The body of this work ends, strictly speaking, with the conclusion of the previous chapter. These last few pages are intended as an attempt to draw together some of the strands that ran through this book and to present some of the reflections and impressions that have emerged during the years I have worked on this project. Because this epilogue may go beyond the data at several points, it may be incapable of having the same intellectual rigor that I tried to sustain through the rest of the work. Yet that risk is perhaps compensated for by the desirability of concluding with some broad, integrative overview. I shall focus on five main themes that deal with the basic issues of life's meaning. These are the human desire for meaningfulness, the way that meaning operates on life, the negotiation between individual and culture to create meanings of life, the modern transformation of selfhood in response to the value gap, and the relation between time and life's meaning.

Why Do People Crave Meaning?

Why do people need meaning? The desire for a comprehensive meaning in life begins with the simple appetite for meaning, which is very strong in human beings. The impulse to talk, label, analyze, describe, and so forth is very deeply rooted, appearing even in small children soon after they learn to talk.

The first and crudest reason people want to use meaning is probably the simple need for stimulation. Human brains are complex and restless. As my friend Frederick T. Rhodewalt, now a famous psychologist, once observed, "My whole life is sort of one big avoidance response to boredom." Language offers endless variety and is perhaps the only medium that can satisfy the complexity of the human brain. The organism is simply reluctant and perhaps unable to let its huge brain sit idle for long periods of time.

Beyond a mere desire for stimulation, there are pragmatic reasons to want meaning. Meaning enables people to predict and control the environment, including the social environment of relationships with other people. It also enables people to predict and control themselves. Meaning is a tool for adapta-

tion, for controlling the world, for self-regulation, and for belongingness. Indeed, it is the best all-purpose tool on the planet.

But the desire for meaning clearly goes beyond pragmatic exigencies. Meaning is imposed everywhere, even if there is no practical advantage. This book has presented many instances of the relentless imposition of meaning. For example, unexplained suffering is the worst kind, and people seem driven to impose meaning on their problems, to make sense of them, even if there is nothing to be done about them. Another example is the construction of illusions of control; people seek to believe that they are in control, even if they are not, and of course illusions of control by definition confer none of the practical advantages of real control. Even simple curiosity may reflect this pattern, for human curiosity nearly always seeks to find out things and formulate them in meaningful terms. More generally, the myths of completeness and consistency reflect the fundamental human tendency to expect everything to make sense.

Meaning thus pervades human experience—and in the process transforms it. Sex, for example, can in principle be engaged in entirely without meaning. Between rabbits or mice, sex presumably requires no abstract analyses, symbols, or commitments. But human sexuality becomes saturated with meaning. Expectations, guilt, promises, insinuations, comparisons, tallies, communication, associations and fetishes, doctrines regarding chastity, reports and norms, and other meanings have utterly transformed sexuality. Indeed, Michel Foucault's (1980) panoramic survey of the philosophical history of sex concluded that the major theme is the transformation of sex into something to talk about. What our species has done, during the long march from apelike society to modern life, is to take sex out of the realm of simple nature and load it up with the baggage of meanings.

We have seen that when meaning is missing from some aspect of experience, people become uncomfortable or upset and usually try to bring meaning in. In this book we encountered several meaning-vacuums, such as one phase in coping with trauma, or one phase during major life change. In general, people try to fill the meaning-vacuum as quickly as possible. The absence of meaning is not a stable condition.[1]

One might well describe the human being as addicted to meaning. The hallmarks of addiction are withdrawal and escalating tolerance (Weil, 1972), and both are apparent with meaning. When people lose meaning, they respond very negatively, and their distress is analogous to the withdrawal reactions that occur under addiction. People feel bad, become ill, complain, and try to find a substitute for the lost meaning. As for tolerance, well, it is readily apparent that people are generally ready to gain new meanings, and that the appetite tends to come back larger each time it is satiated. As we saw in the chapter on life change, the addition of new meaning to an individual's life is typically accompanied by a period of rapture. More broadly, people enjoy learning, and the more they learn, the more they seem to want to learn. In this, too, the usage of meaning resembles addiction.

Often people invoke religion when discussing the need for meaning in life. Religion, however, is a consequence rather than a cause of the need for meaning. The need for meaning itself calls for explanation in secular terms. Whether religious doctrines are objectively true or not is beside the point, although the widespread appeal to faith indicates that most religions go far beyond the facts. Even the most ardent believer of any given religion will likely agree that the views of *other* religions are mistaken. In my view, the profundity and importance of religion are not the supernatural occurrences it claims but the human capacity for belief in them. The fact that people can conceptualize things far beyond what they can see—and can then come to believe these ideas to the point that they feel upset or lost when these ideas are threatened—is extraordinary. It goes far beyond what can be seen in the rest of nature. Religion as a human phenomenon, not as a supernatural manifestation, is the truly extraordinary part, and it grows from the human need for meaning.

Thus, it is fair to say that people have a strong desire for meaning. They seek to impose meaning on everything, they like finding new meaning, and they dislike losing meaning. To apply this desire for meaning specifically to the meaning of life raises the issue of precisely what sorts of meaning people want.

In describing the human uses of meaning, I proposed four basic needs for meaning. These constitute an effective way of understanding the meanings of life that people have. It is clear that the major sources of meaning in people's lives offer purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth, and it is also clear that when people are unable to satisfy any of those needs they become distressed. People look to work, love, family, religion, and other sources to provide those meanings. When people go through a major life change, the adjustment phase often involves creating a new life structure that will satisfy those needs. Although satisfying the needs for meaning does not guarantee happiness, it is apparent that people who can satisfy their four needs for meaning are generally happier than people who cannot. Suffering, misfortune, and threats (including the threat of death), meanwhile, stimulate and increase the needs for meaning.

Those four needs are my distillation of what the search for meaning in life is typically all about. Some people may develop other particular yearnings, but I suspect that even they probably find ways to satisfy these four needs. Understanding how an individual satisfies the needs for meaning is a potentially powerful way to understand what that person's life is like as seen from the inside. That is, to know how people construe the purpose and value of their actions, and to know how they sustain efficacy and self-worth, is to know what their lives mean to them.

How Meaning Operates

Having seen the pervasiveness of the human needs for meaning, I turn now to reexamine what meaning is. What difference does meaning make in life? How

does meaning shape life? Chapter Two provided an overview of the features of meaning, and many of them proved influential at various points. Probably the two most important, however, were connection and stability.

Connection reveals the very essence of meaning, which is to link things—objects, events, possibilities, other ideas—together. Meaning influences events by enabling people to see them as interrelated and hence to respond differently to them. The crystallization of discontent was perhaps the clearest example of this. A person's life may contain exactly the same amount of problems, costs, and unpleasant facts after this crystallization as before it. What changes, however, is that these negatives are seen as one large pattern rather than a collection of isolated exceptions that are unrelated to each other. Connecting them, through meaning, is a crucial step in major life change. As long as these facts can be kept unconnected, the person is much less likely to initiate a major change.

Stability, the other key feature of meaning, reveals one of its basic purposes. Life is full of change but yearns for stability, and meaning is a powerful tool for imposing stable, predictable, controllable order on the world. From marriage to identity to life after death, this book has provided multiple examples of false permanence, in which people's concepts overestimate the stability of actual phenomena. In the final analysis, it appears, the relentless process of change is stressful and unpleasant to the human being, and meaning is humanity's best weapon for combating change.

What do connection and stability have to do with meanings of life? Just as people are reluctant to see their lives as lacking in meaning, so are they also reluctant to see their lives as a kaleidoscope or collage of many various, unconnected, changing meanings. To impose a meaning on life it is necessary to link all the events and parts of a life together. As I have argued, this is almost never done to perfection, but people do manage to find major themes or stories that do a reasonably effective job of imposing a unifying meaning on large parts of life.

To succeed, however, at making sense out of a life, one typically has to link the life to a broader, stable context. (Thus, both connection and stability are implicated.) A human life today typically lasts around seventy years, and so a suitable context may have to span longer than a century. Ultimately, the most popular sources of meaning in life are contexts that span very broad time frames. These are political ideals and movements, artistic evolution, religious truths, and so forth. Many individuals likewise look to the temporally extended family, including past and especially future generations, to give their lives meaning. The permanence of these contexts is probably false too, but clearly they do outlast the individual life span and hence are able to give a single life meaning.

The Mutual Bluff

The appeal to broader contexts to provide meaning to individual lives is an important point of contact between the individual and the broader society and

culture. It is often the culture that tells the individual which broad context will provide meaning to his or her life, or in some cases the culture offers several options and the individual chooses among them. In any case, the individual depends on the culture to provide the possibilities for meaning.

A meaning of life is thus a result of negotiation between the individual and the culture. This negotiation inevitably reflects the interests of both.

The interests of culture are complex and do not necessarily accord with those of the individual. The culture and social system may see the individual as a small, replaceable part of the larger network, one which must be induced to act in ways that society needs. As sociologist George McCall once remarked, "Identity is something that society invents to get people to do what it wants them to do," and the same could be said of many of the other constructs that furnish meaning to individual lives.

For that reason, many of the chapters in this book had to begin by explaining the particular problem for society and only then proceeded to examine how individual lives come to have meaning. It is important to appreciate how much—and *how*—the meaning of each life depends on sociocultural context. This is not to imply that the meaning of someone's life is an accident, for the sociocultural forces and influences are far from accidental. Rather, a society needs to solve certain problems in order to exist, and one way of solving them is to induce individuals to interpret their experiences in certain ways. This may be easier to recognize in other cultures than in one's own, simply because one tends to take so many more things for granted in one's own culture. Communism provided one rather clear and extreme illustration. By inducing people to see their lives as exercises in production and reproduction for the good of the common people, communism sought to get them to perform the tasks that would enable the society to survive and prosper.

Although a meaning of life may thus be the outcome of a negotiation between an individual and society, it is important to realize that neither the average individual nor the society is dealing entirely in good faith. Illusion, distortion, and ambiguity characterize many of the factors that enter into life's meanings. This is perhaps why people may be reluctant to examine their meanings of life carefully or discuss them frankly with others. The fallacies and illusions on which a life's meaning is based might be revealed if one looked at it closely.

Individuals have many reasons for building illusion into their meanings of life. As we have seen, illusion is apparently an important part of happiness, and indeed much of the difficulty of coping with trauma or misfortune is attributable to the need to repair one's optimistic assumptions about self and world that are violated when something terrible happens. Even more important, people construct meanings of life to satisfy the four needs for meaning, and illusions and distortions are apparent in relation to each of these needs. People draw meaning from goals that may never be reached and they strive for fulfillment states that are envisioned in exaggerated, unrealistic terms. They rationalize their actions and use various strategies of selective reasoning to reconcile their actions with

their values. They cultivate illusions of control and efficacy. And they use various distortions to inflate their self-esteem, such as placing elsewhere the blame for their failures, or exaggerating in their minds the number of other people to whom they are superior.

People do keep one another from letting these strivings get too far out of hand. They punish each other for excess, such as by labeling someone a conceited hypocrite. But those punishments are reserved for people who construct illusions beyond the normal, acceptable margin. If one looks closely and uses strict, uncharitable criteria, the majority of people can be seen as conceited hypocrites, for the majority of people do pad their lives with small, comfortable illusions.

Another important misperception on the part of individuals concerns the *interchangeability* of sources of meaning. When people lose a source of meaning in life, they typically experience some distress, and then they replace that source. If it is a job or spouse or religious commitment that fails to work out, the person will often find a new one. Yet people do not typically recognize this interchangeability. This is pervasive and quite important for understanding how people make sense of their lives. The problem of life's meaning is a problem of finding a way to meet the four needs for meaning. Any of a variety of sources might satisfy these needs. But a person who embraces one source is likely to think that no other one would do. People think the compelling, ineluctable part of a meaning of life is in the answers they find, but my analysis suggests that it is rather the questions (i.e., the four needs for meaning) that are inevitable. Answers come and go, but the questions remain the same.

Society, meanwhile, is largely indifferent to many of these individual motives. For example, individuals may want to be superior to others, but for society as a whole this desire for superiority simply breeds a problem (because no one wants to be at the bottom of the pyramid). Society needs people to obey laws, produce goods and services, and reproduce. For this to succeed, people must accept the basic legitimacy and viability of the system as a whole, and they must also embrace the system of rewards and incentives that the society offers. If they are reluctant, society must often make these look better than they are. In that case, society, too, must encourage illusion and misperception in how it represents the meanings of life.

Again, this process may be easier to recognize in other cultures than in one's own. During the 1930s, when Russian society was trying to make the Communist system succeed despite persistent shortages, failures, and breakdowns, the willingness of the people to trust the system was jeopardized. The purges can be seen in part as a response to this threat. In the first place, they fixed the blame for specific problems on specific individuals, thereby implying that the system itself deserved to be trusted. In the second place, the purges accelerated the pace of rewards for those who were not (yet) purged. At each stage in the purge, a group of leaders and officials was removed, and so their subordinates received promotions, and those beneath them were promoted into those vacated

slots, and so forth. It is hard for an individual to question a system that has just expressed so much confidence in him that he has been promoted beyond his expectations (Conquest, 1990; also Arendt, 1951). Of course, when he was arrested, he might begin to see the fallacy in those promises, but by then he has been removed from the society and so his views have ceased to be important. Once again, it is not necessary that everyone accept the views society promotes, only that a sufficient number accept them. Encouraging illusion enables society to accomplish this.

The exaggerated promises of our own society are perhaps less obvious, but they exist nonetheless. American society, for example, has a strong fundamental belief in individual merit and appropriate recognition. People believe that they will enjoy the rewards to which they are entitled based on their talent, effort, and other virtues. In fact, however, the meritocracy is highly imperfect. In the first place, career success or failure can often depend on developments like marketplace trends and corporate profits, which are far beyond the individual's control (e.g., Jackall, 1988). Indeed, one study of fired executives found that, contrary to American ideology, most of them lost their jobs through corporate mergers and reshufflings and other developments that had almost no bearing on the individual's performance (Newman, 1988). In the second place, success in American society is basically a slot system, and so an individual's merit may or may not win rewards, depending on what slots are available when the individual reaches his or her peak. In other words, the number of successful positions is largely fixed. There are only so many Top 10 hits, prime-time television shows, Nobel prizes, Fortune 500 chairmanships, Olympic gold medals, Senate seats, NFL coaching jobs, and so forth. Lastly, of course, there are criteria other than ability that make a great deal of difference, including loyalty to particular bosses, conformity to political views, and even race and gender. Merit does make a difference, but the individual who believes society's promise of being a fair, just, and thoroughgoing meritocracy has swallowed a dose of illusion.

Thus, individuals and society cooperate in helping people sustain self-deception and illusion in their meanings of life. I contrasted the parenthood paradox with the work ethic to suggest that this mutuality is vital. People are not gullible enough to accept just any illusion that the culture offers. Only when individual and culture work together under favorable conditions can large-scale illusions be sustained.

The myth of fulfillment is an important point of contact between the illusory constructions of the individual and those of society. As we have seen, people want to believe that there exists a subjective state that is perfect. They want to believe that they could feel good all the time and live happily ever after. They are willing to put up with a great deal of deprivation, delayed gratification, and even outright suffering in order to reach this state, but it is very important to them to believe that it exists.

Meanwhile, society encourages them in this belief. As long as society can present fulfillment as one of the rewards it controls, people will do what society

wants to try to earn it. Fulfillment, in other words, is one of the incentives society uses to influence and control the actions of individual people, just as it uses money and housing and status. The turmoil of the 1960s was especially troubling to American society because people were questioning the very ideals of fulfillment that society had advocated. After a generation of parents struggled to pave the way for their children to reach the comfortable, middle-class good life, they were shocked to find that many of their children did not even seem to want to follow this path, spurning even that very vision of the good life (see O'Neill, 1971). In the long run, of course, society did manage to win people back to its ideals, but the scare was deeply felt.

Yet fulfillment is a myth, at least here on earth. Indeed, the shift from emphasis on fulfillment in heaven to fulfillment here on earth has not only failed to resolve the myth of fulfillment—it has aggravated it instead. Modern myths of fulfillment here on earth are much more fragile than ideals of fulfillment in heaven, because they can be put to the test and exposed. There is no such thing as permanently good emotion. Passionate love fades after a few months or years. Religious ecstasy subsides and may or may not come back. Career achievement fails to bring contentment or to solve one's other troubles. Fame and riches bring new problems, social disruptions, and other difficulties.

If fulfillment does not exist, then it is no longer quite viable to think of life as a journey toward a particular destination. One may have goals and may even expect idealized good feelings to accompany reaching those goals, but if one reaches them, the journey is not over—unless, like Sir Galahad seeing the Holy Grail, one arranges to die immediately afterward. Otherwise, banality returns before long.

When I was a student, I spent a year studying abroad, and there I had the unsettling experience of watching American Westerns dubbed with German soundtracks. A movie that was immensely successful that year was *Once Upon a Time in the West*, and so to practice my German I saw it twice. In the story, the protagonist has devoted over twenty years to finding the men who brutally killed his father and obtaining his own brutal revenge. When the last of them has been killed, at the end of the movie, the protagonist picks up his hat and says to the woman who has befriended him, "*Ich muss gehen*" ("I must go"). I could never understand that. His entire mission in life is now completed—where could he possibly have to go? If he had indeed been single-mindedly pursuing this project since childhood, there ought to have been nothing left for him to do.

But the fulfillments that occur in life outside of movies probably do leave one enmeshed in further obligations. There are always more things to do, even after a major success, experience, or satisfaction. Fulfillment is never complete. To live one's life focused always on future events, anticipating that fulfillment will arrive and be permanent, is perhaps just as wrongheaded as to live it without any care for the future.

All of this is not to deny that partial or temporary fulfillment states exist. People can indeed reach goals and feel wonderful. If people could be content

with that, then there would be no problem. It is only the exaggerated expectations and idealized notions of fulfillment, based on false permanence, that are illusory. Yet individuals cling to the belief in supreme fulfillment, and the culture encourages them to cling.

The situation in some ways resembles what happens when people discuss the cash value of their lives with their insurance agent. Both the agent and the individual want to agree that the value of the person's life is high, even though their reasons are quite different. In the same way, individual and society cooperate for different reasons in sustaining the myth of fulfillment and other illusions. Individuals find that illusion enhances the meaningfulness of their lives, and the culture benefits because it increases the appeal of the incentives it uses to influence people.

Is it possible, then, to construct a meaning of life for oneself that is free from self-deception and illusion? Perhaps. But the modern era has made that especially difficult, because of the increased emphasis on self. If your life revolves around cultivating the value of selfhood, you have a particularly strong need for self-deception. Modern Western individuals, for all our pretensions to science and objectivity, may be more prone than others to weaving illusion into the fabric of our lives. This brings us to the next issue: the glorification of selfhood.

The Value Gap and the Glorification of Selfhood

The relationship of the individual to society brings up another of the central themes of this work, namely the increased role of self-identity in the meaning of modern lives. To summarize the argument, the movement toward modern society critically weakened several of the culture's most powerful value bases. The result was the value gap—a severe shortage of firm bases for distinguishing right from wrong, for justifying and legitimizing actions, and for guiding individual moral choices. The value gap is the most serious problem of life's meaning that characterizes modern society, because modern life offers abundant ways of satisfying all the needs for meaning except value.[2] Our culture has responded to the value gap in several ways, but perhaps the most important of these is the transformation of selfhood into a major value base.

The value gap and the resulting new emphasis on selfhood reverberate through all the spheres of life's meaning in modern society. In work, for example, the effects have been profound. The work ethic was an initial attempt to cope with the value gap by elevating work itself into a basic, autonomous value, but it failed. Faced with a potential crisis in motivating people to work, the culture discovered that linking work to the self could provide all the motivation that was needed, and more. The bureaucratic career has become the dominant image of work in 20th-century Western culture, whether set in a government office, a large corporation, or another institution. The career men-

tality is largely indifferent to the actual activities of work, as long as they are moderately interesting and not too unpleasant, immoral, or risky. The main motivation is the dream of success achieved by climbing the ladder or pyramid of status. Reaching the top in one's career is the modern ideal of fulfillment through work, and the payoff goes beyond money to include a validation of the self as highly competent, attractive, and good. In order to achieve this glorification of self, people will work very hard for long years at things they really care rather little about or even have vaguely negative attitudes about. The nonsmoker who works for a cigarette company, for example, may exert himself to enormous degrees, not because he feels it is his mission to increase the amount of tobacco that people consume, but because he can improve his reputation, win awards, and gain promotions.

Likewise, love and family have been affected by the value gap and the glorification of selfhood. The Victorians elevated family life to the status of a nearly sacred value, and passionate love likewise came to be seen as one of the culture's strongest values (and models of fulfillment). These values have flourished up to the present, unlike the work ethic, and they provide important bulwarks against the value gap: Someone with strong family ties and powerful feelings of love is probably far less likely to suffer the feelings of confusion, alienation, or uncertainty that result from the lack of firm values.

Yet love and family have had to make peace with the new value placed on the self. As indicated in the chapter on love and family, the trend in recent decades has been for selfhood values to gain the upper hand in conflicts with love and family values. The belief that it is best to remain loyal to a marriage even if it stifles individual growth and freedom has weakened considerably. Many would now say that you owe it to yourself to leave an oppressive or stultifying marriage.

As I said in that chapter, none of this poses any serious threat to society, despite the turbulence and minor upheavals of divorce—but if people begin to apply the same logic to parenting, the social system could have severe problems. For this reason, it may be vitally important to our society to sustain the illusion that parenthood increases happiness and brings fulfillment. The sanctity of motherhood (and, increasingly, fatherhood) is likely to remain off limits to criticism, simply because society needs that illusion. Voluntary childlessness can be tolerated as long as no drastic population shortage arises; but to have parents abandon their children in order to pursue personal growth and fulfillment, as they now abandon marriages, would be catastrophic.

The danger of parents divorcing their children is only one indicator of the dark side of the deification of selfhood. Like most major developments, the transformation of selfhood has trade-offs that confer both benefits and costs. The increased emphasis on self increases the distress associated with personal shortcomings. If the self is not glamorous or successful, this is more than a personal setback—it is an existential crisis. The pressure to sustain self-esteem,

to make a good impression, to be respected and admired as glamorous and brilliant, has taken on a new urgency. The burden of self, in other words, has increased greatly, and the stressful side effects (see Baumeister, 1991) of this burden have increased as well.

For now, the culture has managed to survive the value gap by elevating the self into a basic value, but the individual self has one very severe drawback in that role. That drawback is revealed in the problem of death. The glorification of selfhood has transformed the meaning of death into something far more threatening, as compared with the meaning of death in bygone eras. Because death brings the self to an end, people today find themselves living by a value that is very limited in time. Their actions, strivings, and sacrifices are justified by the new value placed on self, but this is a value that abruptly ceases to exist when they die. In other words, many of one's actions will abruptly lose their value and justification upon one's death.

The career mentality in modern work reveals this problem dramatically. A career is the pursuit of status, rewards, and recognition to glorify the self. Once the person dies, however, all those years of exertion become largely meaningless. It ceases to matter whether the individual received that last promotion or not. The person is gone too, of course, and so the loss of value will not bother him or her. But people do occasionally reflect on death while they are still alive, and the thought of death will be far more disturbing if death entails the nullification of the value of one's strivings. The thought of death therefore threatens the very meaning of people's lives, by undermining much of the value of what they do. One implication is that as people grow old, their values are likely to shift as selfhood begins to seem inadequate and unsatisfactory as a value base.

The social response has been to conceal death so that people do not have to face these disturbing implications, or at least not until they have served their function in society and retired. As a result, it seems doubtful that people fully grasp the newly threatening nature of death and its implications for the meaning of their lives. It is deeply disturbing, but it is something that people find they can avoid for most of their lives. Whether avoidance will be a satisfactory solution in the long run is an empirical question. In the meantime, some sensitive and thoughtful individuals will find that the thought of death brings a class of anxieties that past eras did not have to face.

A last implication concerns the direction of future developments. Currently, the individual self receives a great deal of positive attention, and people use the self as a way of justifying their actions and guiding their moral choices. My impression is that this is deeply embedded in modern Western culture and is likely to remain that way. If it should change and the self should lose its powerful status as a value base, however, then the value gap would resurface. The modern emphasis on self is a response to a fundamental problem of life's meaning—namely a shortage of values. The solution cannot be removed without exposing the problem that elicited it.

When Will the Definitive Answer Be Known?

The question "What is the meaning of life?" is heard today most often in jokes. In this age of mass media, if there were a correct answer that could be summarized in a single sentence, then it would be common knowledge, and so obviously there is no such answer. The resurgence of the question, even in jest, reflects simply our nostalgic clinging to the myth of higher meaning: People feel that there ought to be an answer, and preferably a clear, definite, and reliable one.

The myth of higher meaning causes people to look in the wrong place for such definite answers. The progress of science over the past centuries has accustomed people to believing that answers to difficult questions are either now available or are likely to be discovered in the future. In this light, people may hope that the meaning of life may be established, just as they trust that a cure for cancer will eventually be found. The possibility that the problem will remain unsolvable forever is regarded as unthinkable.

But perhaps such certainty about life's meaning should be found in the past rather than in the future. To find a society where no one has doubts about life's meaning, it may be necessary to look back to small, homogeneous societies with fixed social structures, consensual values, and unanimous religious views. Certainty seems much more possible in such a society than in the future versions of our own society, which looks to be ethnically and ideologically diverse, awash in information, exposed to multiple and mutually critical perspectives, and flexible enough to tolerate considerable idiosyncracy.

And so, if someone asks when we shall know the definitive answer to the question of life's meaning, the answer must be that our ancestors may have known it once, but we are no longer idealistic and gullible enough to believe it. A firm belief in a definitive meaning of life is a form of innocence that may be irrevocably lost, at least at the level of the society as a whole. To be sure, individuals still begin their lives as innocent, gullible, and potentially idealistic creatures, and so here and there individuals may continue to find certainty regarding life's meaning. But the culture as a whole will not.

There is no need to regard that conclusion as depressing or pessimistic. It is not necessary for society as a whole to agree on life's meaning. Rather, lives need to make sense individually, and this is entirely possible, even today. Indeed, even if one were to do away with the illusions, distortions, myths, and other misperceptions that pervade our meanings of life, there is still ample meaning available to make sense of life. Many of our illusions are expendable, being the products of cultural influence and historical accident. For example, I do not see why we must conceptualize fulfillment states as being permanent. Occasional, transient experiences of fulfillment seem to offer plenty to live for.

Half a century ago, Lou Gehrig stood up in Yankee Stadium and said he regarded himself on that day as the luckiest person alive. He was retiring from the baseball team because of an incurable disease that was about to turn him, slowly, into a helpless cripple and then kill him. Such a cruel and ironic fate seemed to resemble torture, yet he extolled his luck.

Perhaps he meant simply that he had been lucky to have enjoyed his years on the team, which had been extraordinarily successful. Yet he insisted that he felt lucky on that particular day. He was decidedly not saying that his luck was in the past. He was referring, I think, to the extraordinary quality of his life experiences and the intense fulfillment they had given him. He had reached the pinnacle of success and been able to enjoy the rewards, as he was doing even at that minute. The prospect of death simply called his attention to how much he had had. True, there might have been more if he had not fallen ill, but all things considered, his life had been a great blessing. Despite the prospect of early death, he was very lucky simply to have been alive—but then, aren't we all? Transient fulfillment was enough.

If there is one depressing note, it is that our culture's attitude toward the meaning of life has led it to ignore Gehrig's message. The prospect of death does indeed make people reflect on ultimate issues of life's meaning, but the response has been to try to improve the quantity of life rather than the quality. Society's first priority appears to be to find things that can enable people to live longer rather than better (e.g., Kearl, 1989). True, there are efforts to improve the opportunities for disadvantaged groups and to alleviate certain forms of suffering. But for the average, mainstream citizen, the goal is to find ways of living longer.

People would generally choose to live longer if they could. But to sacrifice desired, pleasant, or profound experiences early in life in order to add years at the end is at least a debatable preference. Society's current discussions of food, drugs, sex, exercise, tobacco, and others all seem to assume that people would prefer to sacrifice current satisfactions in order to gain the possibility of some extra years. While no one would advocate seeking to shorten life as a goal in itself, one ought at least to consider issues of the quality of experiences that are sacrificed. Should people really automatically give up tobacco, ice cream, whiskey, bacon, or other things they love, simply in the hope of extending their life by a year or two at age 85? The year that is added on may well involve being somewhat blind and deaf, perhaps confined to a hospital bed or in frequent pain. There may be a pattern of diminishing returns as we continue to add years to the end of life by renouncing experiences from the earlier parts. If a change is needed, it is to remedy this imbalance. Our overriding concern should be to improve the quality of the life experience throughout its duration, rather than trying to tack years on to the end.

When you die, or even when death approaches, it matters little how many minutes you lived. If anything matters, it is the subjective experience you have had, and that means quality rather than quantity. That was the point of the Holy Grail myth: A short life, full of risk and adventure, and offering the possibility of the supreme conscious experience, was preferable to the long, safe, and dull life.

A point like this was made a couple of thousand years earlier by another man who was just as familiar as Gehrig with life, death, and change. He had been born into a royal family but abandoned his sheltered, pleasant life for an arduous pursuit of wisdom and understanding. He made his point by telling the following story (Reps, 1957). While crossing a field, a man encountered a tiger, who chased him to the edge of a cliff. The man climbed down over the edge of the cliff on a vine that grew there, but the vine ended abruptly with a long way down yet to go. And he saw that even if he did manage to get to the bottom, another tiger waited there to devour him. Looking up, he saw that the first tiger was sniffing around, waiting for him to return. To make matters worse, a pair of mice began gnawing away at the vine. At this point he saw a strawberry growing wild from the side of the cliff. Holding on to the vine with one hand, he reached out with the other, plucked the strawberry, and ate it. How very sweet it tasted!

The search for a single meaning of all life, or even of one life, is likely to remain incomplete. Yet even if meaning must disappoint us in this respect, it is still vital in what it brings to life. Without the gift of meaning we could never fully appreciate the gift of life. For that reason, if for no other, people should be encouraged to continue to ponder life's meanings. It is the question, not the answer, that is the real miracle. The quest for meaning alone enables us to be fully human.

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Notes

1. Of course, there are some things that may never have been thought about, and such absences of meaning are not problematic. The problems are associated with what might be considered holes in the web of meaning—an absence of meaning where one might expect meaning.

2. Fulfillment is a problem too, of course, but it is a less severe problem because of the abundance of goals, and it is less characteristic of modern society because fulfillment has often been a problem at other times and places.

❖ Appendices ❖