The meaning of life: a defence of the question's legitimacy and routes towards ultimate meaning

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Abstract

This dissertation establishes and defends three positions: (1) The question ‘What is the meaning *of* life?’ is a request for a global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence that narrates across those elements of most existential import to human beings, and this is distinct from the question ‘How may I attain meaning *in* my life?’; (2) The former question is a legitimate one to ask, despite some of the strongest and most prominent arguments that claim otherwise; (3) For this question to be answerable in principle, even if not in practice, we must hold either to (a) empirical idealism, direct external realism, or indirect external realism, all of which must be held as transcendentally real, or (b) a form of transcendental idealism that allows for direct perception of the world in itself, or that allows for us to infer things about the world in itself despite it being experientially inaccessible.

Table of Contents

Introduction

> *So much of our lives is meaningless, a self-cancelling vacillation and futility; we strive with the chaos about us and within; but we would believe all the while that there is something vital and significant in us, could we but decipher our own souls.*
>
> — Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, 1961: v

> *I considered all that my hands had done and all the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.*
>
> — *Ecclesiastes*, n.d.

We have been searching for, affirming, and denying the 'meaning of life' since at least as far back as the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible, even if it was not referred to as the 'meaning of life' at the time. Whether you agree with the previous sentence depends on what you think the question 'What is the meaning of life?' is asking for. I think that it is requesting a global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence that narrates across those elements of most existential import to human beings, and I argue for this conception in Chapter 2.

Such an explanation for the meaning of life, I argue, must involve significance, intelligibility, and purpose, in that it must answer: (1) whether, to what extent, and in what way we are significant; (2) what our purpose is; (3) how we might understand life and existence in general, i.e. how existence is rendered intelligible. I take this trifecta from Seachris (Seachris and Kim, 2018). It must also narrate across elements of existential import to us – something I also take from Seachris (2009). In arguing this, I also distinguish a meaning *of* life from meaning *in* life in 2.2., where the former is a request for an ultimate explanation *of* the framework for existence and the latter is a request for an explanation from with*in* the framework of existence, or with this framework of existence already presupposed.

But already there are objections to this conception of a meaning of life. In Chapter 3 I look at two prominent arguments against the coherency of the concept of a meaning of life – one from Ayer and one from Edwards. Ayer (Ayer, 1947) argues that the concept of a meaning of life is illegitimate (and therefore that the question of the meaning of life is senseless) because any explanation for existence would answer the 'how' but not the 'why', and any possible meaning of life would have to be something that we ourselves choose. In 3.1. I argue that the claim that a meaning of life would answer the 'how' but not the 'why' of existence is unfounded, and that this argument therefore begs the question. Edwards (1972) argues it makes no sense to ask for a meaning of life because this is requesting for something that explains everything, and for something to explain everything it must exist outside of everything, but there can be nothing that exists outside of everything. I reject this argument in 3.2. on the basis that a necessary being like god, for example, could constitute something that does not exist outside of everything and yet would explain everything.

Apart from arguing that the question of the meaning of life is senseless for these reasons, it might also be claimed that the question is either pointless to ask or senseless because we could never know an answer even if there were one in reality. This position is most likely to arise from a transcendental idealist or correlationist metaphysics. In Chapter 4 I outline the transcendental idealist position and why such a position renders the world as it is in itself unknowable. In Chapter 5 I explore the implications that this inaccessibility of the world in itself would have on the possibility of ever knowing the meaning of life, arguing that transcendental idealism and correlationism *prima facie* renders the existence, non-existence, or nature of a meaning of life epistemically inaccessible.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I outline some metaphysics that allow for epistemic optimism regarding the meaning of life, i.e. those metaphysical and epistemological positions that allow for knowing a meaning of life in principle even if not in practice. These positions are either transcendentally realist forms of idealism, direct external realism, or indirect external realism, or they are forms of transcendental idealism that allow for either direct experience of the world in itself, or inference about the world in itself despite its experiential inaccessibility. Taken as a whole, this thesis argues that the question "What is the meaning of life?" is a legitimate and meaningful question that we can in principle discover the answer to, providing we accept one of the aforementioned metaphysics. Once this is established, and providing we accept one of these metaphysics, we can then admit the possibility in principle of discovering an answer to the meaning of life that narrates across those questions and elements of most existential import to us, which is what an answer to the meaning of life must, I argue, provide. This idea of narrating across elements of most existential import is developed in section 2.3, but for now it

suffices to say that a meaning of life, should one exist, would have to be something that answers the sorts of questions that one might pose in an existential crisis, such as the significance and purpose of death, suffering, and of our life projects and ambitions. These elements are common to all of humanity, as they are non-person-specific, and if it is possible to know a meaning of life in principle we can therefore be epistemologically optimistic about finding an answer to those questions of most existential import to all of us.

1 The meaning of the question

If we think that there is something to be said for the salience of 'meaning of life' talk, we might ask what *is* this meaning of life talk? Importantly, in order for us to speculate about the first-order question 'what is the meaning of life?', we must first have an answer to the second second-order question 'what is the meaning of the *question* of the meaning of life?'. In answering this second-order question, I draw upon thinkers who have already done a lot of the legwork. Through this meta-analysis, I outline common ways of understanding the term 'meaning', allowing us to analyse what is meant by 'the meaning of life' more fully.

1.1 The meaning of 'meaning'

Nozick (1981: 574-5) divides 'meaning' talk into eight different categories. These categories cover the different ways we usually use the word 'meaning'. Meaning, he says, may be used to denote the following.

1. External causal relationship (such as in "this means war").
2. External referential or semantic relation ("brother means male sibling").
3. Intention or purpose ("he meant well").
4. Lesson ("Gandhi's success means that nonviolent techniques sometimes can win over force").

5. Personal significance, importance, value or mattering ("you mean a lot to me").
6. Objective meaningfulness (importance, significance or meaning which is grounded objectively, rather than subjectively as with personal significance).
7. Intrinsic meaningfulness (the same as 6, but the ground for its objectivity comes only from itself, and not from its connection to anything else).
8. Total, resultant meaning (the sum total of 'meanings' 1-7).

Seachris (Seachris and Kim, 2018: 2) divides 'meaning' into three, rather than eight, distinct categories of use.

9. "Intelligibility-Meaning", such as: "What did you *mean* by that statement?".
10. "Purpose-Meaning", such as: "I really *mean* it".
11. "Significance-Meaning", such as: "That was such a *meaningful* conversation".

The different types of meaning expressed in Nozick's list may be placed under Seachris's own three categories. Under intelligibility-meaning, we may place Nozick's categories 1, 2, and 4. Nozick's category 1 denotes an 'external causal relationship', such that the phrase 'this means war' signifies an act which has caused another. This is an example of intelligibility-meaning because a request for a cause is a request for an explanation which renders the entire cause and effect scenario intelligible. His category 2 denotes an 'external referential or semantic relation', such that the phrase 'brother

means male sibling' signifies a relation between the term and its definition. This is intelligibility-meaning because a request for such a semantic relation is a request which would render the term in question intelligible. Finally, category 4 denotes a 'lesson', such that 'Gandhi's success means that nonviolent techniques sometimes can win over force' signifies a lesson to be learnt from this particular scenario or story. This is intelligibility-meaning because a request for such a lesson is a request to bring another level of understanding (i.e. intelligibility) to an already partially understood situation.

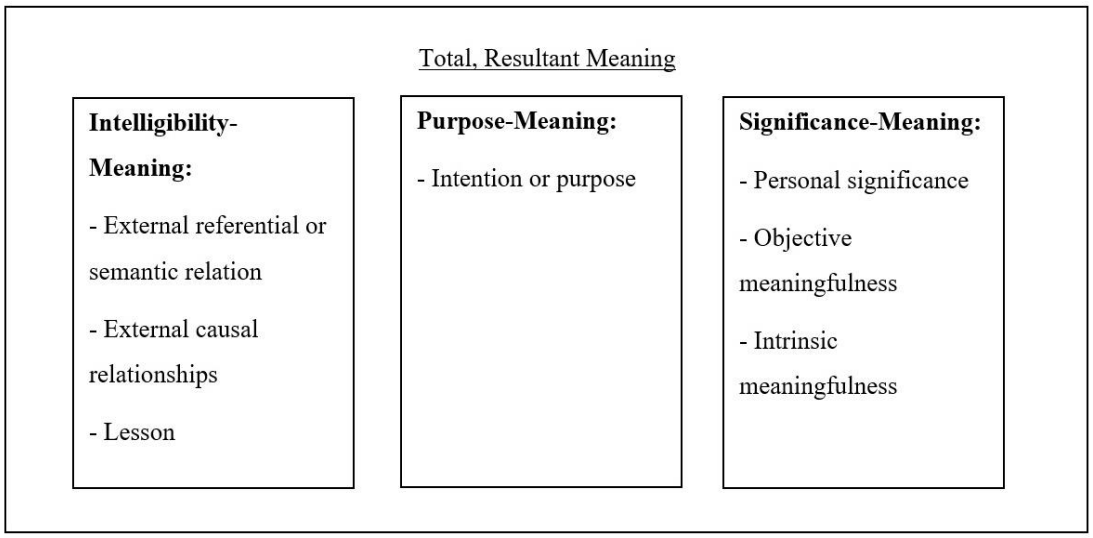
Under purpose-meaning we may place only category 3. This category denotes 'purpose' such that 'he meant well' signifies a purpose or type of purpose which one person intended.

Under significance-meaning there are categories 5, 6 and 7. Category 5 denotes 'personal significance, importance, value or mattering', such that 'you mean a lot to me' signifies a personal significance that one person has to another. Categories 6 and 7 are also types of significance-meaning since they are merely extensions of category 5. Category 6, 'objective meaningfulness', signifies a type of significance-meaning which is grounded objectively, and category 7, 'intrinsic meaningfulness', signifies a type of significance-meaning which is an extension of the previous category, in that it is a type of significance-meaning which is grounded objectively, but this objectivity comes from itself.

This leaves only category 8, 'total, resultant meaning': 'the sum total of 'meanings' 1-7'. This category encompasses all the rest, and even encompasses all three of Seachris' broader categories. This is what we get when we know the meaning of something in all

its different formulations. To understand the meaning of something in this way is to understand everything about it and its context. For example, we might know the total, resultant meaning of a selfless act of love from a father to a child if we were to say the following: First, that we know the cause of this act, being the love of the father, and its effect, being the happiness of the child; second, that we understand what the phrase a 'selfless act of love' means and what its terms refer to; third, that we understand the intention of the father; fourth, that we may learn a lesson from his actions; fifth, that his action expressed the significance of his child to him; sixth, that this significance of the act does not just come from himself but from, for example, the objective value of love; seventh, that the significance of this act, and thereby the value of love, is something which is intrinsically meaningful.

In order to clarify how I have ordered and correlated these categories I have created a diagram which illustrates this topology.



One thing common to much contemporary analytic meaning of life study is the use of meaning as referring only to those final two columns: purpose-meaning and significance-meaning. Metz, for example, takes for granted that at the most fundamental level a meaningful life is synonymous with a life that is "important", "significant", that "matters" or "has a point" (2013b: 80) It is true that he develops and interrogates this concept of meaningfulness further, but he ignores as presumably irrelevant that use of meaning that acts as a request for an explanation or to render something intelligible and understandable. This seems peculiar not least because, as Munitz points out, "In everyday language, the expressions "find intelligible," "understand," and "know the meaning of" are frequently used interchangeably in a variety of situations." (1993: 15).

Munitz's own discussion of the meaning of 'meaning' is short but insightful. He points out that there may be two ways in which we use the word 'meaning'. First, we may use it "*to make sense of what some linguistic or other symbol means*." (ibid., his emphasis). In such a case, asking for the meaning of life would merely be asking for an explanation of the use(s) of the expression "life". The second way he says we use it is to adopt a "*philosophy of human life*" (his emphasis), where we want an explanation of life – we want it to answer to ""the point of it all," "significance," "value," "being worthwhile," and "purpose."" (ibid.: 16).

At first glance, this seems to miss out those intelligibility-meaning uses of which he had previously reminded us. However, he goes on to say that asking for an explanation, such as asking for the meaning of life, can "point in two different directions" (ibid.). It may, on the one hand, point backwards to a cause or causes; or it may point forwards to life's values, purpose(s), goals and how these are all determined. Notably, we see that a

cause may be posited as an answer to something's meaning, which acts to make it intelligible and explain it. In this way, looking backwards may provide intelligibility-meaning, and looking forwards may provide purpose-meaning or significance-meaning. We may also note that, in looking forwards to (for example) life's purpose(s), we may be forced also to look back for its cause(s). The most important insight to take from Munitz, then, for our purposes, is the idea that these different uses of 'meaning' may be conceptually different, but still interrelated. We may be asking for a *purpose* (or telos), but in order to find this purpose, we may have to look backwards for a *cause* (or nisus): something which renders our lives intelligible.

We may also, looking back upon the diagram of categories, reflect upon the fact that one category contained within the intelligibility-meaning column is that of 'external referential or semantic relation'. Reminding ourselves of these terms, this category refers to cases of synonymy, reference, or symbolism. Considering our need to remember the intelligibility-meaning usage, our ordinary use of 'meaning' as denoting synonymous phrases ('brother means male sibling') may therefore serve us better than we realise in answering apparently to non-linguistic meaning requests. As Leach and Tartaglia point out, "perhaps, for instance, [the question of life's meaning] invites us to compare human life [. . .] to a linguistic code in need of deciphering." (2018: 275). In any case, the meaning of 'meaning' in the question of *life's* meaning is not so obviously separate from its other, more ordinary uses.

Let us reiterate the most important points. First, we have seen that there are a number of ways that we can use the word 'meaning', and that these different uses may belong to multiple categories of use at the same time (for example, 'What is the meaning of this?'

might be said to be both a request for intention, but also a request to render the situation intelligible). Second, we have seen that there are different levels from which we can view and categorise meaning talk, being either broader or more specific. We can speak of significance-meaning, but we can also speak more specifically about *personal* significance, *objective* meaningfulness, or *intrinsic* meaningfulness; and we might also look at meaning holistically as the sum-total of many or all of the different ways of using the word. Third, we have seen how intelligibility-meaning is often taken to be inconsequential to life's meaning, and that attention is given primarily to purpose-meaning and significance-meaning by many thinkers in the field.

1.2 A plurality of questions?

Now that we have some idea regarding what might be meant when someone uses the word 'meaning', we must pose the question: When we ask specifically for the meaning of life, are we asking a singular question, a question that sensibly unifies a plurality of other related questions, or are we asking a plurality of questions that cannot be sensibly unified, rendering the question senseless?

If we think that the question is a single unified request, the view is that we are giving multiple interrelated requests sensibly collected under a single term: 'the meaning of life'. With the other pluralist understanding – that the question is an amalgam of distinct, non-unifiable requests – when we ask for the meaning of life we are asking many distinct things at once, grouping together questions that cannot be sensibly asked together. If we hold to the former understanding, which we might call a type of monism regarding the question, we may be reminded of something like Aristotle's categories of

causation, through which there can be different, distinct understandings of a particular thing's cause, and yet a singular understanding of this thing requires a unified understanding of its causes. It requires understanding them all. Also recall Nozick's notion of total, resultant meaning, where a request for meaning under this understanding would be the 'sum total' of interrelated meaning requests. This understanding of meaning would hold to the former, unified conception.

This being the case, we now see that the unified understanding of the question is not necessarily the same as any conception which argues that it is a singular request: it must also affirm that this singular request is a unification of other related requests or elements. For one could reasonably think that asking for the meaning of life is asking a *singular* question, such as 'what is the purpose of life?', but that it is not asking a *unified* one which represents the totality of some or all related requests. The amalgam thesis – a pluralist thesis that denies the possibility for sensible unification of the different requests – denies the possibility for a unified and monistic interpretation of the question of life's meaning on the basis that the various requests posed under the umbrella of the meaning of life cannot be sensibly asked together, so that what is really being asked is a number of non-unifiable questions. The unified approach – the monist thesis – is also pluralist, but asserts that this unification is possible and sensible under the umbrella of the meaning of life.

What, then, of the person who denies the unified nature of the question of the meaning of life, but nevertheless thinks that there is a separate and distinct question which accurately represents the request for life's meaning? This conceptual space is one I believe the literature has not properly addressed (perhaps because few philosophers

holds such a view), and so merely for convenience I think it is beneficial to give this position a name. I elect to call this position ‘particularism’, and, following this, to call its proponent a ‘particularist’, since they are saying that the question of life’s meaning is, in fact, asking a particular question. Unlike the pluralist, the particularist thinks that the question of the meaning of life is a sensible question, but, unlike the monist, denies that the question is a unification of other interrelated requests or elements.

Let us take a moment to recap. There is one type of pluralist who proposes the ‘amalgam thesis’. This person sees the question as a placeholder for a plurality of different requests, such as for ‘purpose’, ‘importance’, ‘cause’ or ‘how one should live’, and they deny the possibility of unification into a singular request. Then there is the monist, another type of pluralist. This person sees the question as a unified request, and thinks that there is something specific to the request itself which justifies unification under the single question of the meaning of life. The difference between these two positions is that where the former does not think that unification is possible, the latter thinks that it is possible and is actually the case. The amalgam theorist sees unification as impossible, and therefore that the question of the meaning of life is not a distinct question at all. The monist sees that the question of life’s meaning is a unified one, and therefore that it serves as a question in its own right. The final type of person I have called a ‘particularist’, who neither believes that the question of the meaning of life is a unification of interrelated elements, nor that it is a cluster of non-unifiable requests or elements, rather that it is a particular question that represents a singular request.

2 Answers to the question

Now that we have gone some way to understanding what it means to ask the question 'What is the meaning of life?', we may begin to look at how we might classify different types of answer. First, I outline some common distinctions that are drawn between types of answer to the question, then I argue for a fundamental and primary distinction between answers to 'the meaning *of* life' and answers to 'meaning *in* life', where the former is understood as a global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence that narrates across those elements of most existential import to human beings. Because the former is the primary focus of the remainder of this thesis, properly outlining this distinction is crucial. Finally, I explain why, for the 'meaning-of' question, intelligibility-meaning plays a central role in the unification of different related elements of existential import.

2.1 Common distinctions

Seachris distinguishes between 'global' and 'local' answers to the question of life's meaning. He tells us that the former 'global' type of answer will seek to "render the universe and our lives within it intelligible" (2013: 4) and that as such it seeks "a deep explanation, context, or narrative through which to interpret existence" (ibid.). We see here the link with Seachris' categories of meaning-use discussed in Section 1.1. Global meaning fits nicely into that oft-neglected column of 'intelligibility-meaning'. 'Local' meaning Seachris places alongside 'individualist' meaning, which he describes as "normative" (ibid.). He says that, when asking this local question, we are asking "what

we must, or should, or ought to order our lives around so as to render them meaningful" (ibid.).

Closely related to this distinction is another, between "holistic" answers and "individualistic" ones (Metz, 2013a: 24). "Holistic" answers are ones that ask "about the universe or about the human race as a species", while "individualist" answers ask "about one of us" (ibid.). In other words, the holistic answer is answering what the meaning of life is for the human species as a whole, and individualist answers tell us how an individual may live to make their life more or less meaningful. Metz also notes that, in the literature, it is only usually the latter, individualist conception that is said to have an "evaluative" or normative dimension (i.e., that says life's meaning is about something desirable). The meaning that one may accrue in one's own life is usually seen as positive, whereas any holistic answer to the meaning of life for the species as a whole is usually regarded as non-evaluative, i.e. purely descriptive – it is simply something that is the case, and is neither positive or negative. Metz does also say that the notion of an evaluative-holistic answer could do with further exploration in the literature (ibid.), and I agree. For instance, one might argue that the purpose that a god constituted of absolute good gives us would be a holistic answer (an answer for the species as a whole) but also evaluative, because such an answer would by its nature be a good one, since any meaning that an absolutely good god gives us would have to be good.

We can see that the global-local and holist-individualist distinctions are closely tied. Both distinctions are primarily ones of scale, in that the global and holist answers are answers to a larger scale question (concerning the species as a whole, or existence in its

entirety), and the local and individualist answers are answers to a smaller scale question (concerning the individual). The only clear difference between the distinctions, at least insofar as their respective proponents describe them, is that global answers seem to be ones of intelligibility-meaning, whereas holist answers are not restricted just to this category, and may be ones of purpose-meaning or significance-meaning also. However, in section 2.3. I explain why we may consider intelligibility-meaning as overarching all other types of meaning when we request a holistic meaning of life, and so this difference between the distinctions becomes dissolved. As such, and bearing in mind their overlap, from here onwards I treat global as synonymous with holistic, and local as synonymous with individualistic.

We also see the possibility that an answer to the global question might provide an answer to the local one, because a deep explanation through which to interpret existence might tell us how we should order our lives in order to render them meaningful. This is an asymmetric relation, however, since a local answer could never guarantee a global one. It is true that if we somehow discovered an answer to the local question of life's meaning, we might be more inclined towards a particular global answer, but this would never be a necessary conclusion to draw, and would not ensure that the global answer is correct. If we were to say, for example, that it is meaningful for a person to order their life around kindness and compassion, we might find reason to be inclined towards a global answer such as that of an omnibenevolent god, but this would not necessarily have to be the case.

In fact, even if we somehow discovered that not only is kindness and compassion objectively meaningful (a local answer), but also that this fact guarantees the existence

of a god (a global answer), then this relationship, extending from the local to the global, would be an *epistemological* one, not an *ontological* one. It would not be that the local answer ontologically guarantees the global answer, it would merely be that the local answer allows us to uncover the truth of the global answer. The global answer, on the other hand, would provide this ontological guarantee. The global answer is ontologically prior to the local one, but not vice versa. In this way we can say, providing these stipulations, that the global-local relation is asymmetrical, and that the local answer may be given by the global, but not vice versa.

One further distinction that deserves mentioning, also tied closely to the global-local one, is Tartaglia's distinction between 'metaphysical' and 'social' meaning (2016). Metaphysical answers, in short, answer the question: "What are we here for?" (ibid.: 2). Social answers are ones which tell us "how to make our lives more meaningful" (ibid.: 3), where this meaning comes from social relations. Social answers, as opposed to metaphysical ones, are ones that answer from within our framework when it is already presupposed, and are social in nature. They ask: 'What may I do from within my context of social relations in order to make my life more meaningful?'.

I will stick with the global-local distinction rather than this one, but the metaphysical-social distinction does serve to point out that the nature of the local question is primarily a social one. This is important philosophically because it helps us to reflect upon the difference between local answers to life's meaning as evaluative ones, and global answers to life's meaning as descriptive ones. It helps us to understand the distinction as one which runs throughout all philosophy: between how we should act, and what we know to be the case. And, remember, the latter may provide ontological

ground for the former, but not the other way around. At this point we might question whether a global answer would have to be a metaphysical one. Could not, for instance, a naturalistic explanation and purpose for our existence suffice? One might argue that our species is here today because we have survived the Darwinian process of evolution, and, courtesy of this process, our purpose is simply to carry on surviving and reproducing. This might be considered a global answer, since it answers to the species as a whole, and yet it would be entirely naturalistic. Whether this is a sufficiently global answer or not merely depends on the scope of the question you are asking. But a naturalistic answer such as that of evolution is insufficient because it does not provide ultimate teleological justification: Why is the evolutionary explanation itself meaningful? Why should we consider a purely mechanical explanation our final end? From such a mechanical explanation of our existence there is no telos and no normative aspect, only brute explanation which is cut short before any final or ultimate answer. So, whilst a global answer may be naturalistic, such an answer would not be suitably *philosophical*[1] in the way that the question of the meaning of life requires. As such, we might add the stipulation that, unless the naturalist can provide good reasons to think that any attempt to move beyond the naturalistic picture is conceptually confused, the *philosophical* question of the global meaning of life, when interpreted in this manner, must be metaphysical. There are further ways of distinguishing between types of answer to the question, but these are mostly either variations of the global-local

[1]What is meant by 'philosophical' is a controversial topic, but one thing is clear, namely that reflections on scientific conceptions of the world themselves are philosophical, and therefore pursuing our line of questioning to its final end, which would call into question any scientific framework *itself*, is philosophical. I would, of course, admit that any naturalistic explanation which demonstrably *cannot* be questioned further, due to its own nature, would be a good candidate for a suitably philosophical answer to the meaning of life, since to come to such a conclusion would involve reflection upon the nature of the scientific framework itself, rather than taking it as a given.

distinction, or otherwise ways of distinguishing between different types of local answer. For instance, Seachris divides answers to this local question into four categories: supernaturalism (orientating your life towards god's purpose), objective naturalism (orientating your life towards objectively meaningful and mind-independent but nevertheless natural things), subjective naturalism (orientating your life towards whatever you find subjectively meaningful), and pessimistic naturalism (i.e. nihilism, that there is no meaning in life since nothing has any value) (2013: 11-13). For the purposes of this thesis, however, we may focus only upon the broader distinction between global/metaphysical and local/social answers.

2.2 The meaning *of* life and meaning *in* life

We have seen that there are two broad ways in which we may distinguish answers to the question of life's meaning. First, there are global answers which answer to the species or existence as a whole. These answers, in order to suitably answer the philosophical question of the meaning of life, must be metaphysical as they must not take the framework of existence as a given. Second, there are local answers which attempt to tell us how individuals might live in order to make their lives more meaningful. These answers are social as opposed to metaphysical since they arise from within our already existing social framework. We have also seen that while a global answer may guarantee a local one this is an asymmetric relation because a local answer cannot guarantee a global one. To the extent that a local answer might somehow tell us the global answer, this is only ever an epistemological relation, not an ontological one.

The question now is this. Given that there is a distinction between global and local answers, is this distinction sufficiently wide[1] for us to consider these two types of answer responses to two separate and distinct questions? In other words, is the difference between global and local answers wide enough for us to say that they are not answering the same question at all? I believe this to be the case, and that global answers are answering the question 'What is the meaning *of* life?', whereas local answers are answering the question 'how may I attain more meaning *in* my life?'. Correlated with the distinction between global and local answers, then, are the questions of the meaning *of* life, and of meaning *in* life, respectively.

Let us consider just how wide the global-local distinction is. A global answer to the philosophical question of the meaning of life will be metaphysical in nature: it will tell us something about the ultimate nature of reality and our place and purpose in it. A local answer, on the other hand, will tell us how an individual might order their life in order to make it more meaningful. We could potentially have local meaning (for example 'to live your life authentically') without global meaning. There have been many philosophers, in fact, who have attempted to demonstrate just this – who have argued for local meaning given the lack of any global meaning. Indeed, the entire post-Nietzschean, existentialist branch of philosophy might convincingly be argued to be a response to the 'death' of the metaphysical conception of life's meaning, by replacing it with a local and social conception (Young, 2014). Whether or not this specific understanding of the history of philosophy is maintained, the point stands that local answers have traditionally been understood as a potential way of retaining meaning in

[1]The 'wideness' of the distinction here simply refers to whether there is any overlap between the two types of answer, and if so, how much overlap. In other words, it refers to how distinct the two questions are.

our lives *despite* the lack of any global, metaphysical meaning. The distinctness of these conceptions is therefore implicit. Of course, we could only successfully replace one type of answer with another if they were answers to the same question. If we think philosophers have attempted to replace the one type of answer with another, but also that these two types of answer are answers to different questions, then we must also think these philosophers were and are incorrect to think of the one type of answer as a replacement for the other. That these two answers are arguably historically distinct is not proof that they are answers to separate questions, rather it goes to illuminate the distinctness of the two types of answer, because it shows that we may have a local answer even without a global one.

In order to further demonstrate the distinctness of the two types of answer we might consider the sorts of questions that one might ask when requesting either a global or local answer. If we are looking for a local answer, we might ask something like 'How should I live my life in order to attain the most meaning for it in the final analysis?'. If we are looking for a global answer, we might ask 'What is the ultimate purpose and explanation for life and existence in general?'. Recalling the social-metaphysical distinction, here we can clearly see that local answers are ones which arise from within a social framework where the metaphysical nature of reality is not explicitly questioned. On the other hand, when we are asking for a global answer, the metaphysical nature of reality and therefore the social framework *itself* is what is being questioned. If the metaphysical nature of reality is ever questioned as a result of local question or answer this is only as a by-product of that particular local question or answer – that it is a local question or answer does not *itself* necessitate a metaphysical explanation, because it could arguably be the case that the maximal local meaning that one can attain has no

relation to the ultimate metaphysical explanation for reality, as local meaning might be argued to depend only on subjective or intersubjective agreement, for example. The global question of or answer to life's meaning, however, does necessitate a metaphysical explanation.

The global-metaphysical answer is of a higher order, in that it questions the entire foundation from which the social question arises. Considering this, if we were going to say that the global and local answers are answering the same question, then we would have to also say that any question arising from within our social framework, such as moral questions, are of the same kind as metaphysical ones that question this entire social framework.

Tartaglia says the following (2016: 22):

> The [social] framework imposes a mutual understanding; an interpretation of the world and the various options we have for living in it which facilitates cooperation for the purposes of satisfying our imperatives, many of which are suggested – and all of which are shaped – by the framework itself.

He goes on to explain how this social framework is analogous to a "highly flexible and complex game" (ibid.: 23), and uses this to distinguish the social framework from life itself, in that "if the practice of playing the prescribed roles of the framework, and thereby interpreting life as a game were to cease, life would not cease" (ibid.), whereas in a game such as chess, if such practice ceased, so would chess itself.

This helps bring to light why the metaphysical and social answers are so different. Asking for meaning from within the social framework is akin to asking which chess piece should go where. Asking for meaning globally and metaphysically, however, is akin to asking why the rules of chess are what they are, and asking why anyone should bother playing it in the first place. The local question of life's meaning is located *in* the framework; the global question is about the meaning *of* the framework itself.

This also goes some way towards explaining the asymmetry described earlier: that the ontological relation can only ever run from the global to the local, and not vice versa. Let us continue with our analogy. A local answer in the game of chess might be that one should attempt to play in such a manner, through adherence to the rules of the game, that you might eventually checkmate your opponent. A global answer, on the other hand, might be that the game is created with X, Y and Z rules, by us humans, for various purposes such as to have fun, or to test one's mental skills, or to provide opportunity to outwit other opponents. A local answer could answer to the purpose of chess by saying that the purpose from within the game is to win it via checkmate, where the purpose of and explanation for *this* purpose is presupposed; to question this purpose further would be to request a global answer. The former, local answer, to checkmate your opponent, could never in itself guarantee the purpose of the game's existence, as to do so it would need to exit its framework, the existence of which the local answer itself is predicated upon. On the other hand, the entire context and purpose of the framework itself, and the rules which we devised, might tell us what the purpose of the game is internal to its framework. We might say that the local answer, 'to checkmate your opponent', gives us insight into the purpose of the game's framework itself, since it points towards its nature being competitive (we could even argue that this being the

purpose *necessitates* the competitive nature of the framework), for example, but then this would only be an epistemological relation. It could never be the case that the answer 'to checkmate your opponent' is ontologically prior to the game's overall purpose, its framework of rules included. On the other hand, it *is* the case that the game's framework is ontologically prior to the game's purpose to checkmate your opponent since you cannot have the latter without the former.

Where the first, local, answer arises as a response to the question 'What is the purpose of chess?' from within the framework of the game itself, the second, global answer also answers to its purpose, but from outside of the framework. It is clear that these are not the same questions at all, for where one is questioning how one should act from within the rules of the game, the other is questioning the intelligibility, purpose, and significance of the game in its entirety. In other words, whilst they are both answering the purpose (or intelligibility or significance) of the game, the object of this question is different. In the first case, the object in question is 'the game from within, already presupposing its framework of existence'. In the second case, the object in question is 'the game from without, including its framework of existence'.

So, we see that although at face value both local and global requests for the purpose, intelligibility, or significance of the game are the same, upon closer inspection the object of questioning is different in each case. The object of the local answer is the game with its framework already presupposed, and the object of the global answer is the game's framework itself. When considering the question of life's meaning, then, we can say that a local answer is answering to the meaning of life with its social framework already presupposed, and a global answer is answering to the meaning of life in its

entirety, including its framework. As such, these are two distinct answers deserving of their own distinct questions. The 'meaning *in* life' and 'meaning *of* life' distinction is most suitable, since it indicates that the local answer is answering the question from *within* the framework, whereas the global answer is essentially about the meaning *of* the framework and all it contains. Thus, the question 'What is the meaning of life?' is asking a distinct global question, and the question 'How may I gain meaning *in* my life?' is asking a distinct local question.

So, the question of 'the meaning of life', which is the focus of the remainder of this thesis, is distinct from the question of 'meaning in life'. The question of the meaning of life is seeking a global, metaphysical answer – but is there anything else to be said about it? Importantly, is it *just* the request for a global and metaphysical answer?

2.3 Metaphysical narratives

There is much talk of 'narrative' in the literature on life's meaning (e.g. May, 2015; Bres, 2018; Kauppinen, 2012). However, such talk is almost always centred around issues of meaning *in* life, in other words, around how one might make their own life narratively meaningful from within the social framework. When narrative is used in this context, it is used as a potential means of objectively grounding meaning, as something that can be aimed towards by the individual in order to increase the 'meaning total' of their life. If you attain narrative consistency, or live a life which instantiates a particular type of story or narrative 'texture', then you have increased the meaning in your life.

This is not how Seachris uses narrative. In his paper, 'The Meaning of Life as Narrative: A New Proposal for Interpreting Philosophy's "Primary" Question' (2009), he argues that the request for the meaning of life is a request for "a narrative that narrates across those elements and accompanying questions of life of greatest existential import to human beings" (ibid.: 20). This understanding of the question of the meaning of life is, I think, correct.

At this point, it is useful to look at the broader picture, and to remind ourselves of the question of the meaning of life, and the circumstances under which it is often posed. Although the question may be posed under many circumstances, one preeminent circumstance is that of the existential crisis. We may wonder just what our life's purpose has been, how significant it has been, or perhaps just how, or from which context, it makes sense. Probably the most well-known description of the existential crisis comes autobiographically, from Tolstoy (1882). Here he describes the way in which his life became more and more meaningless to him, through more and more frequent "moments of perplexity" (ibid.: 380) during which he would question and doubt his life's meaning. Eventually this became his preeminent mood, and his entire life was thrown into the jaws of meaninglessness. I quote here at length (ibid.: 381).

> I was absolutely muddled up inside, and did not know what to think. When thinking about how best to educate my children, I would ask myself: "What for?" Or when thinking about how best to promote the welfare of the peasants, I would suddenly say to myself: "But what does it matter to me?" And when I thought about the fame that all my literary works would bring to me, I would say to myself: "Very well, I will become famous. So what? What then?"

> I could find no answers, but the questions would not wait. They had to be answered at once, and if I did not answer them, it was impossible for me to live. But no answer was being given. I felt that the ground on which I stood was crumbling, that there was nothing for me to stand on, that what I had been living from and for was nothing, that I had no solid reason for living.

Notice that Tolstoy questioned his life's meaning *despite* having lived a life which many would say is meaningful from a context internal to our social framework. So, often what is ultimately being questioned in the existential crisis is the framework itself, thus the global-metaphysical question of the meaning of life.

However, Tolstoy also serves as an example of the importance of the answer to life's meaning being *for us*. His moments of perplexity arose from contemplating just what it is that makes his *own* goals, activities, and relationships meaningful. He questioned his two previously held purposes: his family and his writing (ibid.: 382). He tells us, "Once I grasped how meaningless and terrible my own life was, the play in the mirror could no longer amuse me." (ibid.). So it is through his *own* life being thrown into question that the *play* (or framework) of life is also thrown into question. But what does it mean for an answer to be 'for us'? I contend that an answer which is suitably 'for us' is one which is as Seachris describes, which narrates across various elements of most existential import to us. If the answer does not narrate across those things which strike us as most important (such as, for example, our relationships to others, or our life's passions, or the role that death plays in our life and its meaning), then it cannot be considered a suitable answer to the meaning of life. This is not to say, however, that the answer cannot be *negative* in some of these respects – for example, we could have an

answer which says that death, when it comes for each individual, *does* annihilate the meaning in our lives (or we could have one that says that it is entirely unimportant) – it just means that the answer must in some way address the issue, either implicitly or explicitly.

So, we may say that the elements and questions of most existential import are those which might be posed in an existential crisis. An answer to the meaning of life, in other words, must be suitably far-reaching. Seachris tells us that these elements across which the meaning of life must narrate should "directly address the cluster of existentially relevant facts and accompanying questions that most often surface in the context of discussions over the meaning of life" (2009: 14). They are what "motivate us to inquire into life's meaning" (ibid.: 15). He proposes five elements/questions which might fit the bill. There is room for discussion and debate around the details, but these give us enough of a foothold to continue our discussion. They are the following (ibid.: 14).

> [1] *Fact*—something exists, we [humans] exist, and I exist / *Question*—Why does anything or we or I exist at all?
> [2] *Question*—Does life have any purpose(s), and if so, what is its nature and source?
> [3] *Fact*—we are often passionately engaged in life pursuits and projects that we deem, pre-philosophically, to be valuable and worthwhile / *Question*—Does the worth and value of these pursuits and projects need *grounding* in something else, and if so, what?
> [4] *Fact*—pain and suffering are a part of the universe / *Question*—Why?
> [5] *Question*—How does it all end? Is death final? Is there an eschatological remedy to the ills of this world?

According to Seachris, these elements are what stand "in need of elucidation, or narration" (ibid.: 15). This list is not necessarily exhaustive, and an answer to the meaning of life does not necessarily have to narrate across every single one of these elements, but it at least goes some way towards demonstrating which sorts of elements a global-metaphysical explanation for our existence should affect. These are some of those elements and questions of most existential import to human beings. In short, these are elements and questions that might be posed in an existential crisis like the one that Tolstoy had, revolving around the nature and purpose of our existence and its significance. Death, suffering, and the significance of our life pursuits are of existential import to us because they question the overall purpose, intelligibility, and significance of those elements taken to be most important and in common to all human life. Whatever someone chooses to be their own pursuits and projects, the fact of there being some such pursuits and projects, and the fact of suffering and death, is common to this person as it is to every human being, and it is the intelligibility, purpose, and significance of these things that is called into question in the existential crisis. Narrating across these common elements is what a meaning of life must do. However, for our purposes, and given all that we have come to understand about the question of the meaning of life, I think we can take Seachris's general idea and run with it in a slightly different direction. Given our focus upon the preeminent distinction between meaning *in* life and the meaning *of* life, we might now be tempted to reconsider the relationship between the two.

The meaning *of* life, we concluded, is a global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence in general. Meaning *in* life is something which can supposedly be attained within an individual's own life to make it more meaningful from within the social

framework. However, we now have an addendum to the 'meaning-of' formulation, in that it must also narrate across those elements and questions of most existential import to human beings. At this point one might respond that the 'meaning-of' answer must also answer to the 'meaning-in' formulation, for if it does not do this, the Tolstoys of the world are not likely to be satisfied, since they will be unconvinced of how any of this explanation pertains to *them*. Seemingly, then, we have snuck meaning *in* life in through the back door. We might even doubt our clear distinction between the two questions. Does this mean that they are, after all of this, the same question?

The answer to this is no, they are not the same question. We can see this clearly if we return to the analogy of chess. The meaning-in question, we discovered, is analogous to questioning what the point of chess is from within the game. The answer would be 'to checkmate your opponent'. The meaning-of question is analogous to questioning what the point of the *existence* of the game of chess is, a question of another order. Let us assume there is an answer to this second-order question, the meaning *of* the game – let us say that the answer is, for the moment, 'to better one's strategic mental faculties'. Let us also assume that we decide this answer is not enough, and that it must also tell us about the point of the game from within. The answer to this new formulation might be: 'The point of the game is to better one's strategic mental faculties, and to do this you must adhere to the rules of the game and try to checkmate your opponent.' We now have a comprehensive answer to this new formulation, which includes the answer to the original formulation (the point of the game's *existence*) and also the other question, the new addendum (the point of the game from within). The other question (the addendum, the point of the game from within), we must notice, does not require the second-order question (the point of the *existence* of the game) for it to function on its own, because

one could imagine other explanations for the existence of chess that would result in the same answer to the point of the game from within; the same local question can be asked, and the same answer potentially given, regardless of the answer to the global question. Furthermore, we might say that an answer to the meaning *of* the game is something such as, 'To provide a spectacle for those outside the game.' In this case, there would be no correct way to play the game once we are within the framework, but there *would* be a purpose to our playing the game at all. What this shows us is that we might have an answer that answers to the meaning *in* the game in the negative – it says that what we do *in* the game does not matter – but which nevertheless *pertains to* the meaning in the game. In other words, we might have an answer which narrates across the point of the game from within, i.e. which tells us something about the point of the game from within, but which tells us that there *is* no point of the game from within.

The same is true of the meaning-in/meaning-of distinction. Whilst our new addendum to the meaning-of question means it must narrate across those elements of most existential import to us, this does not necessitate the inclusion of a positive answer to meaning in life; it only necessitates that the answer must *pertain* to meaning in life. A suitable answer could, for instance, be a global-metaphysical explanation which tells us that these elements of existential import that pertain to meaning *in* life (such as our relationships, narrative consistency, subjective engagement, etc.) are actually unimportant. The answer has still narrated across these elements, but it does not tell us that they are relevant or important. That we could have a positive answer to the meaning of life that includes a negative answer to meaning in life proves that the addendum 'a meaning of life must pertain to meaning in life' does not render the two questions the same.

We may look at an example to demonstrate the importance of this new addendum to the question of the meaning of life. Suppose that someone is asking for the meaning of life. Perhaps they are in distress, steeped in existential doubt and crisis; or, perhaps they are simply wondering, as we are, from a removed, philosophical standpoint. Either way, they ask the question: 'What is the meaning of life?'. Let us suppose someone replies the following: 'I have recently, through much philosophical reflection, discovered that there exists a necessary being, a 'god', if you like. This god created all of everything that there is, and is himself of such a nature that he could never have *not* been. This god created everything so that the Blorgs, a faraway species of alien life, can reproduce and colonise their galaxy, and eventually the universe in its entirety. God created the Blorgs because he wanted something to manifest itself in material form as a representation of himself – the blorgs are like God. As for our purpose, it is simply to help the Blorgs achieve their colonising goal. One day we will encounter a Blorgian diplomat who asks for aid, and by this point we must have reached a point in the development of our civilisation where we are capable of helping them. Eventually we must allow them to exterminate us.'

In this example, see that we have a global-metaphysical explanation for our existence: that a god has created us for the purpose of helping the Blorgs. But does this answer narrate across those elements of most existential import to us? Yes, it does. We have been told why we exist, and for what purpose; we have been told what we should be doing (we should be attempting to get civilisation to a point where we can help the Blorgs with their colonisation); and we have been told something about our place and importance in the universe. Notice that we have not answered to all of the elements from Seachris' list, but this is okay. First, the list is not something that must be

exhaustive – it merely demonstrates the sorts of elements and questions which we wish a global-metaphysical explanation to affect. Second, this particular global-metaphysical explanation for existence seemingly *will*, in fact, narrate across these other elements which are, on the face of it, left out. For instance, if we were to know more about the nature of the god of this explanation, we might discover something about our deaths and whether they would be final. And as for whether our deaths affect the meaning of life, we have a direct answer to that: they only affect the meaning of life to the extent that they might alter the chance of human civilisation reaching a point where it is capable of helping the Blorgs. Furthermore, if we knew more about the nature of this god and of the reality that he has created, then we would know the nature and purpose of suffering (perhaps it is necessary for us to suffer for the Blorgs to achieve their goal). The fact that we do not know this explicitly from the global-metaphysical answer does not mean that the answer does not, in fact, narrate across this element of existential import to us. At most, we can say that we have incomplete knowledge regarding the full implications of the global-metaphysical explanation, but this would still *be* the explanation, an answer to the meaning of life, and it would still narrate across these elements of most existential import to us. And this explanation would not be cut short, either, since it would not stop short of final teleological justification. We would not only know the reason for our existence, we would know the reason for the Blorgs' existence, too, which would be the ultimate teleological explanation for life in general.

Once again we return to an epistemological problem, not an ontological one. A meaning of life must be a global-metaphysical answer which narrates across questions and elements of most existential import to us, but that does not mean that *how* the answer narrates across these questions and elements will be clear. This is why, for example,

there are so many differing interpretations of how we should live our lives even from within the same religion (say, Christianity), where each interpretation comes from the same global-metaphysical explanation. If we suppose that the Christian God exists, then the fact that there might be different interpretations of the correct way to live for God does not mean, however, that there is not a single *correct* way to live for God (or that there is, in fact, no correct way). God, as an explanation for existence, would narrate across these elements, and whether or not we know how this explanation affects these elements, or how we should interpret them, does not matter—it still *would* affect these elements.

So, we now have it that the meaning of life must be a global-metaphysical explanation for existence and the human species which narrates across those elements and questions of most existential import to us. We must, however, remember the primacy of the global-metaphysical explanation. Because such an explanation would be the ultimate foundation for existence, it is logically and ontologically prior to anything we might say about other elements and questions of existential import. So, while a global-metaphysical answer must pertain to such elements and questions, we must remember that the global-metaphysical explanation itself is what is primary, and is what allows us to answer to these other elements and questions (whether in the positive or negative).

Importantly, this development of our understanding of the question of the meaning of life resonates with something that we discovered in chapter 1: that one way of understanding the meaning of something is to understand its "total, resultant meaning" (Nozick, 1981: 575). This 'total' meaning, we said, describes the meaning of something when this explanation encompasses all other types of meaning (see §1.1). Another way

to think of total meaning, then, would be as a meaning which *narrates across* all other types of meaning. Considering the meaning of life, we might say that it is a global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence which narrates across those different elements and questions of most existential import to us, *and* which narrates across those elements of different meaning *types*. So, if we take Seachris' more broad categories of meaning – intelligibility, significance, and purpose (Seachris and Kim, 2018: 2) – we can say that the meaning of life, a global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence, narrates across those elements of most existential import to us, and in doing so narrates across the three different types of meaning. Going back to the god of the Blorgs, we can see that such an explanation for the meaning of life would, in fact, narrate across not only different elements and questions of existential import, but also across different types of meaning. We would understand our purpose, but we would also have our place in the universe rendered intelligible, and we would have some idea of our significance.

2.4 The centrality of intelligibility-meaning

We now have a final definition for 'the meaning of life', being an ultimate (global and metaphysical) explanation for life and existence which narrates across those elements of most existential import to human beings. We have also seen how this is similar to Nozick's notion of total, resultant meaning, whereby it answers to all different relevant conceptions of 'meaning', and most broadly to purpose-meaning, intelligibility-meaning, and significance-meaning. Of these, however, intelligibility-meaning is central.

By ‘central’ I mean that, given this understanding of the question, intelligibility-meaning best describes the sort of meaning that we are looking for when we ask for a meaning of life. But this is not to say that significance-meaning and purpose-meaning are not present in our understanding – in fact, they are very important, they just play less of a central role in unifying different elements of the question than intelligibility-meaning. Remember, we are not operating under a definition of the meaning of life which sees it as a cluster of disjointed requests (the pluralist position), rather we are operating under a definition which unifies various interrelated requests and elements under the umbrella of one term, treating it as a single meaningful question (the monist position). Intelligibility-meaning, I argue, plays a central role in this unification.

In the previous section we looked at some examples of the sorts of elements or requests which are of most existential import to human beings, and are what an answer to the meaning of life must narrate across. Under this definition we maintain that the global-metaphysical answer is foundational to all other related elements, but we also leave room for this global-metaphysical answer to narrate across these other important elements.

The problem, however, is that we cannot so clearly say that every element is one of purpose-meaning or of significance-meaning, although these elements may have certain implications on our views regarding each of these things. This is why the ‘total, resultant meaning’ conception which Nozick provides is so useful: because it allows us to narrate not just across different elements of existential import, but also across different *types* of elements of existential import. It allows us to narrate across elements of type intelligibility-meaning, significance-meaning, and purpose-meaning. Under total

meaning, we are allowed to narrate across all of these types of meaning and to unify different elements of existential import. But what does this process of unification look like?

Intelligibility-meaning regarding the meaning of life, Seachris tells us, is a way to "make sense of life, especially its existentially weighty aspects" (2018: 3). What better way to make sense of life than to have an answer to life's meaning which narrates across all these existentially weighty elements? Such a meaning would, as discussed in the previous section, have the global-metaphysical explanation of existence as its foundation, and the other elements of existential import would follow from this, but it is through the intelligibility of such a unification of these elements under one explanation that we find our answer to the question.

Let us look at a common answer to the meaning of life. Let us assume for the moment that there is a god and that god's purpose is what bestows our lives with meaning. The global-metaphysical foundation for this answer would be the existence of god and the ultimate nature of the reality that god has created. From this explanation, other elements of existential import and different types of meaning would be narrated across. We would have an answer to our purpose, since it would be whatever god made us for. That is purpose-meaning covered. We would have an answer to why anything exists at all, since god, as a necessary being, would be immune to any arguments of regress. That is intelligibility-meaning covered. And we would also have an answer to whether or not, and in what way, we are significant, since we would be as significant as god deemed us to be. That is significance-meaning covered. We would also have answers to other elements and requests of existential import, such as the value and purpose of suffering,

and life after death. All of these elements are answered as a direct result of this global-metaphysical answer to the meaning of life.

However, all the while running parallel to this naturally expanding answer to the meaning of life is the fact that what is happening through the unification of these elements into one single answer is the rendering intelligible of life and existence, insofar as the intelligibility of life and existence is the understanding of how all these elements of existential import fit together. Overarching all unified elements of which we want a unified answer to, then, is the umbrella of intelligibility-meaning. As one commentator puts it: “We are trying to find the order in the drama of Time.” (Wisdom, 1965). While we cannot simply leave it at that – we must specify what might constitute sufficient ‘order’, and also how such order arises in the first place through a global-metaphysical explanation – the point remains that any explanation which brings together and unifies various interrelated elements of existential import is essentially undertaking a process of intelligibility-rendering. As such, intelligibility-meaning plays a central role in the process of unification and therefore in the answer to the question of the meaning of life.

3 The legitimacy of the question

I have presented different interpretations of the phrase ‘the meaning of life,’ and, after forming a broad topology which classifies such answers, I have presented my reasons for holding primarily to a distinction between ‘the meaning *of* life’ and ‘meaning *in* life.’ The former, an ultimate meaning which narrates across various elements of the most existential import to human beings, is the focus of this thesis. The question of the meaning of life, given this understanding of the phrase, and given the embedded requirement for an ultimate and final purpose, is not without its criticisms, and there are those who would ardently deny its coherence and who would say that the question itself is, in fact, meaningless. To some, this fact is seen as something which might deflate the problem of life’s meaning in its entirety: if there is no question, then there is no problem to be resolved.

Scepticism regarding the question of the meaning of life may be seen as arising from the context of a positivism which denied any possibility for meaningful metaphysical speculation. With Ayer as the movement’s spearhead, at least in the UK, and with others following suit, “the thesis that the meaning of a proposition was its mode of its verification, the verification principle, was the great weapon in the attack on metaphysics.” (Kenny, 2010: 799). For the most part the positivists ignored the question of life’s meaning, content to imply that it was meaningless – Ayer was the exception rather than the rule in giving the question his attention. Wittgenstein, despite having a large influence on the movement, was more of an interested bystander than an active participant in positivism. He thought that the question of life’s meaning was meaningful, but nonetheless hoped that he might one day be able to stop asking it; thus,

in the *Tractatus* he tells us, “The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem.” (1922: 6.521). Once we re-engage with life the problem of its meaning disappears – we have found our solution.

As for the strictly positivist critique, as we have seen, there is a close connection between the question of the meaning of life and the issues of metaphysics, so it is not difficult to see how such positivist scepticism arises. If all metaphysical talk is meaningless because it is neither tautological nor empirically verifiable (Ayer, 1936: 16) then the question of the meaning of life must be meaningless too, since it is metaphysical in nature. Any talk about ‘ultimate meaning’ is gibberish, since such a thing would lie outside the bounds of verifiability.

Ayer, in his *The Claims of Philosophy* (1947), provides a more specific argument than this. He argues that the question of life’s meaning makes no sense because any meaning must be something which we choose, and so it makes no sense to ask for a meaning of life which must, presumably, describe an ultimate purpose or goal which is given to us. If it is not chosen by us then it cannot ever be a justification for existence, it can only be an explanation – it would answer the *how*, but not the *why*, of existence. This line of thought is found in others such as Nielsen (1964).

A second argument regarding the legitimacy of the question comes from Edwards (1972). The argument is as follows. For any given answer to the question of the meaning of life, we will always reject it as not going back far enough. Furthermore, for something to explain everything in its entirety (as a meaning of life must), it would have to be something that exists outside of everything, which is logically contradictory.

Given this, it is logically impossible to answer the question of life's meaning, and the question is rendered meaningless.

These arguments are the strongest direct attacks on the legitimacy of the question of the meaning of life that I have found, both in terms of their philosophical rigour and in their decidedly anti-metaphysical angle, and they are also anecdotally two of the most commonly espoused ones (should opposition to the legitimacy of the question be espoused at all). I outline both of these arguments and demonstrate why they fail, leaving the question of the meaning of life, understood as an ultimate meaning which narrates across various elements of existential import, intact as a meaningful question which may or may not be answerable. Ayer, and his particular brand of positivism, held strong influence in the 20th century, and the positivist critique of metaphysics left a stain on issues surrounding life's meaning, rendering much of the literature focused solely on meaning *in* life. In tackling these arguments I hope to go some way towards removing that stain.

3.1 Must meaning be chosen?

Ayer, in *The Claims of Philosophy* (1947), argues that the question of the meaning of life, interpreted as a "certain specifiable end" towards which all events are tending (ibid.: 199), is not a meaningful question. Such a question is senseless, just as we might say the questions 'what is north of the north pole?' and 'is two blue?' are senseless. He claims that the problem with the meaning of life question is that such a meaning would only explain existence, not justify it, because, "from the point of view of justifying one's existence, there is no essential difference between a teleological explanation of

events and a mechanical explanation" (ibid.). An end towards which all events are tending would answer the *how* but not the *why* of existence, and those who seek the answer to the meaning of life are seeking something which answers the *why* rather than the *how*. Messerly tells us that, for Ayer, "even if there were such an end it would do us no good in our quest for meaning because the end would only explain existence (it is heading towards some end) not justify existence (it should move towards that end)." (2012: 65). Furthermore, the question does not account for the fact that any meaning of life would have to be something which we ourselves choose. It is for this reason that Ayer says God is not a suitable answer to the question, since such a purpose as one which God gives us would not be our own and would not provide justification for existence, merely an explanation (ibid.: 200). Because of this, Ayer says that the question of the meaning of life is "so framed as to be unanswerable", and that "there is no sense in asking what is the ultimate purpose of our existence, or what is the real meaning of life." (ibid.: 201).

One initial objection to Ayer's diagnosis, which follows from Part 1's exploration of what it means to ask for the meaning of life, would be to say that his prescription for what the question means is too limited or narrow. I have outlined my reasons for holding to a conception of the meaning of life which narrates across more elements than merely a 'purpose' or a 'certain specifiable end towards which all things are tending', and if this conception holds then Ayer's diagnosis of senselessness is misguided, since it is diagnosed upon the back of the assumption that asking for the meaning of life is asking only for a purpose. However, I believe that Ayer's diagnosis does not stand even if we grant his understanding of the question as merely a request for a purpose; furthermore, it may plausibly be argued that even under a broader conception of the

meaning of life, the purpose of existence is foundational for all other elements of existential import. As such, I provisionally take Ayer's understanding of the question as correct, and respond to the argument on its own terms.

The first thing to consider is Ayer's claim that a meaning of life would only explain existence, not justify it – in other words, that it would explain the *how* but not the *why* of existence. Let us look at this distinction between *how* and *why*. Edwards, in his paper, "Why" (1972), describes the alleged contrast between *how* and *why* questions. We will be dealing with Edwards' own argument regarding the legitimacy of the question in the next section, but for now we will simply make use of his analysis of how- and why-questions.

Why-questions, he points out, are seen by some as being beyond the remit of science (which merely answers the *how*), whilst metaphysics (or religion) may purport to ask these why-questions. Such an understanding, he tells us, is used by metaphysicians and the religious in order to distinguish these areas from that of science; but it is also used by those who oppose metaphysics and religion, who say that while science cannot answer why-questions, religion or metaphysics cannot either. Edwards reminds us that this understanding is too simplistic, and that there is not such a clear boundary between how-questions and why-questions.

We are reminded first that 'how' and 'why' may sometimes be used interchangeably (ibid.: 31). For example, we might plausibly ask, 'How does ibuprofen alleviate the symptoms of a headache?' just as plausibly as we might ask, 'Why does ibuprofen alleviate the symptoms of a headache?'. Such questions are most often ones which are

looking for a cause. He then goes on to say that how-questions and why-questions are sometimes different and non-interchangeable. We are told that "this contrast is most obvious when we deal with intentional, or more generally with "meaningful," human actions." (ibid.). For example, asking, 'Why did you grab that can of Pepsi from the fridge?' is different to asking, 'How did you grab that can of Pepsi from the fridge?'. Here is one way in which why-questions may differ from how-questions: the former may be requests for intent or purpose. Finally, we are reminded that a how-question might be a request for a state or condition, where a why-question is not. For example, one might ask, 'How hot is it in here?', which would not be a request for a cause.

Let us get back to Ayer. Ayer's claim is that a meaning of life, described as a "certain specifiable end" (1947: 199) would not provide justification for existence, as it would explain the *how* but not the *why* of existence. We now have a rudimentary framework, provided by Edwards, with which we may analyse such a claim. Let us explore the rest of Ayer's argument, because both claims – that one, a meaning of life would answer the *how* but not the *why* of existence, and two, a meaning of life must be chosen by us – act in tandem.

Ayer claims that a meaning of life must be something which we ourselves choose, otherwise it would not be our own purpose. He says, regarding the possibility that reality is arranged to meet a certain end, that "the end in question will not be one that they themselves have chosen. As far as they are concerned it will be entirely arbitrary" (ibid.). Such an arbitrary end would be without justification. Presumably, then, the point is that only we are givers of justification. While we might be told the end towards

which all things are tending, i.e. the meaning of life, this is not a reason or a justification, as we are the only ones that could provide such a thing.

We may rightly question Ayer's assumption that we are the sole givers of justification. For example, could not a god provide justification and reason for the end towards which all things are tending? Ayer's response to the god hypothesis, apart from the claim that there is no reason to believe that such a god exists, ultimately amounts to no more than a reiteration of his original claim: that the end would not be our end unless it was chosen by us. If our purpose is given to us by a god, then that does not justify such a purpose. We may still reasonably ask: 'Why should we follow god's purpose?'. If we say that we could not question god's purpose due to its sovereignty, then it would be the case that we are always conforming to the purpose regardless of what we choose to do, anyway. Ayer tells us that, "if [god's purpose] is sovereign, that is, if everything that happens is necessarily in accordance with it, then this is true also of our behaviour. Consequently, there is no point in our deciding to conform to it, for the simple reason that we cannot do otherwise." (ibid.: 200). If this is not the case, however, and god's purpose is something which we can choose to conform to, then, for Ayer, "the question "Why?" remains unanswered" since it would merely be "pushing the level of explanation to a further stage" (ibid.). We can always request further justification for any given level of explanation for existence. The question of justification is only something which we may answer ourselves. So, even a god would only answer the *how*, but not the *why*, since only we can answer the why.

The problem with this line of argument is clear: he has given no good reason to support the claim that we are the sole givers of justification. His reason amounts to a reiteration

of the same claim: that we are the sole givers of justification and that we must therefore choose our own purposes in order to obtain justification. He does attempt to show how an external purpose, such as from god, would not actually provide justification, by saying that any such purpose is open to questioning – we may always ask, 'Why should I adhere to this purpose?'. However, in doing so he only begs the question: Why could a god not provide this justification? In other words, why would we be right to question god's purpose? In order for us to question god's purpose, we would have to already be labouring under the assumption that we are the sole givers of justification. If there were a god, and if this god had given us purpose, then we would have ultimate justification, that is, justification which cannot be questioned. If there were a god, constituted of necessity and perfection as traditionally conceived, then we would not, in fact, be the sole givers of justification. The purpose that god has given us would be ours, and we would simply be incorrect to think ourselves tall enough to begin to arbitrate on such matters.

Another counter to Ayer's claim is put forward by Tartaglia. He tells us that "it would not make enough initial sense, prior to Ayer's diagnosis of senselessness, for somebody to ask the question of the meaning of life, if in doing so they were presupposing, as the diagnosis demands, that any suitable answer must be one which they themselves choose." (2018: 241). If we must choose our own answer, why would we ever ask the question? Of course, Ayer's point stands if we prescribe that the answer must be one which we choose, for then we could simply say that the person asking for the meaning of life is confused and asking for the impossible. But, as we have seen, there is no good reason to grant this prescription, and the lack of prescription fits in better with the fact

that so many people do ask and search for such a given purpose beyond their own provincial scopes of choice.

Returning to the ‘how’ and ‘why’, we may look at Ayer’s argument under the framework that Edwards has given us. Recall that Edwards says one primary way in which how-questions and why-questions may be different (when they are different at all) is that why-questions may ask for an intent or purpose where how-questions do not. It seems, however, as if Ayer is attempting to provide one further way in which the two types of question may differ: why-questions might also be requests for justification, whereas how-questions never are. Since Ayer’s argument assumes that the why of existence would provide justification, we have an alignment in Ayer’s thought between the why-question and justification. But he also interprets a purpose (or intent) as being aligned with the how-question, since he thinks that a purpose for existence would answer the *how* but not the *why* of existence. So, for Ayer, on the one side we have the how-question and purpose, and on the other side we have the why-question and justification.

There is a clear separation, then, between purpose and justification in Ayer’s thought. Notice the difference between Ayer and Edwards, here: Ayer sees purpose as being under the remit of the how-question, whereas Edwards sees it as being under the why-question. With Edwards and Ayer we have, if not a difference in thought, then at least another potential way of distinguishing the how-question and the why-question: through the notion of justification. For Ayer there is a clear distinction between justification and purpose or intent, which allows him to claim that a meaning (i.e. purpose, intent) of life is not a justification for it. Of course, there may be overlap between purpose and

justification, but that all depends on what one considers suitable criteria for justification.

Let us consider this position. It does not at first seem so easy to separate justification from intent and purpose. If I grab a can of Pepsi from the fridge, what is the justification for such an action? If somebody asks why I grabbed the can, and if they are asking for a justification of my action, then my answer might not be any different from the one I provide to answer the intent formulation: 'I felt thirsty and wanted a can of Pepsi'. The response justifies my action, and reveals its intent. But the question then is: Why is my own intent considered proper justification? Could not somebody plausibly turn around and say, 'You wanting that Pepsi does not justify you taking it. It wasn't yours to take. It was someone else's Pepsi.'? What is considered 'justification' in this scenario is different to me than it is to the questioner.

However, even if this is the case, then Ayer's alignment of the why-question with justification, and his distinguishing between purpose and justification, must be predicated upon an account of what could count as justification. He has already said that a purpose does not provide justification; so what does? He must have something already in mind with which to judge an answer by. It turns out that he does: what counts as justification for existence is just that it is something which we ourselves choose. A meaning of life cannot justify existence since it is not something which we ourselves choose. But then we are begging the question, since it is the assumption that a justified purpose can only be something that we choose that enables him to say that a meaning of life cannot justify and answer the why of existence. That we are the sole givers of justification is a foundational assumption for his argument that a meaning of life would

answer the *how* but not the *why* of existence, and there is no convincing reason provided for accepting this assumption. If we reject this assumption then we have no reason to assume that a meaning of life would not answer to the *why* of existence, since justification would be able to be given to us externally (by a god, for example). Since we have no reason to assume that we are the sole givers of justification, we have no reason to accept that a meaning of life could not answer the why of existence, and we have no reason to assume that a meaning of life could not justify existence. Once this assumption is dismissed, Ayer's diagnosis of the question as senseless disappears, and we again accept the possibility of a meaningful answer.

3.2 The end of regress

Edwards, in his paper "Why" (1972), provides a different argument against the meaning of life question. He argues that an ultimate explanation for everything is impossible, since such an explanation would have to posit the existence of something outside of everything in order to explain everything. Because there cannot be something outside of everything, since that something would be part of everything and hence not outside of it, the question is asking for something which is logically impossible, and is therefore meaningless. So, it is the logical impossibility of an answer which renders the question meaningless, because, as one commentator puts it, "if a question really cannot be answered, and if all possible answers have been ruled out a priori, is that not the very definition of a meaningless question?" (Messerly, 2012: 63).

After looking at the how-question and why-question in general, Edwards goes on to distinguish two types of why-question: the 'theological why' and the 'super-ultimate

why'. His argument proceeds by distinguishing these two types of why-question and then demonstrating why an answer to the super-ultimate why is impossible.

The theological why, Edwards tells us, is a type of 'cosmic' why-question for which "the questioner would be satisfied with a theological answer if he found such an answer convincing in its own right. He may or may not accept it as true, but would not regard it as irrelevant." (1972: 33). So, the theological 'why' is a cosmic question which is posed under the starting assumption that a theological answer would satisfy the criteria for an answer. In other words, it is a cosmic question for which God may be the answer.

The super-ultimate why, on the other hand, is a cosmic why-question for which the questioner "would regard the theological answer as quite unsatisfactory, not (or not just) because it is meaningless or false but because it does not answer his question." (ibid.: 35). In other words, it is defined in the opposite way to the theological why: it is a cosmic question which is posed under the starting assumption that a theological answer would not satisfy the criteria for an answer. In such cases, the theological answer is denied because "it does not go far enough" (ibid.), because we may still question any theological answer. Note the similarity to Ayer. Ayer said that god's purpose cannot answer the meaning of life since we can always ask why we should follow this purpose. In this way we can say that, for Edwards, Ayer thinks the question of the meaning of life is a super-ultimate why as opposed to a theological why, since he is labouring under the assumption that god's purpose would not be a satisfactory answer to this cosmic why-question. The super-ultimate why, in order to 'go far enough', would have to answer why there is anything at all, why there is something rather than nothing.

The distinction that Edwards draws between the ‘theological why’ and the ‘super-ultimate why’, boils down to one thing, then: whether or not you think a theological explanation would answer the particular cosmic why-question that you are asking. If it would, then you are asking a ‘theological why’. If it would not, you are asking the ‘super-ultimate why’. But if you are asking the ‘super-ultimate why’, Edwards says, then you are asking for the impossible.

Edwards claims that the super-ultimate why is incoherent because it can never be answered. Any answer to the super-ultimate why, he remarks, will be rejected by the questioner as “not going back far enough” (ibid.: 36). For any given explanation, we may still question, ‘Why that explanation?’ If god created the world, why did god exist in the first place? Wisdom (2018: 193) tells a story to demonstrate this problem:

> There is an old story which runs something like this: A child asked an old man “What holds up the world? What holds up all things?” The old man answered “A giant.” The child asked “And what holds up the giant? You must tell me what holds up the giant.” The old man answered “An elephant.” The child said, “And what holds up the elephant?” The old man answered “A tortoise.” The child said “You still have not told me what holds up all things. For what holds up the tortoise?” The old man answered “Run away and don’t ask me so many questions.”

The problem, then, occurs when you reach the level of the super-ultimate why and ask: What holds up all things? The super-ultimate why-question might be phrased, “Why does the universe exist?”, where “the “universe” is taken to include everything that in fact exists” (Edwards, 1972: 38). When we ask for an explanation of x, however, we are

asking for “something or some set of conditions, other than x, in terms of which it can be explained” (ibid.). The problem, therefore, is that in asking the super-ultimate why-question we are asking for something or some set of conditions other than, or outside of, the totality of all things. This is clearly contradictory, since there can be nothing outside of everything, otherwise the latter would not be everything.

Wisdom has his own response to this line of argument through the analogy of a play (2018: 194-6). He tells us that “sometimes even when we have seen and heard a play from the beginning to the end we are still puzzled and still ask what does the whole thing mean” because we wish to “grasp the character, the significance of the whole play.” (ibid.: 194-5). Regarding the meaning of life, this analogy can be used to illuminate the fact that our request is to “find the order in the drama of Time.” (ibid.: 195). As such, we are not requesting something outside of everything which would explain everything, we are merely looking for a way of understanding everything as it already is, has been, and will be. And this, for Wisdom, defeats the sceptical position because it allows for the question to be meaningful, just like the question ‘what did that play mean?’ would be a meaningful question even if we had seen the entire play and knew its surrounding context. The request for life’s meaning, then, is not a request for something outside of everything which would explain everything, it is a request for how we might understand this everything.

Referring back to chapter 1, we can see that Wisdom’s rejoinder amounts to saying that the meaning of life is primarily a request for “intelligibility-meaning” (Seachris and Kim, 2018: 2). However, I have already argued that intelligibility-meaning alone is insufficient, given the nature of the request as one which narrates across multiple

elements of existential import to us. While intelligibility-meaning is central to the meaning of life (as argued in 2.4), it cannot exist on its own since this centrality occurs through the rendering intelligible of our purpose and significance. This is what makes intelligibility-meaning central: that it is through the 'intelligibility rendering' of life and existence that a meaning of life would be coherent – but if there were no answer to our purpose or significance there would not be a complete picture for which to render intelligible. In other words, intelligibility-meaning needs something to *make* intelligible. Furthermore, in order to fully understand something and render it intelligible, we must understand from what context this thing came about. Going back to the analogy of a play, we might say that in order for the play to be rendered completely intelligible we would need to understand the context from which it arose. Similarly, in order for existence to be rendered completely intelligible, we would need to understand the context from which existence arose. It is not enough that existence simply is, in the same way that it is not enough that a play simply is. After all, when we watch a play we already know that the actors and actresses have, before the play commences, come together to perform for us on the directions of a playwright who has constructed the play in order to convey something to the audience. If the play is taken as analogous to 'everything', then it is only through there being something outside of this 'everything' that it is able to be rendered intelligible in the first place. Without this outside context, its intelligibility would be thrown into question, and we would not have the complete picture. Wisdom's reply, therefore, misses the mark.

The solution to Edwards' argument, however, is much simpler than this, and is essentially the same as our response to Ayer's discussion of God. In order to resolve the question of how there can be something outside of everything from which to explain

everything, we may simply say that there could exist something of necessary existence, such as a god. If this is the case then the question 'how can there be something outside of everything from which to explain everything?' is dissolved, since there does not need to be something outside of everything from which to explain everything. If we say that a god exists, then we have an answer which is resistant to us stepping back and questioning further. The super-ultimate why would be answered, and anyone who questioned 'but what is outside of God that explains his existence' would simply be incorrect to assume that such a question makes sense, for by God's very nature there could be nothing further to explain God. Then, of course, Edwards might reply that this would be an answer to the theological-why and not the super-ultimate why. This response, however, would miss the point, since if there were a necessary being the theological why-question and super-ultimate why-question would coincide.

Why should we say that these are two separate questions? If we provisionally concretise the notion of a 'cosmic' why-question, and say, with Ayer, that we are asking for an end towards which all events are tending (i.e. an ultimate purpose), then Edwards would have to say the following. He would have to say: 'If you are asking for such an ultimate end, then you could either be asking a "theological why" or a "super-ultimate why". If you think that God would be a satisfactory answer, should one exist, then you are asking the former. If you don't, then you are asking the latter'. The problem with this is that by defining the super-ultimate why in terms of its relationship to the theological-why (and vice versa) we are not told anything substantive about what each question is really asking. Each question is defined in relation to the other, so there is an inherent circularity to the distinction between the theological-why and the super-ultimate why. It would be a bit like answering 'What is an egg and what is an apple?' with, 'An egg is

not an apple, and an apple is not an egg'. Edwards is operating under a prescription that we have no good reason to accept: that the theological-why is different to the super-ultimate why. The only reason to assume these questions are actually different is if you have already presupposed that a theological-why could not answer a super-ultimate why. But the only reason to presuppose that would be if you were already presupposing that they are different questions.

The problem with Edwards' argument, like Ayer's, is one of a question-begging presupposition. With Ayer, the presupposition was that we are the sole givers of justification, and the reason for this presupposition amounted to saying that we must choose our own purpose(s), which relies upon the presupposition that we are the sole givers of justification. With Edwards, the presupposition is that the theological-why is different to the super-ultimate why, and the reason for this presupposition amounts to saying that the theological-why would not answer the super-ultimate why, which relies upon the presupposition that the theological-why is different to the super-ultimate why. But if there were a necessary being then the two questions would coincide, and there would be no difference between the theological-why and the super-ultimate why.

Once we do away with this question begging argument, and thereby do away with the prescription that a theological answer could not answer the super-ultimate why, we have no reason to assume a god could not satisfactorily answer the question of the meaning of life, should one exist. If a god existed, then the question 'what exists outside of everything (including god) which explains everything?' would be a question with a false presupposition, since god would explain everything without needing to exist outside of everything. Once we understand this, we realise that the theological why and

the super-ultimate why need not be separate questions, rather they are both asking the same super-ultimate why-question, and the only relevant question from there is whether or not a god could be a sufficient answer to this question. Should one claim that god would not sufficiently answer the question, then that does not mean there is an entirely different question being asked, it merely means that the questioner holds to a different account of what could sufficiently answer the same question. And if this is the case, as I have argued it is, then the question of the meaning of life itself is meaningful, and there is simply room for discussion about what might constitute a sufficient answer.

4 An inaccessible reality

So far, we have explored different possible interpretations of the question of life's meaning, and following this we have explored different types of answer to the question. From the various distinctions provided we distilled a primary one between the local question of 'meaning *in* life', which asks 'How may I accrue more meaning in my own life?' and the global question which asks 'What is the meaning *of* life in general?', requesting a global-metaphysical answer for life and existence which narrates across those elements and questions of most existential import to human beings. Then, we looked at two of the strongest arguments supporting the claim that the question itself is meaningless, and discovered that these arguments were premised upon claims which begged the question. We concluded that an answer to the question of life's meaning such as that of a god, should one exist, would be a sufficient answer, and therefore that the question is a meaningful one.

There is, however, another way in which the question is sometimes attacked. It is sometimes argued that, although there could be an answer to the question of the meaning of life, such an answer is not epistemically obtainable for us, and therefore the question is, if not meaningless, then redundant because an answer is in principle inaccessible and unknowable. In this chapter I outline and present the doctrine of transcendental idealism which underpins such epistemic arguments against the legitimacy of the question of the meaning of life. This chapter therefore serves only an explanatory purpose, so that in the following chapters we may more clearly assess the

repercussions of transcendental idealism and whether, if correct, it would pose a threat to the epistemic obtainability of a meaning of life.

4.1 Transcendental idealism

The focus of this chapter is what is sometimes called 'critical' or 'post-critical' – or, similarly, 'Kantian' or 'post-Kantian' – thought. This essentially refers to any strand of thought which takes Kant's critical arguments regarding the transcendentally ideal nature of our reality seriously, if not in all its finer nuances then simply at the most general level. The critical idea is that all we can ever have knowledge of is the relation between thought and being, and not being itself. In other words, the world as it *truly* is, independent of our perception, is inaccessible[1]. For our purposes, the general critical idea, that we only have access to the relation between thought and being, will suffice. Nevertheless, it will be useful to sketch at least a partial outline of the framework from which such an idea arose, namely the doctrine of transcendental idealism outlined by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787). Emphasis will be placed upon those aspects which are most relevant to the meaning of life, primarily those which tell us that the world independent of our representation is, in principle, forever beyond our grasp.

Starting with Kant's own words, then, transcendental idealism is "the doctrine that appearances are to be regarded as being, one and all, representations only, not things in themselves" (ibid.: A369). Under this view, it is not (or not only), as goes the pre-critical view, that our knowledge conforms to objects in the world, rather it is the

[1]This is a relatively uncontroversial belief in academic philosophy since major developments in both analytic and continental philosophy in the 20th Century took this basic Kantian idea as their starting point. This is seen most notably in the philosophy of language, and in phenomenology, respectively. More on this in 4.2.

reverse, that "objects must conform to our knowledge" (ibid., Bxvi). The only way that objects can be possible for us, Kant says, is if these objects conform to our way of knowing – they must be constituted not of their own accord but by us. To deny this is to claim that we have *direct* access to the world in itself, independent of our representational capacities (it would, in a sense, be becoming god). But this is impossible, says Kant, because in order to claim this we would have to step outside our own skins and explain the relationship between reality and our capacity for representation, which is impossible. As such, the direct external realist cannot account for how objects are possible for us. If we flip the equation, however, and say that it is objects which must conform to our knowledge, then we have first-person access to some fundamental facts about objects, since these objects could not be any other way, given our representational capacities. We have a means of explaining how objects are possible for us without having to step outside our own skins.

The best entry-point into this line of thought is through considering just what it is that we know must be true. Contrary to Descartes, Kant thinks that the primary truth of our own existence as an "I" implies more than we might think. Contained within the idea of a thought, recognises Kant, is the notion of a subject. He realises that the subject also has an apprehension of its own unity, and in such first-person perception there is no distinction between being and seeming. Kant calls this first-personal unity of the self the 'transcendental unity of apperception'. This condition "precedes all experience" and "makes experience itself possible" (ibid.: A107). It is a "pure original unchangeable consciousness" (ibid.) which acts as a precondition of all self-knowledge. This unity of the self "is not the conclusion of any inquiry, but the presupposition of all inquiries." (Scruton, 2014: 72). The crucial step for transcendental idealism is to realise that this

unified self presupposes objecthood, since self-knowledge is only possible when the self has an objective identity, existing through time, which could be other than it seems[1].

Objectivity for Kant, therefore, is a precondition of experience, and is something which cannot be doubted. From this point Kant develops an account of objectivity which describes the necessary preconditions of our experience of objects – in other words, our representational capacities to which objects must conform. Although there are more, the two primary forms which act as the preconditions of objects are those of space and time. In the Aesthetic (ibid.: A19-50/B34-74) Kant develops his account of space and time, which argues that rather than being aspects of reality in itself, these are forms of sensibility which are preconditions of our experience of reality. In other words, they are 'in us' rather than 'out there', because they are what is necessary for us to order our experience.

Kant presents six arguments for space and time being forms of sensibility inherent within us. The two most persuasive (and general) of these arguments are as follows. First, Kant says that in order for me to refer to an object apart from myself, the concept of space must be presupposed, and not empirically derived (since the notion of separation itself presupposes space). Second, he says that if space were not presupposed *a priori*, then it would be possible to represent the absence of space. Since this is not possible, because we cannot represent objects without space, space must be a condition of the possibility of representing objects. (He provides parallel arguments for time as well as space.) Space and time are therefore *a priori* forms which are the sensible

[1]For more on this topic, see *Scruton, 1981, p.141-3,* and *Gardner, 1999, p.145-151*.]

preconditions of objects. They are within us, as they must be for us to experience objects at all.

So, we now have a picture of reality which tells us that objects must conform to our way of knowing. The traditional way of looking at reality is flipped on its head, and from this we understand that nothing can be known about reality as it is in itself, independent of our representation. All that we have epistemic access to is mere representation, and true reality is forever out of bounds. In order to access reality as it is in itself, we must be able to transcend our representation of this reality, which is impossible.

Key to understanding transcendental idealism is understanding how it differs from transcendental realism. One common confusion is to think of transcendental idealism as similar to, for example, Berkeleyan idealism. Berkeley believed that objects are nothing more than collections of ideas, and that the world is mind-dependent. This, however, is a form of *empirical* idealism, not transcendental idealism. When it comes to the transcendental, even empirical idealists like Berkeley are realists—they are *transcendental* realists. This is because they assume that we can have direct access to, or knowledge of, reality as it is in itself. For empirical idealists like Berkeley, this means access to a mind-dependent reality, and for empirical realists this means access to a mind-independent reality. In both cases the fact remains that their picture of reality is one in which we can have access to the world in itself. Transcendental idealism, however, denies this. It says that the world as it is in itself can never be known or accessed, since to do so would be to transcend our representation of this world. It is

impossible to access the world without representing it, and so it is impossible to access the world in itself.

To further support this doctrine Kant also gives us the arguments of the Antinomies. These arguments, in short, are intended to demonstrate the logical impossibilities that arise if we do *not* presuppose transcendental idealism. They show us what happens when we assume that we can extend our reason beyond phenomena (the world as we represent it) and apply it to the noumena (the world as it is in itself when considered as thinkable), both from empiricist and rationalist standpoints. If we attempt to do this, Kant shows, we generate transcendental illusions.

Let us take one example. In the first antinomy, Kant demonstrates that transcendental illusions occur whether we assume that the world (in its totality) has a beginning in time, or that it has no beginning in time. If we reason about the world in this way, i.e. if we extend our reason beyond its bounds, then we generate these illusions whichever standpoint we take up. Reason simply cannot extend beyond phenomena. We cannot be transcendental realists. In the first antinomy (Kant, 1781: A426/B454), Kant first sees what occurs if we attempt to prove that the world has a beginning in time. We might attempt this by assuming the opposite, that there is no beginning in time, and demonstrating why this would be impossible. If we assume this, and that there "has passed away in the world an infinite series of successive states of things" (ibid.), we realise the impossibility of this since a completed synthesis of events is required for us to speak of the world as a totality, and the world as a totality is exactly what we must be speaking of if we are claiming to speak of the world as it is in itself. A completed synthesis is required to be speaking about the world, but infinite time does not allow

this. So, the world cannot have no beginning in time, and must therefore have a beginning in time. However, Kant then goes on to demonstrate that the same sort of impossibility is generated if we attempt to prove that the world does not have a beginning in time. Again, he says, let us assume the opposite. Let us assume that there is a beginning in time. If this were the case, he says, there must have been a point in time at which the world (including time itself) started existing, meaning there must have been a time before the world existed. But in this "empty time" (ibid.) nothing can happen. (Another way to think of this is to say that if there was a time before the world (including time itself) existed, then the point at which it begins could not be considered the beginning of the world and time). Therefore, it is impossible for the world to have a beginning in time, and the world must have no beginning in time.

The reason these conflicting theses and antitheses generate these impossibilities, Kant says, is because we are attempting to extend our reason beyond appearances and are attempting to cognise noumena. We are attempting to reason about the world as a totality, a completed synthesis, when such a concept only makes sense if it refers to the world in itself. Our reason, which employs categories and forms of intuition such as causation, and space and time, respectively, cannot apply itself to the world as a totality, because the world as it is in itself is outside of our representation. We do not have epistemic access to it.

It might be asked how we can know the relation between thought and being when we cannot know anything about being itself. How can we know the relation between apples and oranges if we know nothing about oranges? The answer is that we could know the relation between apples and oranges even if we know nothing about oranges

themselves, providing we knew simply that it *is* a relation between apples and oranges. If the existence of apples necessitated the existence of an unknown 'oranges' then we could speak of the relation between the two that is entailed from this necessity without knowing exactly in what 'oranges' consist.

In the same way, according to transcendental idealism, we can know the relation between thought and being despite not knowing being itself, because an appearance must be an appearance of something (the thing in itself), even if we do not know what this something is. In this way, the noumena are seen negatively as a limit: as that which is not known through sensibility. And, under transcendental idealism, we know that the in itself must exist because otherwise appearance could not. Gertz (2019: 32) explains this point concisely: "If experience depends on my existence, and my existence depends on experience, then there must be something that exists that is both beyond me and beyond experience since otherwise we'd be trapped in a chicken-and-egg paradox."

As for how the 'thing in itself' can 'generate an appearance' when it cannot 'be an object of sensory awareness,' Palmquist gives us a way of reconciling the two predications by saying their compatibility "becomes immediately apparent once it is recognised that the former refers to the thing in itself from the empirical perspective… while the latter refers to it from the transcendental perspective." (1986: 128).

The arguments that Kant provides are not supposed to be taken each as a definitive proof of the doctrine of transcendental idealism, rather they are intended to be taken all at once. This is why I began the section with the general idea of transcendental idealism, and some of Kant's more intuitive and general arguments. In the next section I

bring the transcendental idealist picture of reality into light in its most basic form, removing from it all its Kantian terminology, and taking from it only what is necessary to continue our discussion on the meaning of life.

4.2 The inaccessibility of the thing in itself

Let us consider an analogy of a lantern in a pitch-black room. There might be tables and chairs in this room, perhaps a window, a cupboard, and so on. However, we cannot see them because all is dark. If we have a lantern, however, we may see the room. We can walk around and say to ourselves, 'Here is a table, illuminated by my lantern. And here is a dark brown chair.' But when we ask ourselves, 'What does the chair look like without the lantern illuminating and colouring it for me to see?', notice that there is no answer unless we again presuppose that the chair is illuminated. As soon as we attempt to picture what it might look like we are again presupposing being able to see it, in other words, presupposing it being illuminated for us. This analogy extends to representation in general. If we want to say anything about reality in some way, then we are attempting to represent reality. If we wish to represent reality as it is *in itself*, then this means we must represent it as it is free of representation—i.e. unilluminated. This is clearly impossible, because we cannot represent reality as it is when it is not being represented, just as we cannot imagine what the chair looks like when it is not visible.

This is the picture of the world that Kant describes. As soon as we say that there is representation, then we must admit that we are incapable of transcending this representation, since any object which we might think about, perceive, or discuss must necessarily be the object as it is being represented. And if we are incapable of

transcending representation, then we cannot talk about, or imagine, or know the world as it is in itself, since it is precisely this that requires the transcendence of representation (otherwise it would not be the world 'in itself'–it would be the world as it is 'for us'). In other words, "we cannot adopt a third-person perspective that would allow us to compare things as they appear to us and things as they are in themselves." (Bryant, 2014). Thus, when we speak of the table or the chair, we are always speaking of the table or the chair *for us*, not as it is in itself, independent of representation.

Meillassoux, in the first chapter of his *After Finitude* (2008), compellingly argues that ever since the critical transcendental idealism of Kant, philosophy has taken 'correlation' as its central subject matter, rather than substance (ibid.: 6), and that much of post-Kantian philosophy has been 'correlationist'. By 'correlationism' it is meant "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other." (ibid.: 5). The implication of this correlationism is that we cannot know the world as it is in itself, because "we can't distinguish between properties which are supposed to belong to the object and properties belonging to the subjective access to the object." (Brassier et al., 2007: 409). In this way, "what we know of anything is true only *for us*" (Bryant, 2014).

One important aspect of Meillassoux's account, and of the correlationist account, is that it includes other correlations than just the representation-reality relation. Bryant explains this well (ibid.):

> Although Meillassoux does not himself specify this, correlationism presumably comes in a variety of different forms, and is therefore not

> restricted to theories focused on the relation between mind and being. Thus the relation between transcendental ego or lived body and the world in phenomenology would be one variant of correlationism, while the relation between language and being in Wittgenstein, Derrida and Lacan, or between power and knowledge in Foucault, would be other variants. In each case we encounter the claim that being cannot be thought apart from a subject, language or power.

Meillassoux says the following (2008: 7-8, emphasis his):

> . . . we must emphasize that the correlation between thought and being is not reducible to the correlation between subject and object. In other words, the fact that correlation dominates contemporary philosophy in no way implies the dominance of philosophies of *representation*. It is possible to criticize the latter in the name of a more originary correlation between thought and being. And in fact, the critiques of representation have not signalled a break with correlation, i.e. a simple return to dogmatism.

So, correlationist philosophies are ones that say we only ever have access to the correlation between thought and being, and not either of these things on their own. Thus, for Kant, the world is only the world as it is *for us*, in our representation; and how the world is for us is only ever the way that it is when it is related to the world. But the same can be said for any number of other correlates. Meillassoux says, "ever since Kant, to discover what divides rival philosophers is no longer to ask who has grasped the true nature of substantiality, but rather to ask who has grasped the more originary

correlation: is it the thinker of the subject-object correlation, the noetico-noematic correlation, or the language-referent correlation? The question is no longer 'which is the proper substrate?' but 'which is the proper correlate?'" (ibid.: 6).

Regarding correlationism's pervasiveness throughout much of recent philosophy, we may consider two examples. First, there is the field of phenomenology, first developed most explicitly by Husserl (1900). Phenomenology takes 'phenomena' as its starting-point, focusing on those things which "*show themselves* to consciousness" (Scruton, 1981: 260, emphasis theirs). For phenomenologists, analysing what is most immediately known to us, phenomenally, is foundational to our successfully understanding consciousness and mental states. Once we have found pure immediacy (through, for example's, Husserl's process of 'bracketing'), we may arrive at the process of the mind's directedness upon the intentional objects: intentionality itself. This was Husserl's most fundamental and immediate datum: the intentional process itself.

We can see clearly the correlationist picture expounded within phenomenology if we consider the process of arriving at this intentional process. Scruton tells us the following, regarding phenomenological analysis of something such as fear (ibid.: 258, emphasis theirs): "I must not suppose that the object of fear exists independently of my fear. Fear does not guarantee the existence of its object, but only of its own 'direction' towards an object. We should therefore 'bracket' the material object in examining the nature of fear. But the intentional object remains: we cannot eliminate from fear the *idea* of an object, since this is contained in the mental state and immediately present to the consciousness of the man who fears." So, we have bracketed the external object of

fear, but we still have the intentional object, due to the immediacy of our experience. We see here the clear bracketing of all other than the correlate: it is not the relationship between the external cause of fear and our internal fear that we are concerned with, rather it is the relationship between the fear and the *idea* of its object. And it is always the relationship between the two that is considered of immediate and fundamental importance, not the mental states or the intentional objects in themselves. The focus is on the correlation.

A second example of correlationism comes from the philosophy of language, perhaps best seen in (the later) Wittgenstein. For brevity, we will treat Wittgenstein (specifically, the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)) simply, using only a general understanding of those aspects of his thinking that are relevant to the correlationist picture. The later Wittgenstein held a picture of philosophical understanding that placed language at the centre of investigation. In this way he remained faithful to his younger self (found in the *Tractatus* (1922)), and to logical atomists such as Russell and Moore. However, from this point he diverged. He realised that language and linguistic practice is as it is on no basis. In other words, there is "a denial that we can look outside linguistic practice for the thing which governs it" (Scruton, 1981: 280). Furthermore, language is fundamentally public, since we are 'always-already' embedded within a language governed by rules on no basis, and since the notion of a private language is incoherent (this argued in his 'private language argument'). So, we are always-already embedded in a public language which cannot be justified outside of its own rules and practices.

Regarding correlationism, we traditionally thought that what is true or what is necessary is a matter of discerning these things from reality; but for Wittgenstein, "nothing explains and justifies our accepting the necessary truths we do. That is to say, nothing explains and justifies our having the grammatical rules we have . . . Our rules do not correctly *represent* anything." (Moore, 2012: 263, emphasis theirs). In order for our language to correctly represent something we would have to step outside of our language-game, and in doing so step outside the correlation between thought and being. For Wittgenstein, "being cannot be thought apart from . . . language" (Bryant, 2014). Thus, the limits of our language are the limits of our world, in the same way that, for Kant, the limits of our understanding are the limits of our world. We cannot escape the correlationist circle, which prevents us from comparing the *thought* of an object's properties to the object's properties in *itself*. We only ever have access to the correlate, and not to reality in itself.

Where correlationism of representation, language, phenomenal experience, or anything else differs from an indirect external realism which posits that we only have access to our mental states and not the objects that they describe, is that with correlationism we have a strict focus on the transcendental relation. The focus is not on some veil that exists between our experience and the world, rather it is on how our experience relates to that world transcendentally, that is to say, how it relates to the world in itself when this world does not depend at all on my experience of it. The transcendentally inaccessible world is not there in the indirect external realist picture, rather it is the empirically inaccessible world that has the indirect external realist's attention. For the critical or post-critical correlationist, to account for this relation between the transcendentally inaccessible world and our experience, thought itself must constitute

some of the most elemental things that allow us our experience to begin with – things like ‘space’ or ‘time’ that the indirect external realist would take to be actually ‘out there’ in the world itself.

These are only a couple of examples of the correlationist picture expounded in more contemporary schools of thought, and merely go to illuminate what the core correlationist idea is: that we only have access to the relation between thought and being, and not being itself, *regardless of what this correlate actually is*. Whether the correlate is that of intentionality, language, representation, or something entirely different, the correlationist picture is present, and we have no access to reality in itself, as traditionally conceived.

5 The inaccessibility of a meaning of life

If we were to hold to the 'post-critical,' correlationist picture of reality then, given all that we have discovered about what must constitute a meaning of life, we would be committed to saying that any meaning of life is in principle inaccessible. This is because a meaning of life would have to tell us something about the world in itself (being itself), and the correlationist picture denies that such knowledge is in principle obtainable.

In 5.1., I outline why a meaning of life would have to tell us something about being itself, and why it would therefore be unknowable. In 5.2., I concretise this idea by discussing one possible explanation for the meaning of life: god. Such a meaning of life would not be knowable, but would be ontologically possible.

5.1 The meaning of life and being itself

We have said that the correlationist picture describes a world in which we only ever have access to the relationship between thought and being, not to being itself. We have also said that a meaning of life is an ultimate (global-metaphysical) explanation for life and existence which narrates across various elements of the most existential import to human beings. The key question to examine here is whether knowing an ultimate, global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence would require being itself to be knowable.

Earlier (in 2.2) we used the game of chess as an analogy to help us understand the distinction between a meaning *of* life and meaning *in* life. Let us return to that analogy. Meaning *in* life, we said, is equivalent to asking about the rules of chess given the game itself is presupposed. The meaning *of* life is equivalent to asking about the presupposition(s) underpinning the game of chess itself. The former asks 'what do we do within the game?' and the latter 'why does chess exist, anyway? What is its purpose?'

This distinction between questions about meaning with*in* the game, and the meaning *of* the game, is in some ways dissimilar to the distinction between questions about thought and questions about being. If we are playing the game of chess with its existence and rules presupposed, then the game in itself – the framework of rules and purpose within which we are operating – is still accessible to us. To access these global questions about the game would be to question the presupposition of the rules and purpose of the game that we are playing, and we can do this because we also exist outside the game and are able to access a context from which the purpose of the game itself, even when we are operating within its framework, is interrogable. But this is not the case when it comes to our life; it is not the case when it comes to thought and being. With life we cannot remove ourselves from the framework that presupposes life and existence in order to interrogate the framework itself, because to do so would be to step outside of life and look at it from a God's-eye point of view, which we cannot do.

This is essentially another way of thinking about the Kantian picture of representation. We cannot get to the in itself because to do so would be to escape our representation of the world. We cannot uncover the framework itself because to do so would mean

leaving the framework. It would mean leaving the framework because any answer about the framework that we cognise will never be an answer about the framework in itself, in the same way that any experience of the world is not of the world in itself if it involves our representation of it (which, for us, it always will). Any attempt to speak of the framework in itself is prevented at the outset by the simple fact we are always acting from within it (whether you take this framework to be representation, language, or any other inescapable correlation between thought and being).

Speaking of the framework in itself is the very thing that an answer to the meaning of life would require. An answer to the meaning of life must be a global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence. It must be an *ultimate* explanation, meaning it cannot leave the door open to taking that further step back that Edwards (1972) claimed any answer to the question always would (an argument that we rejected in 3.2).

If we accept the correlationist picture of the world, such an explanation is only suitably ultimate and final if it exists beyond the world of appearances – beyond the framework for existence itself. Kant demonstrated this in the antinomies that we discussed in 4.1. If we attempt to find any finality in the world as it appears to us, we are doomed to failure, just as we are if we attempt to find an infinity in place of a finality. When we do this, we are attempting to view things in themselves as knowable noumena, which is not possible since things in themselves are unknowable.

As such, under critical or post-critical correlationism, it would be impossible to know whether there is an ultimate, global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence, since to know as much would require us having epistemic access to the in itself, which

is (according to correlationism) in principle impossible. Therefore, we cannot ever know the meaning of life.

5.2 Could we know that god is the answer to the meaning of life?

Let us concretise this idea of an unknowable meaning of life under correlationism with an example. One possible explanation for a meaning of life would be that a necessary god created us and existence itself for some purpose. This would be a suitably global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence, and it would narrate across issues of existential import to human beings. Let us say that this god created us to live in his image as benevolently as possible, spreading goodness as far as possible. This would be a metaphysical answer, because it would explain the existence of things in a way that is final, due to this god's necessary nature. It would be global, since it would be a purpose for each and every one of us – or, rather, for all of us collectively. It would answer to those issues of most existential import to us, since if we knew everything about this god and his plan and his creation, then we would know something about death, suffering, the grounding of our personal goals, and so on. We would have a perfectly satisfactory philosophical answer to the meaning of life.

One objection to the relevance of such an answer to the meaning of life is that we could still picture our lives as meaningless even if this god explanation were granted. We could still say to ourselves: 'Sure, that's the answer, but I don't feel like what I'm doing is any more meaningful.' To this I would first say that if we felt this way we would simply be misunderstanding what sort of meaning we have been given. We would be looking for meaning *in* life, or the feeling of meaningfulness, not the meaning *of* life.

Gordon (2013: 141) points out that our "role in God's larger drama," given this explanation for a meaning of life, would not be a sufficient one, rather only a necessary one. So perhaps the questioner would be satisfied if they knew a bit more about how this god affects those elements of most existential import to us; if not, again, they were probably never looking for the meaning of life to begin with, rather just a subjective feeling of meaningfulness.

Gordon (ibid.: 146-8) goes on to argue against god's purpose being a satisfactory answer to the meaning of life. "Will not this very design," he says, "stand as a brute given in our explanation of the world?" In other words, how is the god explanation any better than any other "brute given" that we are not satisfied with? He mentions how one might respond to this argument, in a way strikingly similar to my own response to Ayer's discussion of god in 3.1. One might respond, Gordon says, by saying "[t]he purposes of God, then, provide the ultimate teleological explanation because there is nothing outside God and his Creation to which we can address the (illegitimate) question of the purpose of God's purposes." Gordon replies that this argument "does not, however, demonstrate the incoherence in the question, "What is the purpose of God and his Creation?" It provides a reason that an answer cannot be given; it does not provide a reason that the question cannot be asked." But the logical necessity of this question's unanswerableness, while not providing reason that the question *cannot* be asked, does provide reason that it *should* not be asked. If we are not happy with the answer, that would not change the fact that it *is* the answer.

Gordon goes on to argue that even if we accept that god's purposes provide ultimate teleological justification, it would still not be a sufficient answer to the meaning of life,

because we are "nevertheless left with the task of *justifying* his creative enterprise" (ibid.: 147). We have already refuted this argument in 3.1 when it came from Ayer: if we are given an ultimate purpose by a transcendent and necessary god, then this is our purpose regardless of what we think of it. In order to argue that this is not the case, you have to provide a reason why purpose must be chosen or arbitrated by us – a discussion which would lead us away from the meaning *of* life and onto humanistic meaning *in* life.

However, if we could not ask about this god's purpose since to do so would be to ask about the world in itself, could we ever know the truth or falsehood of such an answer to the meaning of life as the god explanation under the correlationist picture? The answer to this is, on the face of it, and according to critical philosophy, no, since a god that created us must have an existence that is a part of the in itself, and we can never access the in itself. If one responds that we are ourselves a part of the in itself, and we know ourselves empirically, the Kantian might respond that we do not actually know our 'self' as it is in itself. A god of appearances (as opposed to the in itself) would not be a satisfactory answer to the meaning of life, because we could always question what this god is in itself. In other words, such a god would not be suitably metaphysical, since it would not answer to the framework itself, rather it would be an answer from within the framework. As such, any answer to the meaning of life, including god, cannot be one situated within the framework of appearance. And a god outside the framework of appearance is unknowable according to the correlationist. Under correlationism, this answer to the meaning of life is in principle unknowable *because* it is an answer to the meaning of life, and as soon as it becomes knowable it is no longer an answer to the meaning of life.

This is why correlationism poses a problem for the legitimacy of the question of the meaning of life. The correlationist can admit that it is ontologically possible for there to exist a meaning of life, but to them the question 'What is the meaning of life?' is illegitimate, since the question itself requires any answer to be unknowable. If a proposed answer is knowable, it is not an answer to the meaning of life, and if it is an answer to the meaning of life then it is unknowable. And asking a question that requires the answer to be unknowable is pointless, since there can never be an answer that pertains to the question as it is intended. It is still a question that can be asked, however, even if it is a pointless question to ask. Just because you know your curiosity can never be satisfied does not mean that you cannot be curious. This is a different kind of question than one such as 'what colour are square circles?' because the correlationist still admits the possibility of an answer ontologically, but says that this answer can never be one that we know, whereas this square circle question is logically contradictory. The square circle question is logically contradictory because there could never be an answer, but there could be an answer to the meaning of life question out there in the world in itself, it could just never be knowable. The square circle question does not even permit an unknowable answer, unlike the meaning of life.

This does not mean that the god explanation could not actually be the answer, however. Just because (according to correlationism) we could never know the existence of a transcendent god does not mean that one could not exist. And just because we could never know the existence of one does not, by default, mean that we could not talk about the implications of such a god existing, as long as this discussion does not go further than talking merely about the implications of the potential *fact* of a god's existence – we could not, for example, talk about the nature of this god and its meaning in any

substantive way, since, absent the possibility for experience of it, we would have no reason to choose one competing type of nature over another. And, of course, such talk would have to be manoeuvred carefully, considering we would have to make sure we were not extending reason beyond its boundaries into the realm of the in itself where such concepts cannot be applied. What form this discussion would take would depend on whether we took a Kantian approach (which would consider non-erroneous conceptions of god as merely intellectual constructs with no metaphysical basis) or some other approach to the distinction between appearance and reality in itself, and such discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis.

It might be objected that surely we cannot even discuss god if it would have to exist beyond appearance, considering the in itself is unknowable. However, providing we use god to mean only a negation of limits, the supremely unconditioned, this would not generate transcendental errors. On the conceivability of god Kant says the following: "Can we, on such grounds, assume a wise and omnipotent Author of the world? *Undoubtedly* we may; and we not only may, but *must*, do so. But do we then extend our knowledge beyond the field of possible experience? *By no means.* All that we have done is merely to presuppose a something, a merely transcendental object, of which, as it is in itself, we have no concept whatsoever." (Kant, 1781: A697/B725-A698/B726, emphasis his). According to Kant's transcendental idealism, the supersensible is thinkable, but, as Pasternack (Pasternack et al., 2020) points out, we can "think about it in too many ways" because "[a]bsent experience, reason is without a touchstone through which hypotheses can be refuted." He goes on to say, "The problem, for Kant, is thus not about meaning, but rather it is epistemic: having no possible experience of the supersensible, we lack the theoretical resources to adjudicate between competing

claims." (ibid.). Taking god as an example, under a correlationist picture we might say that the possibility to continually question god's purpose, and then question the reason for this purpose, and so on (e.g. Gordon, 2013: 148), only occurs when we question our concept of an empirical god, i.e. within the realm of appearances. There is no experience possible that could adjudicate on where the final resting point should lie, because to gain this experience would require accomplishing the impossible task of experiencing the world in itself.

Belief in God, for Kant, comes from a moral rather than an empirical standpoint, which (according to Kant, at least) provides grounds for faith in the existence of God without claiming to know that God exists empirically. In other words, it is not through theoretical reason but through practical reason that we can say that God exists – if practical reason necessitates God's existence then we would "be entitled to base belief in God's existence on what *ought to be* – on the existence of obligation – rather than on what *is*. This would amount to *moral theology* (as distinct from theological ethics, for which God's existence is a presupposition)." (Gardner, 1999: 315-6). This is knowledge of a different sort – practically grounded knowledge rather than empirical or theoretical knowledge. The following and final chapter, however, deals with attempts to render the meaning of life (with God being one such possible explanation) in principle epistemically accessible from the theoretical or empirical standpoint.

6 Routes towards ultimate meaning

Let us briefly recap what we have discovered so far. First, we have discovered that there is a primary distinction between the meaning *of* life and meaning *in* life. The former refers to a global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence that narrates across those elements of most existential import to human beings. In other words, it is an 'ultimate' explanation. While it must involve purpose-meaning and significance-meaning, what ties all these constituting elements of meaning together is intelligibility-meaning, which connects all aspects of meaning under a single explanation that might be called 'total' meaning.

We discovered that the question of the meaning of life is legitimate despite some of the most initially compelling arguments against its legitimacy. However, we have also discovered that if one takes a correlationist or transcendental idealist line on the nature of reality, then an ultimate meaning of life is rendered unknowable. Correlationist metaphysics (or, sometimes, anti-metaphysics), if it does not accept Kant's moral faith argument, might also result in the proclamation that the question of the meaning of life is illegitimate, as the answer's unknowability arguably renders the question either meaningless or pointless.

This final chapter explores possible routes towards ultimate meaning given all that we have learnt so far. If a meaning of life must be a global-metaphysical explanation for life and existence, in which ways can we approach a meaning of life that allows for its legitimacy? Must we deny correlationism and transcendental idealism, or is there a way to maintain the question's legitimacy even under these metaphysical frameworks?

In 6.1, I outline two attempts that have been made to render the in itself (and thereby the existence or non-existence of, and nature of, the meaning of life) knowable despite transcendental idealism. Both Fichte and Schopenhauer stick to a transcendental idealist conception of reality but attempt to render the in itself knowable in order to gain true metaphysical insight about the ultimate nature of reality.

In 6.2, I outline metaphysical and epistemological alternatives to transcendental idealism that would render the meaning of life knowable in principle. These metaphysics are empirical idealism, direct external realism, and indirect external realism, but only when they are taken in their transcendentally realist forms. In other words, the two possible ways to render a meaning of life knowable are: (1) by arguing, like some post-Kantians, that we can infer things about the world in itself despite the distinction between reality and appearance, or (2) by arguing either that the way that things appear can be identical to the way things really are (empirical idealism) or that our appearances can correspond in some way with reality as it is in itself. In all cases, the world in itself is supposedly rendered knowable, and a meaning of life thereby becomes in principle accessible to inference or deduction.

In this Chapter I do not assess whether each attempt succeeds or fails in its attempt to render the world in itself knowable, rather I provide a sketch of the possible metaphysical positions that one may take to in principle render the world in itself knowable and hence provide us with possible access to the meaning of life.

6.1 Moving beyond appearance

After Kant, even many of those philosophers who concurred with the general transcendental idealist distinction between the 'world in itself' and the 'world for us' were not happy to leave the former as epistemically inaccessible. This was especially so for some of the German idealists that followed in Kant's wake, such as Fichte. "[L]ike the other great German idealists who developed their ideas from Fichte's initial inspiration," says Leach and Tartaglia (Leach and Tartaglia, 2018), "he thought Kant had stopped short at the threshold of metaphysical insight."

This is a fairly common frustration upon discovering Kant's transcendental idealism. While Kant attempts to give metaphysical insight into what must be the case in reality by means of transcendental deduction, what occurs with transcendental idealism is arguably not an uncovering of the nature of true reality, but instead the description of an intermediary reality which, along with our minds, co-constitutes the world as we know it. For those seeking metaphysical insight – i.e. those attempting to discover the fundamental nature of reality – Kant might be seen to have substituted the 'reality' of fundamental metaphysical insight with a different type of 'reality', one which is not quite as real as we might have hoped.

This is a different sort of scepticism about reality than that which arises from, for example, Cartesian doubt. Where Descartes says that external reality is independent of our internal states, and only thereafter attempts to prove the existence of this reality and the epistemic credibility of our perceptions of it, Kant instead says that external reality is not proven by the relationship between our immediately acquainted mental states'

relationship to external reality, but that our internal states depend upon this external reality for us to be acquainted with them at all. This results in a co-constitution that guarantees both internal and external states' existence, and then moves the veil, behind which lies the true 'unknown reality', a further layer back. It is, in many ways, a deeper scepticism than Descartes' that might occur from this understanding of Kant's transcendental idealism, because the realm of the unknown is entirely separated from our inner states, the external world that we perceive, and the relationship between the two.

Fichte, one of many post-Kantians that was not happy to leave the in itself so far removed, attempted to resolve this problem by arguing that the unknowable realm is, in fact, knowable. This true reality is an individual's own will as a manifestation of the infinite will. For Fichte, the ego must postulate the non-ego in order for our moral natures to make sense, and this interplay is projected onto the nature of ultimate reality as absolute ego. For Fichte, the in itself *can* be directly known in the case of the self: I have an immediate intuition of my self as it is in itself, and this intuition is 'intellectual' in the Kantian sense, in that it involves active creation from within. The immediate intuition that I act – that my self acts – is the starting-point for Fichte, and this is a knowledge of something *in itself*, quite unlike the picture painted by Kant.

However, while this was a departure from the Kantian system, in other ways Fichte explicitly operated within Kant's critical framework, since he saw "no way of making naturalistic sense of the knowing willing subject" (Moore, 2012: 148) – "naturalism", here, is referring to the dogmatism that Kant opposed). The in itself is immediately intuited, and all other things that are known are mediated through our 'spectacles'. The

immediately intuited subject is not thought of as an object like the off-limit world in itself, but instead as an act. This act is in creating "the conditions for its very own creativity. It creates itself." (ibid.: 153) – in this sense (of its creating being the condition for its own creativity) Fichte's account is transcendental, because it is an argument based on the *conditions of possibility* for creativity. Fichte believed that "all human understanding is ultimately rooted in the practical and moral imperatives of will; in acts of conscience guided by a faith that our endless individual strivings are in accordance with an infinite and benevolent will" (Leach and Tartaglia, 2018: 280). For the Jena Romantics like Fichte, self-creation in accordance with the divine will was the meaning of life.

Direct and immediate intuition of the will as a manifestation of the absolute is one way we might attempt to render the in itself knowable given a transcendental idealist framework, then. But some, like Schopenhauer, thought that this was incorrect, and thought that, instead, a Kantian metaphysics "that does not lapse into the charlatanry of purported 'intellectual intuition' of the absolute" (Young, 2014: 53) is necessary. Schopenhauer thought that for many post-Kantians, "Reason was supposed to denote an entirely imaginary, fictitious faculty, admitting us, as it were, to a little window overlooking the superlunar, nay, the supernatural world, through which all those truths are handed to us ready cut and dried, concerning which old-fashioned, honest, reflective Reason had for ages vainly argued and contended." (Schopenhauer, 1813: 139).

For Schopenhauer, "it is on such a mere product of the imagination, such a completely fictitious Reason as this, that German sham philosophy has been based for the last fifty years; first, as the free construction and projection of the absolute *Ego* and the

emanation from it of the *non-Ego*; then, as the intellectual intuition of absolute identity or indifference, and its evolutions to Nature; or again, as the arising of God out of his dark depths or bottomless pit *à la* Jakob Böhme; lastly, as the pure, self-thinking, absolute Idea, the scene of the ballet-dance of the self-moving conceptions – still, at the same time, always as immediate apprehension […] of the Divine, the supersensuous, the Deity, verity, beauty and as many other "-ties" as may be desired, or even as a mere vague presentiment of all these wonders. So this is Reason, is it? Oh no, it is simply a farce, of which our professors of philosophy, who are sorely perplexed by Kant's serious critiques, avail themselves in order to pass off the subjects of the established religion of their country somehow or other, *per fas aut nefas*, for the results of philosophy." (ibid., emphasis theirs). Direct experience of the in itself, the 'immediate intuition' of the subject as with Fichte, is a "farce" – but there is still another way to know the true nature of reality, according to Schopenhauer, one that does not involve "such a completely fictitious Reason as this", one that is properly Kantian.

Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), takes an approach that he considers to be more true to the spirit of Kant's critical philosophy than that of other post-Kantians like the Jena Romantics. He takes the ideality of our world of appearances as a given, and thinks that to question this after Kant "would be as absurd as questioning the heliocentric account of the cosmos after Galileo" (Young, 2014: 51). He says that "[w]ith the exception of my own body, I know only *one* side of things, that of representation: the inner essence of things is closed to me and remains a deep mystery, even when I know everything that causes alterations in them" (Schopenhauer, 1819: 149). But just because the world of appearances is ideal it does not follow, Schopenhauer argues, that we cannot know anything about the world in itself. There is

still the possibility for metaphysics, and thus (this being my own inference, not Schopenhauer's) the possibility of discovering a meaning of life. It only follows that we cannot have direct experience of the in itself (ruling out Fichte's notion of the infinite will), not that we can know nothing about it.

Young (2014: 52) analogises this way of thinking about metaphysics to the way we think about molecules: "Metaphysics, suggests Schopenhauer, can be conceived in a similar way: its status as knowledge is based entirely on experience, yet because its topic lies beyond experience – in a way analogous to the way in which molecules lie beyond experience – it can count as genuinely metaphysical." In other words, just because we cannot directly experience molecules does not mean that we cannot infer their existence and characteristics; similarly, just because we cannot experience the in itself, says Schopenhauer, does not mean that we cannot infer its existence and characteristics. But what do we look at to make this inference? What route is there to the in itself when direct experience is unavailable?

Schopenhauer says this route is found through contemplating our understanding of the world of appearances. The world of appearances is often explained through atomistic means: in the modern world, we explain physical objects in terms of molecules, molecules in terms of atoms, atoms in terms of electrons, protons, and neutrons, and these in terms of quarks, and so on. Schopenhauer argues that in order to explain physical causality we must, at some point, posit the existence of brute forces. These forces, rather than physical structures which can always be broken down further, are the ultimate constituting force in the universe.

From there, he extrapolates further to interpret these forces as will, by way of comparison with our only direct experience of such a force: the internal will. The source of this knowledge, then, comes from our experience of the world of appearances, but it infers beyond itself to the realm of ultimate reality through the necessary positing of force. And this force is interpreted as 'will', which we know from our own experience of it. Schopenhauer "aims directly to apprehend an aspect of himself that in addition to constituting his own inner being, could also constitute the inner being of any physical object," (Wicks, 2018: 156), and this is found to be the 'will', which is then generalised to all of reality. Thus, what one "recognises as his own essence is the same thing that constitutes the essence of the world in its entirety, the essence of the macrocosm: and thus it is, like himself both will through and through and representation through and through; nothing more remains" (Schopenhauer, 1819: 212).

Reality in itself, then, is the will, and from there Schopenhauer goes on to attempt to demonstrate why this ultimate nature expresses itself in us as suffering, and why we should attempt to break free of this suffering by denying the will in its entirety, and by dying a death through lack of will to life rather than as a will-affirming act of suicide. As far as a meaning of life goes, however, "ultimate reality or, following Immanuel Kant's terminology, the "thing-in-itself," is nothing more than an aimless, meaningless impulse, and by implication, so is life." (Wicks, 2018: 150). There is no purpose to the will – no end goal – so it is ultimately meaningless, as is life which is guided by it. As an answer to the question "what is the meaning of life?" this might seem unsatisfying, as it answers: "there is none"; but it does traverse the supposedly unsurpassable gulf between the world of appearances and the world in itself to provide an answer.

It is important to note one way that Schopenhauer's explanation might be considered similar to Fichte's and those of other post-Kantians like Hegel. Fichte takes the in itself to be directly experienced as the will of the self, which is a manifestation of the ultimate, absolute will. Schopenhauer thinks that this is not truly Kantian, because it is claiming direct access to the in itself, whereas Kant thought that direct knowledge of the self would mean that "no one could then deny our right of advancing yet further in this domain [of noumena], indeed of settling in it, and, should our star prove auspicious, of establishing claims to permanent possession" (Kant, 1781: B410) . Instead, Schopenhauer thinks, we cannot directly experience the in itself, but we can experience the world as it appears to us and then infer its underlying nature (forces) by interrogating what must necessarily lie at the bottom of all appearances, and then interpret this by comparing it to something we *do* directly experience: our own will. This requires Schopenhauer to distinguish between his comparing of appearances to our will, and Fichte's immediate intuition of the self as it is in itself, otherwise he would be falling into the same trap that he accuses other post-Kantians of falling into, because to infer that ultimate reality is the 'will', just like that which we directly perceive, it appears that you must say that this directly experienced will is as it is itself. Otherwise, why should we accept that the posited base forces of nature are similar to our own will at all and can be characterised in such a way? It is only by assuming that the internal will is as it is in itself that we can map it onto reality in itself, otherwise we would only be mapping an appearance of will onto a (supposedly necessary) notion of force or will in nature, and this would not tell us anything about what this will is like in itself. But is there really such a difference between understanding an underlying reality in terms of a directly experienced will, and immediately intuiting the reality as self-will?

Still, whether or not this move to interpretation of the will is justified, we have, with Schopenhauer, one way in which we might attempt to discover a meaning of life despite the distinction between the world in itself and the world of appearances: by interrogating our experience of reality to discover a reality that goes beyond experience, in the same way that we interrogate a physical object to discover its underlying structure. Schopenhauer attempted to remove the barrier to knowledge of the in itself by arguing that true reality can be discovered despite us being unable to directlyexperience it. Fichte and other post-Kantians like Hegel attempted to remove this barrier by saying that we can, in fact, directly experience the in itself, and that we do this via the self.

6.2 Denying the distinction between reality and appearance

Transcendental idealism and those correlationist philosophies that follow in its wake pose an epistemological problem for the meaning of life, because the ultimate nature of reality, which is where the meaning of life must be found, is rendered entirely unknowable. This is distinct to sceptical responses to indirect perception because the transcendental idealist thinks that even those realities themselves that are indirectly perceived (for example, the primary properties of an object), as well as our perceptions of them, are part of the world of appearance. The world as it is in itself is further – completely – removed from the realm of possible experience and therefore knowledge.

In the previous section we saw one way that we can attempt to resolve this epistemological problem: by inferring or directly experiencing the in itself in some way despite the distinction between the world in itself and the world of appearances remaining intact – in other words, by rendering the in itself accessible to reason through

some means and in some way. But there is a further way we may respond to the problem, and that is by denying the transcendental idealist premise and instead presenting a picture of the world in which we always directly perceive reality as it is in itself – in other words, we could espouse transcendental realism[1]. The epistemological theory of direct perception, as it is found in direct external realism and idealism presents another way of rendering the meaning of life knowable, providing we mean transcendental realist forms of these metaphysics. In a way this goes without saying, because if transcendental idealism poses a problem then clearly the denial of transcendental idealism would resolve this problem. However, it is useful to outline in which precise way the problem is resolved, and to explore why direct perception would resolve the problem in a way that post-Kantian philosophies do not.

Let us take direct (or 'naïve') realism first. Crane and French say direct external realism holds "that the veridical experiences involved in genuine cases of perception consist, in their nature, of relations to ordinary objects" and that "this is put to work in explaining the phenomenal character of such experiences." (2017). It is important not to confuse this with (external) realism on its own. Realism, as Searle argues in Chapter 7 of *The Construction of Social Reality*, consists only of the ontological proposition that "[t]he world (or alternatively, reality or the universe) exists independently of our representation of it" (1996: 150). On the face of it this runs counter to transcendental idealism, since one of Kant's central claims is that the world is not independent of our representation of it. However, the "world" of external realism is referring to the world in itself, not the world of appearance that the transcendental idealist says is dependent on our representation.

[1]Another possible route towards meaning might be through faith, but this is not a way of rendering the meaning of life knowable, rather it is a belief in a meaning of life despite its unknowability.

External realism simply claims that there exists a reality that is out there, independent of our representation of it. Indeed, Searle says that there is nothing epistemic about realism, and that "[i]t would be consistent with realism to suppose that any kind of "view" of reality is quite impossible" (ibid.: 154).

Direct external realism, on the other hand, adds an epistemological claim onto external realism, this claim being that we directly access or perceive this representation-independent reality. If we can directly perceive a representation-independent reality then we can directly perceive the world as it is in itself, and we are therefore, and at least in principle, capable of directly perceiving things which might lead us to infer the existence of a meaning of life. In other words, there would be no difficulty moving from our experience of the world to inferring the ultimate nature of reality and what this means for the meaning of life, since our experience of the world would not be principally disconnected from reality as it is in itself. We would not in principle lack the experience to adjudicate between competing claims about the world as it is in itself: our notions of causation, substance, objecthood, and so on would apply to the world as it is in itself, and could therefore be used as tools to attempt to deduce or infer a meaning of life.

Indirect external realism might also mean that we could in principle discover a meaning of life, but this would depend on the particular indirect external realism in question. Transcendental idealism is distinct from many takes on indirect external realism where true reality (the in itself) is concerned. If we are talking about the world as it is in itself, as we must be to discuss an ultimate meaning of life, then under transcendental idealism we do not perceive it at all, either directly or indirectly. It can only be in the empirical

sense that we regard Kant as an indirect or direct external realist: transcendentally ideal, and empirically real. If we take a transcendentally real perspective, however, then, just like direct external realism, we could in principle discover a meaning of life. If our experiences map onto reality in a reliable way (taking reliabilism as one example) then we can infer the existence of a meaning of life from our indirect or direct experiences of reality (which are objects as they are in themselves, on the transcendentally real account) as we can be sure our inferences about the ultimate nature of reality are within the realms of possible experience. Transcendental realism in both direct external realist and indirect external realist forms, then, renders a meaning of life in principle knowable.

Empirical idealism, which claims that reality is mind-dependent, would, like empirical realism, also mean that a meaning of life could in principle be deduced or inferred. It might be claimed that empirical idealism 'does away with' the notion of reality in itself because under empirical idealism there is no more mind-independent reality. However, what makes something that thing 'in itself' is that it is the final fact or form of the matter. As such, if we have a picture that describes true reality as mind-dependent, then instead of this being a dismissal of the in itself we have in fact rendered – or attempted to render – the in itself knowable because the self and the mind is immediately knowable. There is no barrier in principle between our immediate experience and the world 'in itself' with empirical idealism because the world in itself is directly knowable as 'idea'.

It does not make sense to say that this does away with the in itself, as some forms of phenomenalism might do, unless we also claim that this mind-dependent world is

unreal (i.e. not as it is in itself), in which case we return to a distinction between the world and reality, in other words, transcendental idealism. Except, this time, it is unclear where the distinction between the in itself and the world of appearances would lie – or, what the in itself would consist of – since if there is nothing that is not mind-dependent, and this mind-dependent reality is only appearance, then there is little room for the in itself. For empirical idealism to be distinct from transcendental idealism we must accept that it makes claims about and attempts to describe the world in itself rather than do away with it. If it does not do this then it must argue that there is no way that anything is something in itself at all, which does not characterise empirical idealism.

Empirical idealism renders the meaning of life knowable in principle in the same way that direct external realism does by saying that reality in itself is directly perceived. The only difference is, for the idealist, reality is not externally real and material: the mental is the ultimate foundation of what exists, and, because we are immediately acquainted with the mental, we are immediately acquainted with the ultimate nature of reality. It is still a theory of direct perception, which is what allows for epistemological optimism about the meaning of life, but it is antirealist in the external sense. If reality is constituted of the mental, either completely or foundationally, and if we have immediate access to the mental, then there is no veil for us to pierce to access a more 'real' type of reality – we have everything right in front of us, so to speak. The idealist has less to account for epistemologically than the realist, at least regarding our present discussion, because while the direct and indirect external realist must account the relation between object and experience, for the idealist our experience *is* the object. This immediate and direct perception of the in itself allows the empirical idealist to reason about the in itself and potentially infer the meaning of life.

With direct external realism, indirect external realism, and empirical idealism, we render a meaning of life in principle epistemically obtainable if we are operating from a transcendentally real perspective. With these philosophies the 'in itself' is not done away with, rather it is said to coincide with our experience, whether that experience is of an external reality or a mind-constituted one. What is important, then, is the denial of a separation between reality and experience. If our experience of the world and the world in itself can coincide, as with idealism, then we can experience the world as it is in itself, and if we are directly or indirectly experiencing the *external* world as it is in itself then, similarly, we are experiencing things the way they truly are. In all cases we are in principle capable of reasoning about the in itself and potentially inferring the existence of a meaning of life, as our true reality is rendered within the bounds of possible experience.

Conclusion: epistemological optimism

There are two separate kinds of question regarding the meaning of life. The first, epistemological type of question, is, "Can we know whether there is a meaning of life?", or "Can we know what the meaning of life is?", and, following this, "*How* can we know the meaning of life?" The second, ontological type of question, is, "Is there a meaning of life", and, following this, "What is the meaning of life, irrespective of our knowledge of it?". These questions, strictly speaking, deal only with the nature and existence of a meaning of life regardless of whether or not we can know it. We have primarily focused our attention on the former, epistemological question, and our discussion of the latter has consisted in outlining possible explanations for a meaning of life given what one must consist in, rather than assessing any particular answer. In other words, we have not attempted to answer the question "What is the meaning of life?", but have instead attempted to narrow down which kinds of answer would be sufficient given what is being requested by the question.

When the question is asked in its usual form – "What is the meaning of life?" – this is a request for an answer to any and all of the above. "The meaning of life is to live as God commands", or "The meaning of life is to become alien grub", or "There is no meaning of life", or "We cannot ever know the meaning of life", or "We can know what the meaning of life is in principle, but I don't know the answer or whether there is an answer at all" are all perfectly sufficient responses to the question, providing there is enough evidence or a convincing enough argument provided for the response in question. This, in the same way that someone asking, "What exists outside of the

currently observable universe?" might find the answers "Nothing", "More of the same", "A giant green Tortoise", or "We don't know" all sufficient.

We cannot answer "What is the meaning of life?" in the ontological sense if we cannot know whether there is a meaning of life. And if we do think that a meaning of life, should one exist, would be knowable, but that there is in fact no such meaning, then this answers both the ontological and epistemological question: we know that the meaning of life does not exist. Any positive answer to the question "What is the meaning of life?" must answer both epistemological and ontological questions, because to do so is to claim knowledge of its existence and its nature. An answer to the epistemological question, however, clearly requires no answer to the ontological one, because it is possible to say that we can or cannot know a meaning of life in principle without claiming to know anything about the existence, non-existence, or nature of one in practice.

In terms of how we come to approach the meaning of life as human beings, the epistemological question comes before the ontological one. We cannot answer the ontological question without either explicitly answering the epistemological one or otherwise implicitly presupposing an answer to the epistemological one. In either case, both positive and negative ontological answers presuppose a positive epistemological one. But we have seen that Kant's transcendental idealism and the correlationism that follows in its wake pose a serious threat to this epistemological optimism regarding the meaning of life. If we cannot know reality in itself, and if a meaning of life requires knowing reality in itself (which, as argued in Chapter 2, it does), then we cannot ever

know the meaning of life, and all ontological claims about the existence or non-existence of one are unfounded and possibly even meaningless.

Possible responses to this problem were discussed in Chapter 6. The epistemological problem that transcendental idealism and correlationism poses is that, if we hold to these philosophies, the world outside of representation, or language, or any number of other thought-being relations, is unknowable as we cannot experience being itself and therefore cannot reach a viewpoint removed enough to answer the question of the ultimate meaning of life. So, if we want to render the meaning of life epistemically accessible, we must either (1) argue, like Fichte and Schopenhauer, that we can infer things about the world in itself despite our inability to experience it, or (2) argue that there is no distinction between reality in itself and appearance because reality is either (a) directly experienced as external, (b) indirectly but correctly experienced as external, or (c) directly experienced as mind-constituted. These are the only ways to render a meaning of life knowable.

Edwards' objection to the meaning of life question (an argument that we rejected in section 3.2) rests in part upon his claim that any answer to the meaning of life will always be said to not go far back enough. Despite us rejecting his overall argument, this rejection of any potential answer to the meaning of life as not going back far enough is a very real instinct. Let us take god as an example. If we say that a god created everything, and the meaning of life is to live as it commands, then it seems very reasonable to reject this answer as one that does not go back far enough, for we can still question 'Where did this god come from?' The transcendental idealist might say that this impulse to request further justification or levels of explanation occurs because we

are attempting to extend our reason beyond the realm of appearances and onto the world as a totality, which does not make sense. However, if we hold to either (1) or (2) above, and if we have arrived at this god explanation by some means, then we may reject the 'it does not go back far enough' impulse as incorrect or irrelevant (incorrect if we take it as a proposition and irrelevant if we take it as a subjective expression of dissatisfaction towards the answer). A necessary god *would* be the final resting point, whether we felt like it could be questioned further or not. If it could be questioned further then it would not be a 'necessary' god. And, if in fact it is not a necessary god, then we would be correct to say that the answer does not go back far enough, but we would be wrong to say that this means there could be no answer to the meaning of life. It would just not be *this* particular answer involving a non-necessary god, at least not in the final, ultimate analysis. (Returning to our discussion from Chapter 2, we might say that this non-necessary god would not sufficiently answer to the meaning *of* the framework of existence, and would merely be a part of the framework itself and therefore act as a possible answer to meaning *in* life.)

So, we now have it that if we want an answer to the meaning of life we need an ultimate explanation for life and existence that narrates across those elements of most existential import to human beings. Despite some of the strongest arguments against the legitimacy of the question, we have seen that the question is, in fact, legitimate, and that there are different metaphysics and epistemologies that can be held which maintain epistemological optimism regarding an answer. Transcendental idealism and correlationism pose serious threats to this epistemological optimism, but there are attempts to combat this threat either by denying the distinction between reality and appearance, or by arguing that the world in itself is still knowable through inference or

direct experience despite the distinction between reality and appearance. Only by undertaking our questioning from within one of these metaphysical and epistemological frameworks can our attempts to discover whether there is a meaning of life and what it might be potentially be fruitful; if we begin our questioning from a strictly Kantian or correlationist standpoint we are doomed at the outset, as these standpoints dictate that we can know nothing about a meaning of life, regardless of whether there is one in reality or not. But the question of the meaning of life does not, as is sometimes assumed, necessitate an epistemically pessimistic answer by default.

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