Philosophical Entrées

Classic and Contemporary Readings in Philosophy

Dale Jacquette

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edited by
Dale Jacquette

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Foreword

The essays in this volume include selections from important classical and recent and contemporary philosophical writings. The essays are organized into six categories, concerning the meaning of life, epistemology or theory of knowledge, the concept of mind and problem of free will and determinism, the existence and nature of God, ethical theory and moral decision making, and metaphilosophy or the philosophy of philosophy.

The collection represents a choice of six central topics in philosophy. It is offered as supplementary readings to accompany my introductory philosophy text, *Six Philosophical Appetizers.* The *Appetizers* and *Entrées* complement one another; the six sections of readings in the *Entrées* correspond to the six philosophical topics of the *Appetizers.* An ideal way to combine these two sources would be to read a chapter in the *Appetizers,* and then to consult the corresponding readings in the *Entrées,* working back and forth between the two to understand the philosophical problems and their historical and current context of discussion for each of the six topics. Yet no definite reading program is presupposed in the organization of either book. Indeed, the concept of providing the reader with philosophical appetizers and entreés is to encourage a leisurely sampling according to individual taste. The order of essays in each section has been made for a variety of pedagogical and ideological reasons and inevitably reflects at least some of my personal philosophical preferences. It is recommended as an interesting experiment to read the same set of materials in different sequences, to see whether the exact presentation of philosophical ideas can affect even the impression of their truth.

The readings chosen are philosophical entrées in both senses of the word. They are main courses, philosophical food for thought, for which the appetizers in the companion text are table starters. They are also points of entry into the vast philosophical literature surrounding each of the six topics. By investigating the problems presented in these *Entrées,* it is possible to get a clear view of the issues that divide philosophers, and the variety of philosophical methods that have characterized philosophy's remarkable history. I have chosen the essays and chapter

excerpts not only because of the attention they have deservedly received in the marketplace of ideas, but also for their outstanding literary qualities and diversity of outlook, representing many different philosophical perspectives from many different historical periods, involving many different styles of philosophical reasoning. The anthology illustrates the plurality of philosophical methods applied to a wide range of philosophical controversies.

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Contents

PART ONE

The Meaning of Life

The scenes of our life are like pictures in rough mosaic which produce no effect if we stand close to them, but which must be viewed at a distance if we are to find them beautiful. Therefore to obtain something that was eagerly desired is equivalent to finding out how empty and insubstantial it was, and if we are always living in expectation of better things, we often repent at the same time and long for our past.

—Arthur Schopenhauer
Parerga and Paralipomena, 1851, §145

- Plato, *Apology* (excerpt)
- William James, Is Life Worth Living?
- Albert Camus, An Absurd Reasoning (excerpt)
- Thomas Nagel, The Absurd
- Richard Taylor, The Meaning of Life
- John Wisdom, The Meanings of the Questions of Life
- Irving Singer, The Meaning of Life: Rephrasing Questions
- Joseph Ellin, The Meaning of Life

To question the meaning of life is a relatively recent philosophical preoccupation. The ancient Greek philosophers asked how we ought to live and wondered whether suicide could ever be morally justified. For the most part, however, the earliest philosophical thinkers in the Western tradition seem to have believed that the purpose of life consists in living a morally good life, something that every person in principle is capable of doing, and that it is only if life becomes intolerable that it might be conceivable under dire circumstances for individuals to ask whether their lives remain worth living.

Thus, Socrates, on trial for his life, as recounted in Plato's dialogue the *Apology,* maintains that "the unexamined life is not worth living." But we would be hard-pressed to find any classical philosopher who would have found it reasonable to conclude after careful reflection simply that "life is not worth living," or, more importantly, to generalize about the meaning and value of life as such, as opposed to the life of particular persons under particular conditions. Although many ancient moralists were not squeamish about the ethical permissibility of suicide, they did not recommend self-destruction generally or for everyone on the grounds that life

was somehow absurd, but considered it only as a desperate possibility of escape from the most extreme incurable pain or insufferable dishonor.

What gives life meaning? Many philosophers and nonphilosophers answer this question differently. For some, the meaning of life is bound up with developing one's talents, living according to certain moral prescriptions, accumulating wealth, raising a family, serving others, or preparing for a future existence after death. There is a philosophical dispute about whether life, if it has meaning, derives its meaning from within life or from something beyond. Some philosophers have argued that life is meaningless or absurd in and of itself, but that for this reason it is up to each individual to give life meaning by choosing a purpose and taking responsibility for the actions by which we try to achieve our goals. The problem that exercises many philosophers remains whether life has a built-in meaning or purpose, and, if so, what it is and how we can find out about it.

The idea that life is meaningless or absurd has several sources. The fact that whatever we try to achieve can be taken away from us so easily by death or disease or bad luck of another kind is one basis for denying the meaning of life. So is the randomness of events in the universe and its apparent indifference to our concerns that seems to contradict there being any purpose to life. The meaning of life ought to be universal, available in principle to all persons, or at most it will apply to those in particular circumstances. The meaning of life cannot be to win a prize at the Olympics, or to discover the cure for a disease, but must be something for which it makes sense for everyone to try to attain, by virtue of having a life. The principal candidates for the purpose of life conceived in general terms have been suggested as that of living a good life, raising a family and propagating the species, contributing to the good of others, or living in anticipation of an afterlife.

Yet there are also difficulties with these proposals in explaining the meaning of life. It is no longer clear to modern thinkers as it was to the ancient Greeks that everyone in principle is capable of doing good. The inhumanity of two recent mechanized world wars has made philosophers less optimistic about human nature than the ancient Greeks, despite their worldly-wise tragedies about war and plague. The concentration camps and wide-scale participation of average persons in the atrocities of war may have had something to do with the thematization of the meaning of life as a philosophical problem, and with the spread of intellectual nihilism, in the attitude that nothing matters and nothing has value. The shock of self-recognition that persons who commit terrible actions are not so different from ourselves may have led philosophers to question the Greek assumption that all persons in principle are capable of good. The roots of the meaning of life as a philosophical problem in any case extend back to before the two recent world wars. We can point to many other cultural factors that have had a hand in questioning the meaning of life. These include the alienation of persons one from another in urban industrial societies, and the affluence of an economy in which the minimal requirements of subsistence can virtually be taken for granted. The need for fewer persons to struggle constantly for the bare means of survival affords the luxury of questioning the meaning of life. The spread of popular religions also encourages believers to expect a continuation of life after death, raising the issue of the purpose of life as aiming at something beyond existence in the physical world of the here and now.

Whether life has a general purpose or meaning is the problem with which this collection of readings begins. It is a question that leads many thinkers to philosophy in the first place, as they turn to wonder about the human condition. The conclusion that life may be meaningless or absurd is not merely a matter of intellectualizing depression or generalizing melancholy to the whole of life. It is the outcome of a philosophical argument, correct or incorrect, to be evaluated by the same rigorous criteria as any other in philosophy. The essays included in this section provide a choice of raw materials for our own philosophical reflections on the meaningfulness or absurdity of life.

American philosopher and psychologist William James asks directly, "Is Life Worth Living?" He describes the mood swings associated with despair about the value of life in order to distinguish severe cases of the blues from what he designates as "that metaphysical *tedium vitæ* which is peculiar to reflecting men." This pessimistic *Weltschmerz* or excessive world-weariness is understood by James as a kind of mental disease. As a remedy, he recommends a restoration of religious faith that affirms a self-fulfilling assumption that life has value. James argues that if we proceed in good faith as though life has meaning, then our lives will acquire meaning. An attitude of confidence in the meaning of life will then turn out to be justified by the life-affirming actions we are more likely to undertake as a result of the will to believe. This seems like good practical advice, especially for the popular audience to which his lecture was addressed. But does it settle the metaphysical question that brings philosophers seriously to ask whether life has meaning? If it is true that life has meaning, then we ought to be able to say more definitely exactly what meaning it has by specifying the aim or purpose of life. James extolls us to carry on bravely in the face of doubts that sometimes arise about the meaning of life, with the expectation that things will work out right, especially if we have the heart to go forward and make life better for ourselves. But it is unlikely that James's encouragement will have much effect on persons who are deeply in the grip of uncertainty about whether life has meaning. More importantly, James says nothing definite about the purpose or direction of life.

In an excerpt from "An Absurd Reasoning" in *The Myth of Sisyphus,* the twentieth-century French existentialist philosopher and essayist Albert Camus poses the problem of the meaning of life in stark terms, as a question of whether or not we should continue to live. If life is meaningful, then we ought to live; but if live is meaningless or absurd, then we might as well choose suicide. Camus compares suicide as a solution to the absurdity of life with Edmund Husserl's abstract theory of intentionality or the object-directedness of thought, and with Søren Kierkegaard's religious conception of reason recognizing its own limits and humbling itself in the clear apprehension of life's enigmas that are beyond our ability to answer. In reaction to Husserl and Kierkegaard, Camus offers a remarkable alternative. He concludes that those who are troubled about the meaning of life should embrace the absurd, to sustain and contemplate it, which they can only do by continuing to live and think about the problem. Philosophical suicide in the sense in which Camus speaks of it is not the solution to the absurd, but the very opposite. The absurd enlightens those who reflect philosophically on the absurd, and as Camus in this absurd reasoning concludes, it is the absurd that makes life meaningful.

Thomas Nagel, in his essay on "The Absurd," looks closely at the reasons offered in support of the conclusion that life is absurd. He maintains that the usual

arguments for the absurdity of life are inconclusive, although they may provide a natural expression for the sense many persons seem to have that life is absurd. By considering the reasoning underlying philosophical attitudes about the absurd, Nagel cuts much of the ground from under existentialism and other philosophies that depend on the assumption that life is meaningless, or in Camus's formulation, that life falls short of our expectations about the meaning we should like it to have. The effect of Nagel's analysis is to challenge the philosophical credentials of the feeling or emotional response that thinkers sometimes report as the absurdity of life in lived-through confrontations with the absurd. If life is truly absurd in a sense in which philosophy can take notice of it, then, if Nagel's criticism is correct, better arguments will need to be found.

Richard Taylor, in "The Meaning of Life" from his book, *Good and Evil,* by contrast, presents an evocative comparison of attitudes alternatively of life's meaninglessness and meaningfulness, in which the emotional content of one seems to cancel out the other, permitting Taylor to conclude on a note of heartfelt moral optimism. John Wisdom, in the chapter of his *Paradox and Discovery* on "The Meanings of the Questions of Life," takes the opposite approach to understanding the meaning of life. He offers plausible interpretations of doubts about the meaning of life by analogy with the kind of puzzlement and sense of meaninglessness we experience when we are puzzled in different specific ways about the meaning of a dramatic performance at the theater. We can be similarly perplexed as spectators of the unfolding events of our personal lives.

The same combination of blunting the philosophical force of considerations about the absurdity of life and projecting the individual's choice of objectives as a local solution to questions about the meaning of life is explored in distinctive ways in the concluding selections of chapters from Irving Singer's book, *Meaning in Life: The Creation of Value,* and Joseph Ellin's *Morality and the Meaning of Life.* Singer requires that the sense of the absurd as a challenge to the meaningfulness of life involve an outright logical absurdity. By showing that there is no contradiction in the purposefulness of the struggle for life and the apparent purposelessness of the universe as a whole, Singer argues that by reconciling the purposes of an individual life with the world's meaninglessness there is no need to acknowledge that life is absurd. Ellin similarly examines the origin of questions about the meaning of life and considers a number of likely answers that have been proposed in the history of philosophy. He addresses many different sources for the philosophical idea of the meaninglessness or absurdity of life and articulates a set of conditions to be satisfied by an adequate solution to the problem of the meaning of life. Any such big picture of the meaning of the world according to Ellin can only be accepted as a general article of faith that life has some meaning, with no particular insight as to its purpose. The literal meaninglessness of questions about the meaning of life is suggested by the difficulty if not finally the impossibility of answering such questions, or even of being able to say what kinds of answers might be appropriate. Ellin recognizes that semantic subterfuges cannot satisfy the intellectual yearnings of persons who are preoccupied with the problem of the meaning of life. He emphasizes purposes and moral values as giving individual meaning to each person's life even in the absence of any larger intelligible cosmic direction or plan.

Apology *(excerpt)*

Plato

Let us then take up the case from its beginning. What is the accusation from which arose the slander in which Meletus trusted when he wrote out the charge against me? What did they say when they slandered me? I must, as if they were my actual prosecutors, read the affidavit they would have sworn. It goes something like this: Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse into the stronger argument, and he teaches these same things to others. You have seen this yourselves in the comedy of Aristophanes, a Socrates swinging about there, saying he was walking on air and talking a lot of other nonsense about things of which I know nothing at all. I do not speak in contempt of such knowledge, if someone is wise in these things—lest Meletus bring more cases against me—but, gentlemen, I have no part in it, and on this point I call upon the majority of you as witnesses. I think it right that all those of you who have heard me conversing, and many of you have, should tell each other if anyone of you has ever heard me discussing such subjects to any extent at all. From this you will learn that the other things said about me by the majority are of the same kind.

Not one of them is true. And if you have heard from anyone that I undertake to teach people and charge a fee for it, that is not true either. Yet I think it a fine thing to be able to teach people as Gorgias of Leontini does, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis.[1] Each of these men can go to any city and persuade the young, who can keep company with anyone of their own fellow-citizens they want without paying, to leave the company of these, to join with themselves, pay them a fee, and be grateful to them besides. Indeed, I learned that there is another wise man from Paros who is visiting us, for I met a man who has spent more money on Sophists than everybody else put together, Callias, the son of Hipponicus. So I asked him—he has two sons—"Callias," I said, "if your sons were colts or calves, we could find and engage a supervisor for them who would make them excel in their proper qualities, some horse breeder or farmer. Now since they are men, whom do you have in mind to supervise them? Who is an expert in this kind of excellence, the human and social kind? I think you must have given thought to this since you have sons. Is there such a person," I asked, "or is there not?" "Certainly there is," he said. "Who is he?" I asked, "What is his name, where is he from? and what is his fee?" "His name, Socrates, is Evenus, he comes from Paros, and his fee is five minas." I thought Evenus a

[1]These were all well-known Sophists. Gorgias, after whom Plato named one of his dialogues, was a celebrated rhetorician and teacher of rhetoric. He came to Athens in 42 B.C., and his rhetorical tricks took the city by storm. Two dialogues, the authenticity of which has been doubted, are named after Hippias, whose knowledge was encyclopedic. Prodicus was known for his insistence on the precise meaning of words. Both he and Hippias are characters in the *Protagoras* (named after another famous Sophist).

Source: Excerpts from *Plato, Five Dialogues,* trans. G. M. A. Grube, pp. 25–29, 41, 59–60, 69–76, 84–86.

happy man, if he really possesses this art, and teaches for so moderate a fee. Certainly I would pride and preen myself if I had this knowledge, but I do not have it, gentlemen.

One of you might perhaps interrupt me and say: "But Socrates, what is your occupation? From where have these slanders come? For surely if you did not busy yourself with something out of the common, all these rumours and talk would not have arisen unless you did something other than most people. Tell us what it is, that we may not speak inadvisedly about you." Anyone who says that seems to be right, and I will try to show you what has caused this reputation and slander. Listen then. Perhaps some of you will think I am jesting, but be sure that all that I shall say is true. What has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom, perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I mentioned just now are wise with a wisdom more than human; else I cannot explain it, for I certainly do not possess it, and whoever says I do is lying and speaks to slander me. Do not create a disturbance, gentlemen, even if you think I am boasting, for the story I shall tell does not originate with me, but I will refer you to a trustworthy source. I shall call upon the god at Delphi as witness to the existence and nature of my wisdom, if it be such. You know Chairephon. He was my friend from youth, and the friend of most of you, as he shared your exile and your return. You surely know the kind of man he was, how impulsive in any course of action. He went to Delphi at one time and ventured to ask the oracle—as I say, gentlemen, do not create a disturbance—he asked if any man was wiser than I, and the Pythian replied that no one was wiser. Chairephon is dead, but his brother will testify to you about this.

Consider that I tell you this because I would inform you about the origin of the slander. When I heard of this reply I asked myself: "Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so." For a long time I was at a loss as to his meaning; then I very reluctantly turned to some such investigation as this: I went to one of those reputed wise, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could refute the oracle and say to it: "This man is wiser than I, but you said I was." Then, when I examined this man—there is no need for me to tell you his name, he was one of our public men—my experience was something like this: I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders. So I withdrew and thought to myself: "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know." After this I approached another man, one of those thought to be wiser than he, and I thought the same thing, and so I came to be disliked both by him and by many others.

After that I proceeded systematically. I realized, to my sorrow and alarm, that I was getting unpopular, but I thought that I must attach the greatest importance to the god's oracle, so I must go to all those who had any reputation for knowledge to

examine its meaning. And by the dog,[2] gentlemen of the jury—for I must tell you the truth—I experienced something like this: in my investigation in the service of the god I found that those who had the highest reputation were nearly the most deficient, while those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable. I must give you an account of my journeyings as if they were labours I had undertaken to prove the oracle irrefutable. After the politicians, I went to the poets, the writers of tragedies and dithyrambs and the others, intending in their case to catch myself being more ignorant than they. So I took up those poems with which they seemed to have taken most trouble and asked them what they meant, in order that I might at the same time learn something from them. I am ashamed to tell you the truth, gentlemen, but I must. Almost all the bystanders might have explained the poems better than their authors could. I soon realized that poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say. The poets seemed to me to have had a similar experience. At the same time I saw that, because of their poetry, they thought themselves very wise men in other respects, which they were not. So there again I withdrew, thinking that I had the same advantage over them as I had over the politicians.

Finally I went to the craftsmen, for I was conscious of knowing practically nothing, and I knew that I would find that they had knowledge of many fine things. In this I was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, gentlemen of the jury, the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance, or to have both. The answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was to my advantage to be as I am.

As a result of this investigation, gentlemen of the jury, I acquired much unpopularity, of a kind that is hard to deal with and is a heavy burden; many slanders came from these people and a reputation for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved that my interlocutor did not have. What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said: "This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless." So even now I continue this investigation as the god bade me—and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise. Because of this occupation, I do not have the leisure to engage in public affairs to any extent, nor indeed to look after my own, but I live in great poverty because of my service to the god. . . .

[2]A curious oath, occasionally used by Socrates, it appears in a longer form in the *Gorgias* (482b) as "by the dog, the god of the Egyptians."

I should have to be inordinately fond of life, gentlemen of the jury, to be so unreasonable as to suppose that other men will easily tolerate my company and conversation when you, my fellow citizens, have been unable to endure them, but found them a burden and resented them so that you are now seeking to get rid of them. Far from it, gentlemen. It would be a fine life at my age to be driven out of one city after another, for I know very well that wherever I go the young men will listen to my talk as they do here. If I drive them away, they will themselves persuade their elders to drive me out; if I do not drive them away, their fathers and relations will drive me out on their behalf.

Perhaps someone might say: But Socrates, if you leave us will you not be able to live quietly, without talking? Now this is the most difficult point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me and will think I am being ironical. On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for man, you will believe me even less.

Is Life Worth Living?

William James

When Mr. Mallock's book with this title appeared some fifteen years ago, the jocose answer that "it depends on the *liver*" had great currency in the newspapers. The answer which I propose to give to-night cannot be jocose. In the words of one of Shakespeare's prologues,—

> "I come no more to make you laugh; things now,
> That bear a weighty and a serious brow,
> Sad, high, and working, full of state and woe,"—

must be my theme. In the deepest heart of all of us there is a corner in which the ultimate mystery of things works sadly; and I know not what such an association as yours intends, nor what you ask of those whom you invite to address you, unless it be to lead you from the surface-glamour of existence, and for an hour at least to make you heedless to the buzzing and jigging and vibration of small interests and excitements that form the tissue of our ordinary consciousness. Without further explanation or apology, then, I ask you to join me in turning an attention, commonly too unwilling, to the profounder bass-note of life. Let us search the lonely depths for an hour together, and see what answers in the last folds and recesses of things our question may find.

Source: "Is Life Worth Living?" by William James, from *The Will to Believe and Other Essays on Popular Philosophy,* © 1956, 32–62. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.