

A Fast Car and a Good Woman

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From Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin, *The Experience of Philosophy 2/e* (Wadsworth, 1993), 556-562

Poverty, sickness, loneliness, alienation, feelings of inferiority, an ability to give and receive love. Such problems can challenge the meaning of our lives. There is no puzzle about why. When we are afflicted with them, we suffer. If our suffering is bad enough and seemingly intractable, we may lose the sense that our lives are worth living.

Such problems are practically, but not philosophically, challenging. When they cause suffering that is avoidable, the important question is how to avoid it. When they cause suffering that is inevitable, the question is how to accept it. Learning how to avoid suffering when we can and accept it when we must are not part of the problem of the meaning of life. They are part of the problem of life.

Death also challenges the meaning of our lives. But in the case of death, unlike in the cases of the other problems mentioned, it is not clear why. What does the fact that our lives will come to an end have to do with whether they are worth living? There seems to be no connection. I shall suggest a partial answer.

The problem of the meaning of life is the philosophical question of how, if at all, our lives can be worth living. It concerns, for instance, such speculative questions as whether there is an overriding purpose or pattern for human life as a whole that confers meaning on our individual lives, and whether there is an objective source of value for our lives. The problem of life, on the other hand, is the practical question of how to live our lives so that they are as worth living as they can be. Clearly the problem of life is more important. In fact, it can seem so much more important that it is a tenet of practical wisdom that if we take proper care of our lives, questions of meaning will take care of themselves. That's good advice, unless you are the sort of person who *has* to address questions of meaning to take proper care of your life. Not everyone does, and even among those who do, questions of meaning will seem more important at some times than at others.

Tolstoy is the classic example of someone for whom questions of meaning can be urgent.

... I was overcome by minutes at first of perplexity and then of an arrest of life, as though I did not know how to live or what to do, and I lost myself and was dejected. But that passed and I continued to live as before. Then those minutes of perplexity were repeated oftener and oftener, and always in one and the same form. These arrests of life found their expression in ever the same questions: "Why? Well, and then?"

At first I thought that those were simply aimless, inappropriate questions ... [But they] began to repeat themselves oftener and oftener, answers were demanded more and more persistently, and, like dots that fall on the same spot, these questions, without any answers, thickened into one black blotch.

... And I was absolutely unable to make any reply. The questions were not waiting and I had to answer them at once: if I did not answer them, I could not live.¹

Empathizing with Tolstoy's existential anguish can unravel our familiar everyday rationalizations and expose a secret need for understanding we keep buried deep within. Stripped of our pretensions, we look freshly—at our own lives, at the lives of those around us, at the lives of everyone who has ever lived—and we ask: Why? There is no answer. Just the silent, anxious echo of our question. And sometimes a nagging doubt.

There is something fishy about existential anguish. Even when it comes wrapped in the paper of respectable philosophical questioning, it often smells suspiciously like a rationalization of unmentioned problems. Tolstoy, for instance, portrays himself as one who would be happy, except for worries about the meaning of life. But is it really worries about the meaning of life that keep dragging him down? There are questions he can ask about the meaning of life, doubts to be raised. But questions and doubts can be raised about anything. Questions are not necessarily problems. They can be. We can make a

psychological problem out of almost anything. But how often are philosophical questions genuine psychological problems? When it seems that our philosophical questions give rise to existential anguish, should we marvel at the depth of our insight or suspect self-deception?

There is one familiar way philosophy can give rise to psychological problems. The naive person whose sense of security is built on a foundation of unquestioned beliefs can have those beliefs suddenly swept out from under him or her by philosophical questioning. Consider, for instance, a person whose sense of security rests on religious beliefs that suddenly become subject to doubt. The resulting turmoil can be so painfully confusing as to call into question the meaning of life.

Without minimizing this sort of problem, I wish to set it aside. The philosophical questioning which induces it usually directly challenges only the beliefs we depend on for security, not the meaning of our lives per se. The suffering comes not from some insoluble philosophical problem but from the sudden realization that our personal ideologies rest on dubious assumptions. Most people get over this realization quickly enough (usually too quickly), either by forgetting or ignoring their doubts or else by finding a new basis for security. I am asking whether there is a deeper and more direct philosophical challenge to the meaning of our lives which is at least as psychologically valid as the one that depends on philosophical naiveté, yet is not so easily set aside or outgrown.

In sum, I have distinguished three challenges to the meaning of our lives: bad times, death, and philosophical doubts of a sort that can arise even when our lives are going quite well. My concern, now, is with the third of these challenges. Putting aside problems caused by the realization that our personal ideologies rest on dubious assumptions, I am asking whether challenges of this third sort—that is, philosophical doubts about the meaning of our lives that can arise even when our lives are going quite well—are psychologically genuine. I don't deny that when our lives are going quite well, psychological problems can arise. I'm asking how likely it is that philosophical questions are the explanation. I admit

they may sometimes be the explanation. I'm asking whether there isn't usually some deeper explanation, a source of anxiety and despair we may not be facing if we allow ourselves to become preoccupied with philosophy.

Thomas Nagel sets aside as unphilosophical those challenges to the meaning of life that arise because things go wrong and "are compatible with the possibility of meaning had things gone differently." Philosophical challenges to meaning, in his view, threaten human life with "objective meaninglessness" even when it is "at its subjective best." And he seems to think that philosophical challenges to meaning are a chronic source of deep psychological problems.

In seeing ourselves from outside we find it difficult to take our lives seriously. This loss of conviction, and the attempt to regain it, is the problem of the meaning of life.

... it is a genuine problem which we cannot ignore. The capacity for transcendence brings with it a liability to alienation. ... Yet we can't abandon the external standpoint because it is our own.

It is our own, Nagel says, because the objective self is such a vital part of us that "to ignore its quasi-independent operation is to cut off from oneself as much as if one were to abandon one's subjective individuality." So, in Nagel's view, there is no escape from this sort of alienation—"no credible way of eliminating the inner conflict"—and, hence, no solution to the philosophical problem of the meaning of life.

But there is help, Nagel thinks, and it comes from two sources:

[Morality] permits the objective assertion of subjective values to the extent that this is compatible with the corresponding claims of others. It ... [involves] occupying a position far enough outside your own life to reduce the importance of the difference between yourself and other people, yet not so far outside that all human values vanish in a nihilistic blackout. ...

... Humility falls between nihilistic detachment and blind self-importance. ... The human race has a strong disposition to adore itself, in spite of its record. But it is

possible to live a complete life of the kind one has been given without overvaluing it hopelessly.²

Even so, Nagel thinks that “the gap is too wide to be closed entirely, for anyone who is fully human.” So, although morality and humility help, the problem is insoluble. Serious internal conflict remains. In sum, Nagel agrees with Tolstoy, though for different reasons, that philosophical challenges to the meaning of life are an important source of psychological problems.

If Nagel and Tolstoy are right, practical wisdom is wrong. Questions of meaning do not take care of themselves. If you are intellectually sensitive, then to take proper care of your life, you have to attend to questions about meaning. Tolstoy’s self-portrait seems to show that these questions *can* bring you down. Nagel’s view is that if you think honestly and correctly about questions of meaning, they *will* bring you down. Tolstoy solved his problem by embracing Christianity. Nagel claims there is no honest solution. Nagel’s analysis of the philosophical problems is elegant. Yet his account, like Tolstoy’s, is psychologically suspect.

To see why, think about a time when you life *was* at its subjective best. Maybe you were young and had just fallen deeply in love with someone who had just fallen deeply in love with you. Perhaps you were in the throes of sexual ecstasy or enveloped in mystical bliss. Or you may have played some instrument, or danced, or acted, or written much better than you ever thought you could. Perhaps you were simply drawn out of yourself by the muted texture of an autumn day or the vibrant sting of cold rain against your face.

Whatever your peak experiences, were you worried then about the meaning of life? Did *questions* about the meaning *bother* you, that is, were they *problems* for you? Of course not. If your life really was at its subjective best, then probably it was sufficient: you lacked nothing. Because you had solved the problem of life, at least temporarily, questions about the meaning of life did not even arise. If such questions had been raised, you would have regarded them as an entertainment or, more likely, dismissed them as irrelevant. Perhaps, then, practical wisdom is

right after all: how to live well is the only psychologically valid issue.

When we are happy, *questions* about the meaning of our lives rarely ever become *problems*. The solution to the *problem* of the meaning of life, then, is simple: be happy. The really important question is: how? Life is too short to try out many paths to happiness. We have to take our chances. And we have to take some of our most important chances when we are young and relatively inexperienced. Through ignorance or bad luck, people often choose the wrong paths to happiness and, as a consequence, suffer. Such bad choices are obviously an important source of suffering, particularly for people in circumstances sufficiently advantaged that they have the luxury of choice. But the fact that people make bad choices about how to be happy does not in and of itself give rise to *philosophical* problems about the meaning of our lives.

Like Nagel, Richard Taylor locates *philosophical* questions about the meaning of our lives in the tension between objective meaninglessness—for him, “endless pointlessness”—and subjective meaning. His view is that our lives are objectively meaningless, but not meaningless *per se*.

At this point, then, we can reintroduce ... our own wills, our deep interest in what we find ourselves doing. If we do this we find that our lives do indeed still resemble that of Sisyphus, but ... the strange meaningfulness they possess is that of the inner compulsion to be doing just what we were put here to do, and to go on doing it forever.

In other words, the tasks people set for themselves, the things to which

they bent their backs day after day, realizing one by one their ephemeral plans, were precisely the things in which their wills were deeply involved, precisely the things in which their interests lay, and there was no need then to ask questions. There is no more need of them now—the day was sufficient to itself, and so was the life. This is surely the way to look at all of life. ...

So, in Taylor's view, subjective meaningfulness resides in activity in which our wills are involved.

A human being no sooner draws his first breath than he responds to the will that is in him to live. He no more asks whether it will be worthwhile, or whether anything of significance will come of it, than the worms and the birds. The point of his living is simply to be living, in the manner that it is in his nature to be living. ... What counts is that one should be able to begin a new task, a new castle, a new bubble. It counts only because it is there to be done and he has the will to do it. ... The meaning of life is from within us, it is not bestowed from without, and it far exceeds in both its beauty and permanence any heaven of which men have ever dreamed or yearned for.³

Taylor's view, in sum, is that the value derived from activity in which our wills are involved is enough to sustain the meaning of our lives, indeed, is as much as we can rationally hope for.

Is it? Looking around, we see people *willfully* building their castles and bubbles, so to speak, just as Taylor says they do, but not as *meaningfully* as he claims. Surely Thoreau was not all wrong when he observed that most people live in quiet desperation.

Taylor finds meaning everywhere. Nagel finds it nowhere. The saccharine sweetness of Taylor's conclusion makes Nagel's pessimism look appealing. But neither account feels psychologically valid. Taylor's is too romantic and makes meaning too easy. Nagel's is too intellectual and makes meaning too hard.

It is worth exploring the middle ground. A plausible view suggested by Taylor's discussion is that people have meaningful lives not when they are doing what they *will* to do but when they are doing what they *love* to do. Such a view seems to leave a place for meaningfulness without romanticizing human life. For most people are not doing what they love to do but, rather, what they have to do, or what they feel they have to do. The human spectacle is not a scene of yeoman farmers toiling happily in their fields. It includes a fair proportion of tired, unhappy people, resigned to their painful, dreary

lives, trying desperately to distract and anesthetize themselves.

Meaning, then, on this criterion, is neither impossible nor inevitable. Nor is it all or nothing. It is a matter of degree. Is the answer, then, not that your life is or is not inherently meaningful but, rather, that it can be meaningful, and is meaningful largely to the degree that you are doing what you love to do? That seems a more likely hypothesis than the ones already considered. Yet, in its implicit suggestion that the main problem of meaning is the practical problem of finding out what you love to do and then doing it, this view too may be hopelessly romantic.

Oscar Wilde once remarked that there are only two problems in life: not getting what you want, and getting it. If Wilde is right, then what many people think is the whole problem—not getting what you want (or doing what you want to do)—is really only part of the problem. Ironically, the rest of the problem is what these same people think is the solution. It is hard to quarrel with that much of Wilde's observation. Getting what you want *can* be problematic. Wilde's remark also *suggests*, however, that getting what you want not only *can be* but *will be* problematic. If that's true, then our lives are an insoluble problem.

It is easy to see how not getting what you want can be a problem. And, if you want the wrong things—say, the pleasures of an unhealthy lifestyle—it's also easy to see how getting what you want can be a problem. But what if you want the right things—things that are not only good in themselves but also good for you. How could wanting the right things be a problem?

Think back to those times when your life was at its subjective best. Granted, at those moments you were not bothered by questions about the meaning of life. But were you completely satisfied? That's a loaded question. How could you ever know that you couldn't have been even more satisfied? So far as you could tell, then, were you completely satisfied? Probably you were. If you were, then it must be possible to be so happy that, so far as you can tell, you have all of your unsatisfied wants driven out of you—at least all of them that detract from your happiness. That may or may not be complete satisfaction.

But it's close enough for most of us. And we sometimes get it. In and of itself, it's a solution, not a problem. But it inevitably leads to a problem, the real problem: *it doesn't last*.

Life is a tease. It promises more lasting satisfactions than it delivers. No matter how good it gets, eventually we always find ourselves wanting more. If we lose what was satisfying us completely, we want it back. If we keep it, we want more of it or else we want something else. And we will want in a way that detracts from our happiness. That's a psychological truth you can bet the farm on. Whatever you think is going to satisfy you completely, it is not going to satisfy you completely for long. It may for a while. If you are clever, you may even distract yourself from noticing that the itch of unsatisfied desire has returned. But if you look closely, you will see that what you wanted, what you may have thought would be enough, what you were sure would satisfy you completely, does not really do it.

Most of us have the dubious luxury of thinking that we would be happy if only we had something we cannot have, or we were doing something we cannot do. Our deprivation nourishes the illusion that complete satisfaction—that lasts—is attainable, if only the external circumstances of our lives were better. Tolstoy did not have the luxury of that illusion. He had everything he wanted—wealth, fame, a loving family—and was doing what he wanted to do. Yet still he wasn't satisfied. He had so much that he couldn't imagine what more he wanted—unless perhaps it was answers, and then—so he would have us believe—he was happy. That is his story: that it was lack of answers that brought him down in the first place, and that it was his subsequent conviction that he had answers—his “irrational knowledge”—that made everything right again.

Perhaps. But another possibility is that Tolstoy's lack of answers was at most a symptom of the problem, not the real problem. Since he had everything and was doing what he wanted to be doing, what, then, could his real problem have been? It *could* have been simply that even with everything, Tolstoy's life did not stay at its subjective best: satisfied, he could not stay

satisfied. The problem could have been that Tolstoy wanted his life to be at its subjective best but could not keep it there. So, when he came down, as inevitably he did, he wanted more, even though, as we say, “he had everything.” In other words, the problem could have been simply that while life allowed him to taste complete satisfaction, it didn't last.

If not getting what you want (or not doing what you want to do) won't satisfy you completely, and getting what you want (or doing what you want to do) won't satisfy you completely either, it's worth thinking briefly about the extreme alternative: don't want. That's the essence of the Buddha Gautama's contribution to solving the problem of life. It may or may not be the right solution. We don't really have to decide. For even if it is the right solution, it is the Buddha's solution, not ours. We may give lip serve to that solution, but few of us really see it as a realistic option for ourselves. If we did, we'd be off somewhere, perhaps meditating in a monastery in Burma, not taking college courses or reading essays like this one on the meaning of life. We may say we're on the “path.” And we may be. But even on the path we still spend most of our waking time trying to get what we want. Except that on the path, in addition to all of the usual wants—security, sex, love, power, glory—we now have an unusual want: not wanting. The path is crowded with spiritual materialists.⁴

We're back to a realistic pessimism. The answer to the problem of the meaning of life may simply be that we're stuck with a life of fleeting satisfactions and unsatisfied desires. Whatever the value of morality and humility, they are precious little help in solving this problem. Doing what you love to do is a great help, probably the most important contribution you can make to the meaningfulness of your life. Ironically, doing what you love to do may even be a critical part of the most important contribution you can make to the lives of those around you. Even so, at least this side of enlightenment, there may be no fully satisfying solution to the problem of life.

Since satisfaction doesn't last, then either we have to continually resatisfy ourselves or successfully and pleasantly distract ourselves from the fact that we haven't. That seems to be

our fate, and if we're reasonably good at these two tasks, it's not such a bad fate. But neither is it a fully satisfying solution to the problem of life. In other words, what I am suggesting is that the root psychological problem, the one that keeps arising even when our lives are going quite well, may simply be that we cannot satisfy ourselves completely for long. That is, why even among people whose lives are going quite well, almost everyone is chronically unsatisfied. Acknowledging that this is the problem can bring us down from our philosophical heights. Back on earth, we can redirect our energies toward solving the problem of life. To do that, we follow our individual recipes for happiness: a fast car and a good woman, or whatever you think will do it for you.

The acknowledgment that there is no fully satisfying solution to the problem of life can quash our hopes that we will ever get the complete and lasting satisfaction we crave. That is one of the deepest and most emotionally significant hopes we have. True, that hope may never have survived rational scrutiny anyway, but that doesn't stop us from secretly nourishing it. It comes as a profound disappointment to finally admit, not just verbally, but completely, that whether we get what we want or not we will never stay satisfied for long.

And then there is death. Death has always been a puzzle for philosophers. Not what it is, but why we have some of the attitudes toward it we do. For present purposes, we can ignore most of these famous enigmas. Our question is this: Why does death threaten the meaning of our lives? Surely part of the answer is the familiar observation that we fear we may vanish without leaving a significant trace—that our lives will not

have made a positive difference. But, of course, that should not be a problem for people, such as Tolstoy, whose lives have gone as well as possible and, hence, who have made a positive difference. There must be more than that to the challenge to meaning that death poses. The analysis just given suggests part of the answer.

Death threatens the meaningfulness of our lives partly because it ends our struggle for satisfaction. Because death kills us, the prospect that death is near kills the unspoken and irrational hope that if only we had a little more time, we might satisfy our need for psychological closure—for complete satisfaction. If we have already given up that hope, we will fear death less. We may even welcome it as a merciful release from a struggle we cannot help throwing ourselves into even though we know we shall never win it. In any case, death challenges the meaningfulness of our lives partly because the prospect that death is near makes it painfully obvious that we will lose the struggle for satisfaction. Death is a major symbol of defeat.

Return once again to those moments when your life was as its subjective best. Those moments brought complete satisfaction. And complete satisfaction is a kind of victory over death. A person, for instance, can be so much in love, so deeply satisfied, she feels that she could die and it wouldn't matter. When our experience gets that good, we have won the battle for satisfaction, and death holds no terror. The problem is that our victory is only temporary. Death is a persistent foe, and desire its ally. Satisfied, we cannot stay satisfied. The itch of desire returns, the struggle resumes. Until death ends the struggle—perhaps forever.

¹ Leo Tolstoy's reflections on the meaning of life are in his book, *My Confession*, translated by Leo Wiener, Dent and Sons, 1905.

² Thomas Nagel's thoughts on the meaning of life were published originally in his essay, "The Absurd," *The Journal of Philosophy*, v. 63, 1971, pp. 716-727. The passages quoted are taken from that portion of Nagel's *The View from Nowhere*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 214-223, that is reprinted in the present volume.

³ Richard Taylor's views are from his book, *Good and Evil*, New York: Macmillan, 1970. They are reprinted in the present volume.

⁴ I have borrowed the notion of "spiritual materialism" from Chögyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual materialism*. Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 1973.