Unraveling Life's Riddle

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By

Tami Yaguri

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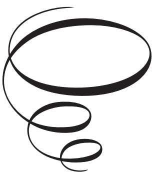

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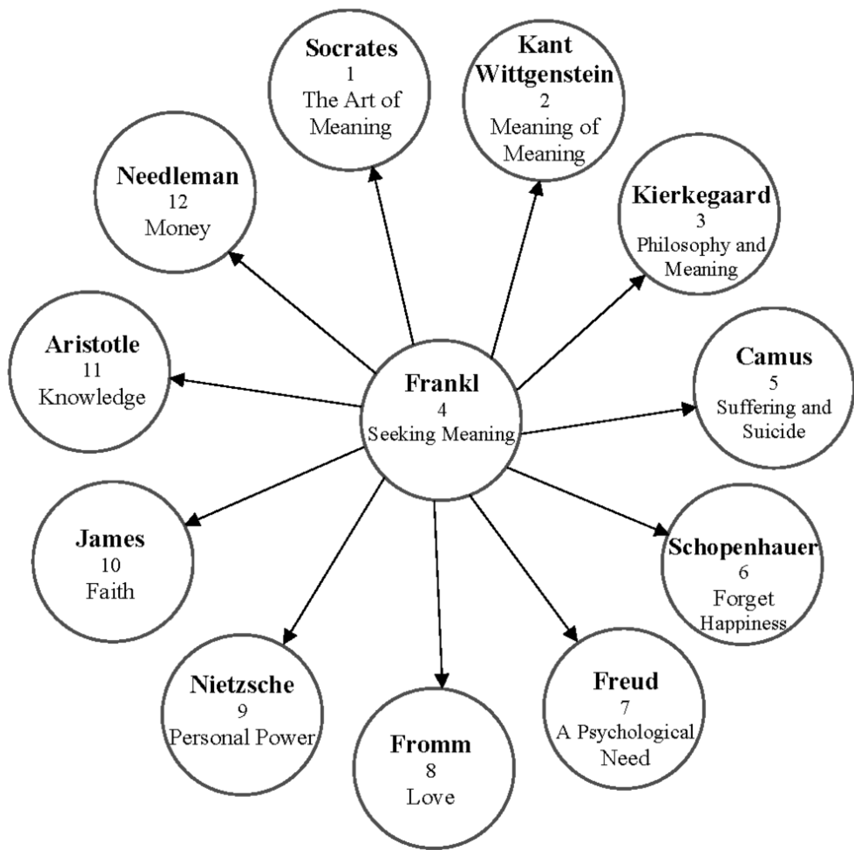
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A SENSE OF WORTH

At the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, my father was drafted for reserve duty as a tank battalion commander, and was sent to the Egyptian front. On the second day of the war he was taken prisoner along with some of his soldiers, after many of their brothers-in-arms were killed in battles on the banks of the Suez Canal. I was a young girl back then. I spent days and nights worrying about him, asking myself how he would endure the tortures and the hardships of captivity. He returned, gaunt, his back marked by blood and scars from whippings. His body was covered in blue bruises, and his troubled sleep was fraught with nightmares. I continued to worry: how would he manage? How would he heal? Would he ever find meaning again?

Upon his release, my father had to cope with returning to everyday life with family, friends, and work. Like many others who had experienced first-hand the terrors of war, he was haunted by profound guilt for having survived, while so many others never returned. He relentlessly asked himself, why me? With time he found meaning in his life.[1] From then on, he was brimming with vitality. Plans, goals and a sense of purpose filled his daily life. From him I realized that the answer was not self-evident, and in order to lead a full life it was necessary to find it.

Individuals who know meaning in their lives understand why they wake up in the morning. They believe their waking hours are not wasted, and go to sleep with a sense of wholeness. A meaningful life is a creation––our life-creation. It brings together the unique way we live (a personal identity), and the things we believe in and are committed to (a worldview). A meaningful life does not guarantee happiness in the sense of pleasure and enjoyment. It could be quite the opposite. Some meaningful lives are fraught with painful struggle. If we must choose between the two, better choose meaning. Happiness is transient, whereas meaning lasts till the end of one's life.[2]

Every person needs meaning in life, but not everybody creates one. Everybody wants their life to express their own choices, yet many perceive themselves as victims of their circumstances. Everyone needs to know that they did not live in vain, but many experience the bitter taste of senselessness. No one wants to live idly, without a purpose, a goal, a sense of worth, or an aim. No one wants to miss out on their lives, to waste them, to perform on the world’s stage without playing a memorable role

and vanish without leaving a trace, with an orderly and uneventful departure, timed so as not to detract or distract.

Many find themselves caught somewhere in-between meaning and senselessness. Few will say wholeheartedly that they live the life they wish to live, or that they live the best version of their lives. *The art of creating meaning* grapples with this difficulty. A successful outcome is marked by straightforward assertions—*this is my life; it is the most meaningful one I could create.*

For eight years I have been teaching a course at Tel-Aviv University on meaning in life. It is in high demand among young students and adults. Even though it is offered in the humanities, students from the exact sciences, economy, law, psychology, film, and computer science register for it. Their active participation underlines the extent to which the issue of meaning in life is relevant to thinking people. This book has grown out of this class, but it is not an academic text book.

Fifteen years ago I wrote a Master's thesis on meaning in life as self-narrative. My doctoral thesis focused on the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. When he was twenty-four he wrote in his journal, "What I really need is to be clear about what I am to do…. The crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, and to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die."[3] I recognized this as a young man's search for purpose and meaning, for an identity and a worldview. In the years since, I have written books,[4] published articles, attended conferences and given lectures on meaning in life. For the past ten years I have discussed the subject outside the university as well, through lecture series, radio interviews, articles in the press and online, and through workshops and individual consultations.

Personal consultation includes four questions and a story: 1. What is the meaning in your life? Tell a story that shows it. 2. What is important in the story? 3. Why is it important? 4. Which cultural value best expresses this meaning? This fascinating process of discovering meaning and its personal impact surprises me. It accomplishes more than I could ever hope for. I will illustrate how this inquiry works through the personal interviews in the chapters to come. I have chosen women and men with rich life-experience, over forty, their self-identity and worldview well-developed and consolidated. They are all eager to explore meaning in their lives. Their names have mostly been changed, and every one of them has authorized the descriptions.

In the realm of counseling and especially in existential psychotherapy, the importance of finding meaning in life is a major concern.[5] Exploring meaning sharpens personal understanding and assists persons navigating

their paths of aspiration. A clear sense of meaning becomes a North Star, guiding life's journey.

Along with tools for creating meaning, each chapter presents a significant cultural value. Some people are passionate about issues of meaning. They continuously ask, investigate, ponder, and search. Others focus on action, and don't "waste time" in contemplation. I extend my invitation to explore life's meaning both to people of thought and to people of action. As in preventive medicine, the idea is to take healthy steps in advance of any crisis, to supplement life with a critical gaze and a formative touch. No one wants to wake up one morning to discover that they have wasted a precious gift, and there is no longer anything that can be done.

Meaning itself is the most important personal and cultural value. It is a diamond mined from life narratives. It is a fundamental characteristic of a worthy life, answering the question, "why live?" Asking for meaning is seeking the most important thing in life, the thing worth dedicating our lives to or even dying for. It separates a life worth living from a pointless one. Many people, perhaps most, prefer meaning over simple pleasure and enjoyment. For their parents, children are not simply happiness not all the time anyway, and not even most of the time. They can present painful challenges. But they give meaning. The same is true for professions or hobbies, family life, close relationships, or social activities. They are full of oscillating dualities, enjoyment and happiness, disappointment and heartache. But meaning carries us through.[6]

The poet asks,

> So what is a person?
> Is she what she said yesterday,
> Or what he cries now,
> Or what he will hold silent in a moment?
> Is she her memories, is she her hopes,
> is he what he does, is she what is done to her,
> is he the last cry he cries on his deathbed,
> or her first cry between the legs of her mother?
> Is he all of the horrible, ridiculous confusion in-between those two cries?
> If so, where is the connecting thread between it all,
> where is the thread, and what is the meaning?[7]

We are creatures who seek meaning, who strive for and create meaning, who answer the "why-questions" of life. Thus we are able to face life's challenges. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche professed that whoever has the *why* can bear every *how*.[8] Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl reinforces this. From his experience in concentration camps, he saw that

whoever lost meaning sentenced himself to death. Those who maintained a sense of worth managed to cope with the worst.[9]

A person who finds meaning in life knows they are not wasting their life. Meaning in life is the synthesis of personal identity and worldview. A personal identity, is fashioned throughout life, and answers the questions—"Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?" Past, present, and future are interwoven. This sense of self is not settled or final, but dynamic. It is articulated again and again in the contexts of biological, psychological, social and cultural changes in life.[10] Conversely, a worldview is, first and foremost, taking a stand with regard to higher cultural and spiritual values.[11] It is voicing reasons why life is worth living, and highlighting principal goals one strives to attain.[12] A well-articulated worldview flows in tandem with a consolidated personal identity. This unravels life's riddle.

For meaning to reach full volume in the realm of personal identity, one proceeds toward a rich individuation. This means to perceive the self as unique and singular, and to discern its reality conscientiously**,** flowing from choice. In the realm of worldview, the path toward meaning is anchored in an experience of unity with the world. There is no gap between oneself and the world in moments charged with positive, overwhelming excitement or emotion, in jolting and consolidating "peak experiences." These experiences shape the flow of one's individuality. One is at home in the world and feels most alive. Unity with an unfolding path and a sphere of excitement provides conceptual and existential glue. This is the promise and realization of a meaningful life.

Consider the structure of the human brain. Roughly speaking, each hemisphere has its own specialty. The left is responsible for thinking with words and making plans. It specializes in language, linear processing of logic, and the organization of data and analysis. The right hemisphere, roughly, is responsible for emotional perception, intuition, creativity and imagination. It specializes in parallel processing, and handles holistic vision.[13] We can link the left hemisphere, roughly speaking, to *Personal identity*, the ability to say "I," and to know where I stand. It marks differences between me and whatever is not me, and articulates characteristics of my personality and my life's goals. The right hemisphere, by and large, is linked to *Worldview* and the experience of unity that blurs the boundaries of the self, allowing the "I" to flow into and be immersed in the surrounding environment. As with the human brain, so with meaning: these are two sides of the same coin, different but closely related, and both are essential to the whole picture.

The answers to "who am I?" and "what do I believe?" assemble meaning in life. When a person asks "who am I?" he or she looks inward toward impulses and passions, needs and desires, yearnings, dreams, choices and goals. This assembles personal identity, and shapes individual uniqueness. When asking "what do I believe?" or, "what is the most important thing out there?" one clarifies what is paramount in life, what cultural value is worth living for, dedicating a life to, fighting over, and sometimes dying for.

To name a few, cultural values include justice, freedom, equality, wisdom, or knowledge, as well as happiness (as fulfillment and growth), friendship, beauty, love, success, power, awareness, faith, art, and so forth. In contrast to facts, values are human assemblages, which grant importance to things and ideas. Creation of a worldview, that is anchored in an experience of unity between a person and the world, answers the question "what do I believe?" Answering who I am and what do I believe assembles a specific meaning *in* life for a person or for a number of people. These are not answers to the overall cosmic meaning *of* life—if there is in fact any such meaning in the unfolding cosmos. Meaning *in* life is a different matter.

The Meaning *of* Life and Meaning *in* Life

To search for the meaning *of* life is not to search for meaning *in* life. To search for the meaning *of* life is an attempt to discover the biggest picture of the universe and everything in it—how absolutely everything hangs together. Searching for meaning *in* life focuses, more narrowly, on a specific person's world and life. The first search assembles or finds an external perspective, detached from the seeker; the second search is personal. The first will find facts of my birth and death coincidental and unimportant. The second will find the fact of my birth bearing central importance, and my impeding death**,** no less significant. The meaning *of* life is completely objective. Meaning *in* life involves the identity of the seeker, his or her aims, conclusions and resolutions.

From a biological standpoint, living creatures share common needs—to survive and procreate, to persist in being and to preserve genetic material. Knowing all this is insufficient for those who seek to understand their own life's purpose. Biology does not address the *personal* question "why;" it does not answer "why survive and procreate?" It teaches a common factual denominator, but it does not tackle the problem of meaning in terms of cultural and personal values. In the context of seeking meaning *in* life, biological answers do not suffice.

In the history of philosophy, many try to unearth the cosmic or metaphysical meaning *of* life: Why is there any life at all? Why is there something rather than noting? Why is the universe present and not absent? Philosophy seeks an objective, rational, and universal answer that would explain the whole of life. This general answer would also apply to personal existence. An answer that would account for the entire phenomenon of life—including human beings—will also work out in the personal case. There is an overlap between the macro-and-micro-levels. If the meaning of all life whatsoever is acquiring power, then meaning in my life is acquiring power.[14]

Existential philosophy and psychotherapy offer theories for meaning *in* life. They focus on the person as an individual or on the human soul, and search for a purpose or reason, an essence or sense, an explanation or goal, worthy of choice in a person's life. The emphasis is on personal answers. The answer is individual but when many share a personal answer, it acquires an "objectivity." Meaning in life takes various forms. Between a total lack of meaning and a life endowed with significant meaning there are degrees and levels. Nurturing meaning will peak when a person experiences existence as meaningful, is recognized and respected by others, and inspires future generations.

The seeker after meaning walks the path of individuation, on the one hand, and the path of unity, on the other. Individuation establishes that it is *her* life she is living. The experience of unity locates her existence in meaning *beyond* herself. These two paths climax in an articulation of meaning that answers the questions "who am I?" and "what do I believe?" Such is the spirit of the tale in which the rabbi tells his students:

> Each one of you needs two pockets, so you can use one or the other according to the need. In the right pocket is the saying "for my sake the world was created," and in the left pocket: "who am I but dust and ashes."[15]

Inroads into Meaning

This book is a philosophical, psychological, and personal investigation. I begin each chapter with a "mind map," a visual table of contents conveying, at a glance, the scope of the discussion. Most chapters open with a poem. In addition, I incorporate personal interviews that illustrate the art of extracting meaning in life.

The first chapter shows how to extract meaning from a life-story and how to present it in the best, most revealing, way. The second chapter offers two accounts of meaning that aspire to scientific objectivity. This

investigation reaches a dead end. Should we stop looking? The third chapter reveals why a systematic investigation is doomed to fail. We then shift from universal meaning to personal meaning. The fourth chapter presents an optimistic view: meaning unfolds as goal and purpose on its own. It appears in every situation and under any condition. It is a resource for coping with distress and life-challenges.

The fifth chapter considers suffering**:** "To be or not to be, that is the question."[16] The question is truly existential—and so is the answer. In the sixth chapter we establish that we must live *with* suffering and not rely on good luck and happy endings. The seventh chapter clarifies why, despite failures to attain it, we cannot forsake an aspiration for lasting happiness and fulfillment.

The eighth chapter presents love as the only mature and full answer to the enigmas of human existence. Love must be learned by unique individuals who are becoming who they will be, and who experience unity with the world and with other human beings. The ninth chapter focuses on individuation, and the tenth**,** on the experience of unity, which peaks in religious experience. The eleventh chapter shows that an experience of religious unity is not necessarily mystical, super-natural, or irrational. It can be, in Wordsworth's words, "a simple produce of the common day."[17] The twelfth chapter—in seemingly striking contrast—considers money as a meaning in life. It might be a value worth living for when its meaning combines self-control of individuation and selflessness of unity.

We all aspire to meaning and must engage in the art of its discovery and creation. The paths of individuation and unity consolidate personal identity and worldview. Pursuing this art we arrive. We experience the magic of life**.** The riddle is unraveled.

THE ART OF CREATING MEANING:
A DEFENSE OF SOCRATES

I share a ride with Ted on the way back from the university in Jerusalem. He is a professor of philosophy, and one of the wisest people I know. Driving on Highway 1, which spirals down toward the coastal plain, I ask him what he thinks is the meaning in his life. He gives me the forgiving smile of someone who is familiar with my passion for the subject. “Many things in life are important in my eyes,” he answered cautiously, “for example, understanding that good things can happen in the world just as much as bad things, without disrupting its wholeness. On the other hand, in private life, one always moves between the good and the bad, and tries to enhance the good.”

“So that is the meaning of your life?”

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

“I have a way to extract meaning in life from a life-story. Do you want to give it a try?” I gave him no opportunity to hesitate, “Anyway, you can’t go anywhere as long as I’m holding the wheel and there’s still an hour’s drive ahead.” Ted nodded.

We shall return to this.

***

Like Ted, or anyone else, I too have a life-story. I was born on a certain date, to certain parents, in certain circumstances. If I meet someone who asks to hear my story, I do not need any special preparation. I can simply plunge in. The only thing required is time. The story is ready and willing. And what about meaning in my life? Is it also ready and willing? Does the fact that I have a life-story necessarily mean that my life bears meaning? The answer is no. Having a biography is not enough to determine that I have a philosophy of life.

Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard changed my life. From him, I learned that people are great believers. At every stage of life, we believe in something that is perceived as an absolute. One person believes in himself and in his ability to achieve full and complete pleasure; another perceives philosophical conclusions as unique truths; an artist worships the perfect masterpiece; this woman worships married life; that one, moral values and social norms; those who believe in a transcendental deity hold that God alone is the absolute.

I learned from Kierkegaard that, consciously or unwittingly, I will crown an “absolute” to which I will be devoted. Under its inspiration I will strive to excel, to obey its authority and engage it in dialogue. I suspend the authority of the “absolutes” that I had previously held, and seek to maintain a grip on an absolute beyond the human. This Absolute is an

ideal, while all the words that attempt to explain it are human, all too human. I seek to obey an absolute that lies above and beyond the highest human existence. Inspired by the philosopher Martin Buber, I called this striving "religiousness without religion."[1]

I did not intend to commit myself to a set of rules and commands. My belief is private and lacks external habits. I do not need to wear special garments, or follow rituals created by ancients, or abide by sets of laws and restrictions governing a social and religious regime. Just as I can hold on to religiousness without religion, so there is religion without religiousness: those who *seem* to believe, but lack faith.

Is this meaning in my life? Not exactly. Something further is required. It requires a persistent search until it is found. I have a life-story and there is meaning in my life, and though they are not identical, they share a bond. What is this bond? The story serves as the raw material for meaning. When you distill the essence of life from someone's biography, a value is obtained. Interpreting the story can yield meaning in life.

Here is an example of interpretation that extracts meaning from a life-story. It is a short prologue to the autobiography of British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970):

> Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.
>
> I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy—ecstasy so great that I would often have sacrificed all the rest of life for a few hours of this joy. I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness—that terrible loneliness in which one shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable lifeless abyss. I have sought it, finally, because in the union of love I have seen, in a mystic miniature, the prefiguring vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined. This is what I sought, and though it might seem too good for human life, this is what—at last—I have found.
>
> With equal passion I have sought knowledge. I have wished to understand the hearts of men. I have wished to know why the stars shine. And I have tried to apprehend the Pythagorean power by which number holds sway above the flux. A little of this, but not much, I have achieved.
>
> Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.

> This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me.[2]

In light of this eloquent prologue, there is no need to ask what the meaning in Russell's life is. He provides the keys: "love," "knowledge" and "empathy toward suffering." We now have a basic answer to some important questions—why did he make specific life-choices? What was the purpose of his actions? How did he handle suffering? During his ninety-eight years, Russell earned global recognition as a philosopher of mathematics, published dozens of books and articles, led political protests, and married four times. The meaning he articulates in his prologue stands on its own. It answers the questions—What is important to him? What does he believe in? His meaning rests on central values. These guide a search for answers in his life-story.

Look at this introductory page on the one hand, and contrast its brevity with the rest of Russell's autobiography. Meaning may be succinctly delivered. It takes hundreds of pages to tell a life-story. Meaning is the essence of that which can be told in detail and at length. It is reason and justification, goal and purpose. It also provides the code to interpret a life-story.

Love, knowledge and empathy are values that many can identify with. Who does not aspire to love? Who does not want to know? Who does not bow his head in the presence of suffering? However, this is not enough. Not every person who endorses these values will convince us that they are, in fact, the governing passions that infuse meaning in their life. There must be a connection between biography and meaning. Anyone can uphold values which express meaning, but Russell convinces us, in his biography, that these values are the warp and woof of his life. When values and life-story are incompatible, meaning is a blatant forgery.

Meaning is also present in the atmosphere that accompanies words. The manner of expression is as important as what is said. In Russell's story, the ambiance he creates conveys his rich awareness of love, his full acceptance of his achievements, his reconciliation with suffering, and his satisfaction with his life—he would gladly live it over again. This aspect of meaning is found in the rhythm that accompanies the words he writes. The full meaning is a combination of words and rhythm—the content of the story and its music. As one chooses the flow of one's life story, one also chooses the tone, music, and voice that carry the story. To apprehend the full meaning it is important to listen not only to the content but to the music as well.

The art of unraveling meaning is the art of transforming a life-story into meaning in life. From the raw materials of the story we extract the values that constitute meaning. Biography becomes philosophy.

1. The Question of Meaning

I travelled to India after completing my undergraduate studies at the Hebrew University. During the first year of my studies in Jerusalem, I would still stop by the Old City market to buy presents for my friends in Tel-Aviv. Before statistics exams which I dreaded I could place a note in the Western Wall. But later the atmosphere changed. It became hostile. In my third year only when a sense of adventure swept me up would I take the bus that passed by Damascus Gate. The marks of the Intifada were visible in the streets. A sense of danger detached me from the magical heart of Jerusalem. Toward the end of my studies, I became "stuck" with the idea of going to India. Its image was shaped by Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* and Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. I was drawn by the heroes, the ideas, and the different ways of thinking. I allocated four months for the trip, and would return home when they were up. I set out to find meaning.

I have a life-story. How can I phrase its meaning? Let us assume there is a life-story before us—mine, yours, someone else's.[3] We want to extract meaning. We have to take on the role of an interpreter, a detective, to find an answer. But what exactly are we looking for?

Meaning in life is a positive value a person ascribes to life in general and to his life in particular. This value is a justification or reason, a response to the question, "what is the most important thing in my life?" This value illuminates private existence, answering the questions—why did I choose this rather than that at a crucial moment in my life? Is there a purpose to my actions? What justifies the prices I pay for critical choices in my life?

We sound out a person's "life-story" to clarify and extract positive values. But what is the connection between a story and a life? A story one tells oneself, has to authentically describe the flow of one's take on one's life, and be precise about the facts. Even so, a story of one's life is not identical to that life; rather, it is an interpretation of it. A life is always more than any one story about it.[4]

The question of meaning is an interpretive question. Distilling it from life means extracting it as an explanation and illumination. Life is everything that has happened and will happen, at any level, without regard to degrees of importance or personal relevance. In contrast, the story is an evaluation of the facts that includes what is good or bad, gladdening or

saddening, constructive or destructive in a life. All these lines of evaluation shape and organize the facts as they become interpreted to form a life-story. The life-story refers in the present to what has happened in the past. The future is not part of the story. It is either fiction or fantasy. Meaning in life is bound up with what may be extracted from the past.

The search for meaning then focuses on the choice and creation of an interpretation of the life-story. It is not necessary to present a *complete* life-story. It's possible to take a DNA sample and deduce meaning in the larger story. Fragments reflect on the bigger picture of the interpreted life. I have a life-story and a helpful toolbox before me. Now I take on the role of an interpreter. The toolbox holds an assortment of approaches to the analysis. I'll illustrate as I go along.

***

"Tell me something about yourself, a story that describes something in your life."

Ted turned his gaze toward me. He wrinkled his brow.

"What should I tell? Something that teaches about the meaning of my life? Maybe how I came to study philosophy or why I have devoted my life to the field?"

"Tell me whatever you want. This will get us going. Choose a decade. You know, between birth and the age of ten, between ten and twenty, up to now. Choose a ten-year period. Okay? Have you made a choice?"

He nodded, shaking his head, as if trying to get rid of a nagging thought.

"It's bizarre. On one of my holidays, I went to visit my parents, who were already elderly and living in a retirement community. I was fifty. We sat and had an impersonal, forced conversation. My mother and I mainly spoke. My father sat on the couch besides her, listening with no interest, contributing nothing. After a short while I stood up to leave. He automatically rose to walk me out. At the door he said: 'Of all my children Jim is the only one who has made something of himself.' 'What are you talking about?' I blurted out, astonished, 'Your eldest daughter has a doctorate and your youngest one is very successful at her job, and I'm not in a shabby state myself.' He averted his eyes as he retorted: 'You're just a professor.'"

2. The Final Chapter of Socrates' Life

The final chapter in the story of Socrates' life (469-399 BC) recounts his trial, his last day in prison and his hour of death.[5] At the beginning of the final year of his life, a lawsuit is filed against him in the Athenian court, accusing him of denying the gods and corrupting the youth. In his trial, Socrates defends himself in three speeches before the five hundred and one citizens chosen by raffle to serve as his judges, and before a large audience of spectators.

Socrates responds to the allegation of corrupting the youth by arguing that if it were true, the parents and relatives of the adolescents would have joined the prosecution. But the parents and relatives do not blame him—in fact they are willing to testify in his defense. They bless him and are thankful for Socrates' influence. Then the allegation is leveled against him that he denies the gods—whose worship is customary in the state—and that he believes in demonic-satanic powers. Here Socrates forces the prosecutor into a contradiction. He gets the prosecutor to say that Socrates does not believe in *any* god. But how can Socrates believe in demonic-satanic powers—yet not believe in any god? The prosecutor's self-contradiction invalidates the second charge against Socrates.

Socrates affirms that libel spread by his enemies is the motive behind his prosecution. The majority of his speech is devoted to explaining why he has aroused resentment in Athens. That resentment flows, Socrates maintains, from his commitment to a strange and, thus, threatening vocation. He pursues a *divine* mission he calls "philosophy"—the love of wisdom. What is philosophy? It steps back to seek and examine the essence and purpose of everyday conduct. In stepping back, it deviates from familiar, unreflective practice. Philosophy makes demands on those who undertake it. It sets them apart from others. Socrates' enemies regard this pursuit, this stepping back to evaluate, as haughty and subversive.

The aspiration to wisdom requires, first, that you determine what should be achieved. Only then is action viable—"look before you leap." You should step back to see that your action is directed by a morally desirable and appropriate purpose. The philosopher searches for truth and for ways to improve the soul. Socrates declares that he will not recant this purpose, even at the cost of his own life. He is willing to die rather than change his ways. Despite the insistent pleadings of his family—his wife and three children—and regardless of the pleas of his longtime companions, he refuses to beg for mercy from the judges.

Socrates is convicted. In the Athens of the time, after a conviction is announced, the accused is granted a second speech in which he may

propose an appropriate punishment. The judges ask, in effect, "What do you think you deserve?" This alleged "second chance" tests the degree of remorse felt by the accused. The judges' final verdict reflects whether they think the accused shows proper contrition. Socrates abstains from pleading for a light sentence. He does not calculate what the judges might consider reasonable. He might have asked for imprisonment, exile, or a monetary fine, with the hope of avoiding a death sentence. Instead, with sarcasm, he asks to be granted free meals for the rest of his life. Outraged by his shameless impertinence, the judges sentence him to death.

In his final speech, days after the sentence, Socrates says he would have gotten a lighter sentence if only he had lamented and bewailed what he had done. He would be freed, if only he had said

> all sorts of things which I declare to be unworthy of myself, but which you are used to hearing from other people. But I did not think then that I ought to stoop to servility because I was in danger, and I do not regret now the way in which I pleaded my case, I would much rather die as the result of this defense than live as the result of the other sort.[6]

It is clear to him that justice is on his side. He perceives himself heroically, and compares his situation to the predicaments of Odysseus and Sisyphus, heroes of Greek mythology.

Two days before his execution, Crito—a wealthy and elderly old friend of his—enters the prison cell. He tells Socrates that he and others have come up with a plan for rescue. They will help him break out of prison by bribing the guards. Then he can flee from Athens. Crito presents all the reasons he can think of to persuade Socrates to cooperate in the escape. But Socrates refuses. He says that as a citizen of Athens he is obligated to obey its laws; he cannot break the law merely because the verdict is against him. The moral principle that guides him is that "It is dishonorable to return injustice for injustice and injury for injury."[7] He is committed to abiding by procedural law. The court has followed proper procedure. Thus, he endorses the court verdict even as, in this particular case, it causes an injustice.

On the morning of his last day, ten close friends, who have stood by him and visited him daily during the trial and after it, gather in his prison chamber. His wife Xanthippe arrives. She is weeping, and Socrates requests that she be sent home. In the evening, at sunset, his verdict will be carried out. Socrates will be executed.

On his last day he conducts a philosophical discussion in the prison cell—as if this were like any other day among friends. Socrates' composure in the face of death is striking. He radiates a sense of inner

peace, and wishes his friends to share his serenity, rather than weep or wail or sorrow. He opens by saying that the life of a philosopher can be seen as a preparation for death. He says that, in fact, his death is something he has always yearned for. The proof is in his preference for protecting and improving his soul more than his body. He dedicates his life to this value of soul over body. He says it is important to eliminate fear of death, and adds that he has no fear. But for those who *do* fear death, he offers an argument for the eternity of the soul. It exists before it enters the body and prevails after the death of the body. He offers the argument tentatively, as if he were not fully convinced of its validity. He seems to believe that this argument will be more beneficial than harmful, if approached cautiously.

The sun is about to set. A messenger enters and announces that the time has come to drink the poison. The messenger says, weeping: "endeavor to bear what is inevitable as easily as possible."[8] Socrates asks Crito to bring the poison. Crito says: "But… the sun is still on the mountains, and has not yet set…. Do not hasten, then, for there is yet time." Socrates is sure there is no point in postponing his last moments: "I shall gain nothing by drinking a little later on, except to become ridiculous to myself, in being so fond of life, and sparing of it, when none any longer remains." The man who prepared the poison instructs him to walk around after he drinks until he feels heaviness in his legs, and to lie down afterwards as it continues to work. Socrates takes the cup in his hand: "And… having received it very cheerfully… neither trembling, nor changing at all in color or countenance" he brings the cup to his lips. He drinks it "readily and calmly."

Phaedo has been describing the situation. He reports:

> Thus far, most of us were with difficulty able to restrain ourselves from weeping; but when we saw him drinking, and having finished the draught, we could do so no longer; but, in spite of myself, the tears came in full torrent, so that, covering my face, I wept for myself; for I did not weep for him, but for my own fortune, in being deprived of such a friend. But Crito, even before me, when he could not restrain his tears, had risen up. Apollodorus, even before this, had not ceased weeping; and then, bursting into an agony of grief, weeping and lamenting, he pierced the heart of every one present, except Socrates himself.
>
> Socrates said, 'What are you doing, my admirable friends? Indeed, for this very reason, I sent away the women, that they might not commit any folly of this kind. For I have heard that it is right to die with good omens. Be quiet and bear up.'
>
> When we heard this, we were ashamed, and restrained our tears. But Socrates, having walked about, he said that his legs were growing heavy, lay down on his back; for the man had so directed him. The messenger who

> gave the poison saw it taking hold of him, and after a short interval, examined his feet and legs; and then, having pressed his foot hard, he asked if he felt it: Socrates said that he did not. And after this the messenger pressed his thighs; and, thus going higher, he showed us that Socrates was growing cold and stiff. Then Socrates touched himself, and said that when the poison reached his heart he should then depart.… Shortly after, Socrates gave a convulsive start, and the man covered him, and his eyes were fixed; Crito, perceiving it all, closed his mouth and eyes.
>
> This …was the end of our friend—a man, as we may say, was the best of all of his time that we have known, and, moreover, the most wise and just.[9]

This literary masterpiece is the last chapter of the life-story of Socrates, the "father of philosophy."

3. Socrates Seeks Meaning

Let us imagine a meeting between Socrates and Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist, who arrives at the prison. The purpose? To extract meaning from Socrates' life. Frankl arrives with a couple of guidelines. First, although a careful search may be required to bring it to light, meaning, however shadowed, exists in every situation and under any condition, even the most terrible. The second guideline is that meaning is primary; it is an end in itself and foundational. It lies behind, precedes, and can arouse familiar values such as happiness, health, pleasure, or power.

Frankl, we imagine, leads Socrates in a quest for positive meaning in his life. The search is conducted on two levels: discovering meaning and creating meaning. Discovery relates to what already exists; creation gives shape to that which does not yet exist. Discovering is aimed at finding mundane meaning in everyday life. Creating is aimed at construing spiritual or divine meaning.

Socrates can find meaning on both levels: the divine and the everyday. He believes in the existence of a cosmic order, superior moral principles, the eternity of the soul, and maybe even in an afterlife of rewards and punishments. This attests to spiritual or divine meaning in Socrates' life. Meaning in everyday existence may be found in the realms of work, creation, interpersonal relationships, coping with distress and suffering.

Frankl asks: *What do you give to the world, Socrates? What do you receive from the world? How do you relate to your suffering?* Socrates takes a while to consider, then answers directly and clearly. "What do I give to the world?" He reminds Frankl that he is a midwife of his own ideas and of those of his partners in dialogue. He refers to creativity, to

giving birth. He creatively engages in the love of wisdom, in the nurturing of thought, in concern with his insights and with the common sense of others. He aspires to truth and to the improvement of his soul. Frankl's next question, "What do I receive from the world?" places Socrates in the realm of receptivity, in the midst of his experience. Socrates would highlight his experiences of faith and love, true friendship, and family.

Frankl's last question, "How do I relate to my suffering?" leads Socrates to reveal his optimistic stance toward suffering and death. He finds his struggles justified, finds meaning in his pain, and is not embittered or desperate. He would tell Frankl that the entrapment of the soul in the body and the difficulty of getting familiar with ideas without being encumbered by the body are the cause of suffering. To devote oneself fully to the spiritual life would be an escape from suffering. Mundane suffering in ordinary life is undesirable, of course, but it is a means to achieving a worthy goal. Suffering is a stepping stone or a bridge to a world devoted to the exploration of the soul.

What does Frankl conclude after listening to Socrates in this imaginary encounter? Meaning, for Socrates, is a mosaic of three elements: his creativity, expressed as love of knowledge, truth, and wisdom and a desire to improve his soul; second, his experience of friendship, family, and love**;** third, the positive way Socrates regards his suffering. Socrates' answers explain the reason for his choices (an embrace of creativity in matters of knowledge and wisdom), the purpose of his actions (to enhance friends, family, and love) and the way he copes with adversity (seeing it as a stepping stone).

4. The Glass Half Full

As we have sketched it, the meaning of Socrates' life makes him an optimist. He gazes at his life and impending death with pride and satisfaction. Is this optimism justified? It seems that it is. At first glance—but only at first glance—it is in accordance with Viktor Frankl's approach to meaning. Frankl holds that we should look ahead with aspirations and goals in mind, and with the belief that good shall come about. Looking to the future is also essential for mere survival. It prevents a nostalgic addiction to what has been and gone by. Devoid of expectations, it is unclear why one should go on. Without hope for the future there is nothing left but **to** wallow in memories. But although the future is essential for *survival*, for Frankl, unlike Socrates, the future is *not* essential for meaning. Meaning is stored in our pasts, not in expectations. The past harbors our motivation to continue living.

In the last phase of his life, Socrates focuses on his future. He has goals and aspirations that lie beyond this life. Frankl will criticize Socrates for focusing on the meaning of his death—in the future—rather than on that of his life. A future identified with the afterlife empties actual existence of value. Friedrich Nietzsche accuses Socrates of nihilism, of emptying life of its present and past content. He thinks Socrates has committed intellectual suicide. According to Nietzsche, Socrates dies by his own hand. He destroys his will-to-live – in the present. He rationally subdues any fear of death and aspiration to survive. Nietzsche takes Socrates' optimism to be "practical pessimism."[10]

In Judaism there is a saying: "The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the important thing is to fear nothing."[11] This can be understood as rejecting the supremacy of life over death. Appreciation of life must include fear of death; after all, it terminates life. To focus on death is a preference to "get to the other side" rather than revel in the here and now. For Frankl, anticipating the future is not part of meaning in life. Nonetheless, without hope for the future—for tomorrow and the next day––an individual may be drained of a will-to-live. At the end of his defense, Socrates says to his judges and to his audience that he is now going to die, "But it is now time to depart—for me to die, for you to live. But which of us is going to a better state is unknown to every one but God."[12]

Welcoming the end of his life is not the defiance of a man who stands before death and has nothing to lose. By preferring death over life and eliminating fear of death, Socrates is turning the tables. Even if everyone else sees death as a great evil, "at some times and to some persons only it is better to die than to live." Philosophy cultivates the soul—not the body, which alone is fated to die. Socrates declares that "philosophers should be very willing to die."[13] Death is "the separation of the soul from the body"—a separation we should welcome. "As many as rightly apply themselves to philosophy seem to… aim at nothing else than to die and be dead."[14]

How can we clarify this difference between Frankl and Socrates? To begin with, Frankl locates the reservoir of meanings from which we draw meaning in life in the past alone, in what we have been through. He thinks of the future in terms of survival, avoiding dangers and meeting expectations, quite apart from questions of meaning. The struggle to get through this day and the next is *not* tantamount to a search for meaning.

For Socrates, the future is a locus in which philosophers in particular can find meaning. Finding meaning entails stripping away the details of the everyday, to attain the world of eternal truths. They lie in a realm where the body and the everyday are absent. Thinking is dying to the

body, separating its weight from ideas that animate our souls. Thus meaning can exist in the future and in the afterlife for Socrates, though not for Frankl. There is another difference between Frankl and Socrates. For Frankl death is the ultimate suffering. The end of life is the end of personal meaning. For Socrates the ultimate suffering is not death but giving up truth and goodness.

How does this relate to pessimism and optimism? Frankl's optimism focuses on meaning. One can always find and retrieve meaning from the past. Meaning is an embodiment of the will-to-live. Pessimism is the idea that the past cannot deliver meaning. Socrates' optimism focuses on his future. Stripped of the weight of his body and every day cares, his good soul may enter the eternal world of truth and ideas.

Socrates optimistically faces his future, his death, for in death he can cultivate his soul. Socrates sees the glass full not in this life, but in death. The importance of everyday life is negligible. He rejected a number of opportunities to repeal the death sentence. He could have expressed remorse in front of his judges. He could have appealed to their mercy, and agreed to the conditions they set for him. He had opportunities to escape after the verdict, or to accept going into exile. The suffering Socrates inflicts upon friends and family could also have been avoided.

For Frankl the question of meaning should be attached only to suffering that cannot be avoided. Socrates could have avoided death by hemlock. For Frankl, the ending of life is the greatest enemy of all; for Socrates it is not. Socrates pursues values that are more important to him than shunning death. Worse than death is to do harm and deny truth. Had Socrates chosen to escape or to beg his judges for pardon, he would have been spared drinking the cup of poison. But he would have lost his regard for the laws of the state. The laws are a great good. To defy them would have been to have lost his immortal soul.

Pure logic and common sense fail to aid us in choosing between Socrates' and Frankl's respective views of Socrates. Frankl defends an optimistic evaluation of life. By avoiding death we attain a prize of meaning available only in this life. Socrates desires to attain the prize of goodness even at the cost of life. When life and goodness collide, life can be left behind. For Frankl this amounts to a pessimistic evaluation of life.

It is possible to continue to imagine how Frankl joins Socrates's friends and tries to persuade him to wait and not rush to drink the poison. We can imagine Frankl joining those asking Socrates why he chose death. But the meaning of Socrates's story is incomplete.

5. Dissatisfaction

Before landing in India, I arrived in Thailand. At sunrise, I visited Bangkok's big park, which was full of people practicing T'ai Chi. Outside the park, there were food and drink stalls, and beside them a stand with five cages that contained live snakes of various kinds, colors, and lengths. Those who wish to improve their sexual potency or to strengthen their courage come to this stand. A local showed up and ordered a glass of blood. The salesman grabbed two snakes with his hands, and a third one, which probably was poisonous, with a special stick. He inserted the snakes' heads through nooses which descended from a hanging device, sterilized their entire bodies with alcohol, and, using a surgical knife, ripped open the belly and extracted its contents. He emptied the blood into a tin cup, removed the snake from the noose and placed it aside. At the end of the process, a cobra, a large viper, and another snake I could not identify, lay still. He poured the snake blood that was in the tin cup into a wine glass. Then he cracked the bile of the three snakes into it and stirred gently with a spoon. The local, who waited sitting on a stool next to a small table, took the elegant glass of blood and drained its contents, thanked the salesman wholeheartedly, paid, and walked away.

If only it were possible to obtain meaning in this manner, to empty out the liquid of life from one body and transfer it into another; if only it were possible to eliminate the suffering of existence in this way. Socrates drank his death from the cup of poison; the local drank for his life. Socrates drained the contents of the cup and coped with suffering that ended in death, whereas the local, bringing the sap of life to his lips, faces a different kind of suffering. It can be called "restless dissatisfaction."

After a month of travelling on my own I was swept into the customary pattern: more and more sites received a hurried visit—tourism at the speed of light. The rapid pace did not leave me time for myself, and I realized that I would be returning home to my routine as exhausted, worn out, and confused as I had left. I was afraid that whatever was lacking for my peace of mind would not be found anywhere, and would doubtfully be found within me. As time went by, I identified a growing fear of myself. I realized that I had travelled to the other side of the world "to search for myself" and that I was fearful of the encounter. I was not interested in meeting myself and discovering that I had nothing to say. Rather than awesome, I regarded my versatility in travel as shallowness. My fields of interest and abilities indicated that I was not especially good at anything. I was daunted by the pretension to "find myself" and by its heavy toll. I was not sure either that I was strong enough to bear it. I granted myself an