who always was, in the first instance, or some set of physical facts, a “singularity” from which the Big Bang emerged, in the second? Both stories stop further questioning and are found satisfying by different groups of people. But this cannot be due to their satisfactoriness as answers. Their appeal must lie elsewhere.

Transcendent Meaning

One reasonable suspect for where the appeal of the first story lies is in the fact that it provides the possibility that life has transcendent meaning—an omniscient God shows the way, I follow, and I achieve personal immortality. His plan must be the right one; it must make sense and ground a good and meaningful life. He is God, after all.

The second story generates a host of worries. If there is no God, if I am just an animal subject to the same finite fate—becoming nothing when I die as I was before my birth—then of what significance am I? And what basis could there be for thinking that one way of living is better than another? And if my time is limited, why should anything else matter than that I get pleasure, as much and as quickly as I can get it? And why, as I
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push the thought of my utter contingency to the limit, why think that I am in fact anything at all, rather than some sort of chimera or ephemera, at most a location from which self-expressive and self-generative forces seemingly emerge, but which in fact is simply, like all else, a place where certain things come together in a manner that creates the illusion that I am an agent, a self.

The second image, the scientific image, is thought by many to be deflationary and nihilistic, destroying at once the very idea that I am an agent as I conceive of myself, that my life matters, and that being ethical matters in this scheme where nothing matters. There is Dostoevsky’s worry that if there is no God then everything is permitted. How could anything be better than anything else if there is no transcendent ground for meaning? But then there is Nietzsche’s question: Why should the fact that a certain plan is God’s plan assure its meaningfulness? Even if it does assure that the plan is meaningful for God, what makes it meaningful for me? And what assures that the plan is good, or that it grounds meaning, just because it is God’s plan. If God always was and always shall be, isn’t it the case that he just came with this plan. How could something (two things: God and his plan) so inexplicable, reassure me that the meaning of my life is secure, that it is in good hands, that it is not simply a derivative surd—an offshoot of the originary surd, a God who always was and just had this plan. How is this different from the second picture according to which I am nature’s surd?

If it seems like the originary force of all things including this life lies in something personal and spiritual rather than material, then the next philosophical move is to motivate skepticism that God’s creation, and God himself are good. I am to be reassured because I was made in his image. Why?

William James quotes this poem by James Thomson in his essay “Is Life Worth Living?” The poem makes the worry vivid:

Who is most wretched in this dolorous place?
I think myself; yet I would rather be
My miserable self than He, than He
Who formed such creatures to his own disgrace.

The vilest thing must be less vile than Thou
From whom it had its being, God and Lord!
Creator of all woe and sin! abhorred,
Malignant and implacable! I vow

That not for all Thy power furled and unfurled,
For all the temples to Thy glory built,
Would I assume the ignominious guilt
Of having made such men in such a world.
My Way

It is hard to see why or how either story, the theological one or the naturalistic one, could ground meaning and worth in something intrinsic, timeless, and itself comprehensible. The scientific image seems no worse off at any rate than the theological one.

Perhaps looking for the ground of meaning and worth in origins is the wrong place to be looking. Still, the theological story contains an interesting suggestion. It claims that God needs us as much as we need him for the plan to work. This leads Robert Nozick to ask, “[I]f it were possible for man and God to shore up each other’s meaningfulness in this fashion, why could not two people do this for each other as well?”

Or, to put the point more generally: If meaning and worth come with relations of certain sorts, perhaps in the first instance to other selves, but possibly also to nature, to work, to oneself, then perhaps we are wisest to look for grounds of meaning and worth in this life—in relations we can have during this life. Does science say that this life doesn’t exist, or that it doesn’t matter? I don’t see how, any more than I see that “death-of-the-subject” arguments in the humanities succeed.

The claim is that it matters a lot that I do what I want to do. And it matters at least as much that what I do is something worth doing, something of value. These things of value need not be momentously important—ordinary things matter, eating a tasty meal, throwing a stick for the dog to fetch, shooting a basketball. These are things worth doing. If life was comprised only of such ordinary short-term goods, we might feel that something was missing. Why? Because we think that a person ought to have some long-term projects and plans and these ought to be about things that matter, things that are worth caring about, worth a bit more than the things just mentioned. Love and friendship and work, creative work, are among these things.

What I do and think reflect on me, on who I am. What I think and do also help constitute who I am. Expressing myself, making and modifying myself, and respecting myself all matter, and they are interconnected. Questions of meaning only arise because I am a thinking thing and, in particular, because I am a conscious thinking thing. My conscious thinking abilities stretch to knowing such things as that I will someday be dead. Being dead means once again being nothing at all. For creatures who thrive on self-expression, no longer being able first-personally to express anything thwarts a basic desire. Here is where leaving parts of ourselves in the world, by having changed that world in directions that matter, that are positive, lessens the threat of my demise. This is a kind of naturalistic transcendence, a way each of us, if we are lucky, can leave good-making
traces beyond the time between our birth and death. To believe this sort of transcendence is possible is, I guess, to have a kind of religion. It involves believing that there are selves, that we can in self-expression make a difference, and if we use our truth detectors and good detectors well, that difference might be positive, a contribution to the cosmos.

Notes

1. In this passage, Richard Rorty expresses the sort of picture I want to endorse: "[E]very human life is the working out of a sophisticated idiosyncratic fantasy, and a reminder that no such working out gets completed before death interrupts. It cannot get completed because there is nothing to complete, there is only a web of relations to be rewoven, a web which time lengthens every day.

   But if we avoid Nietzsche’s inverted Platonism—his suggestion that a life of self-creation can be as complete and as autonomous as Plato thought a life of contemplation might be—then we shall be content to think of any human life as the always incomplete, yet sometimes heroic, reweaving of such a web. We shall see the conscious need of the strong poet to demonstrate that he is not a copy or replica as merely a special form of an unconscious need everyone has: the need to come to terms with the blind impress which chance has given him, to make a self for himself by redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own” (Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 42-43).

2. Robert Nozick, like me, has a relational rather than intrinsic view of how life’s meaning must accrue, and he captures nicely the deep psychological urge to avoid becoming totally nothing. “Death wipes you out. Dead, you are no longer around—around here at any rate—and if there is nowhere else where you’ll be (heaven, hell, with the white light) then all that will be left of you is your effects, leavings, traces. People do seem to think it important to continue to be around somehow. The root notion seems to be this one: it shouldn’t ever be as if you had never existed at all. A significant life leaves its mark on the world. A significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world—it leaves traces” (Philosophical Explanations [Cambridge: Harvard University Press], 1979, 582).
