

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Prelude to the discussion

We frequently come across the view that it is a prime task of philosophy to raise questions. It is also a natural disposition of the human mind to raise questions. We also are told that wonder engenders questions out of which philosophy is generated. Right from ancient times some questions kept perplexing human minds. Answers given to such questions had their supporters as well as critics. In such arguments and counter-arguments, many more facets of the issue came forth. It is a continuous process that sometimes appears to be never-ending. Out of many such questions, we intend to deal in this work with a question that has been called by many as the ultimate or sometimes even the final question of life. I mean ‘what is the meaning of human life?’ Most philosophers attempted to address this question directly and indirectly. Hence the canvas is a huge one.

There might arise a question of why I have singled out to discuss only human life’s meaning. Life pervades animal as well as plant kingdoms as well. Such a question is indeed pertinent. However, non-human lives, as we intend to show in the next chapters, only exist, but do not raise or have the capacity to raise a question about the purpose of their existence. This trait differentiates human life from non-human life. This is why I have singled out the question of the meaning of human life as the question of our present enquiry.

Four important words in the question that we are going to deal with are ‘the’ ‘meaning’, ‘human’ and ‘life’. Analyses of these words are a requirement that we need to do before we make efforts to traverse the literature. Prima facie it appears that all these four words are known words and we understand their meanings. However, a hair-splitting analysis,

which is a requirement for a student of philosophy, makes us feel that all these words are highly loaded. Analysis of these words requires a thorough inquiry. I understand that a single thesis is very much inadequate for such a thorough enquiry. However, even a short analysis will suffice our purpose in the present venture.

Before the advent of analytic philosophy, philosophers attempted to answer the question under discussion (i. e. the question of the meaning of human lives) in a way which presumed that the question is a simple one. Most philosophers thought that the intent of the question is to know the purpose or goal of our lives. If this can be determined, we can direct our lives/activities in a way which is in consonant with that purpose. A study of Greek philosophy gives us this impression. That is why Socrates is goading us not to live an unexamined life. Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Diogenes and some other philosophers tell us to live a virtuous life and strive for good and happiness. But the questions that arise then are what is a 'virtuous life', what is 'good' and what is 'happiness'. Is there agreement on these issues? A. J. Ayer in his essay "The Claims of Philosophy" tells us that the view that someone can pursue happiness as the goal of life if happiness "is used merely as a description of any end that is in fact pursued."ⁱ The arrival of analytic philosophy actually provoked us to think that the question is not a simple one. It includes within its fold a number of questions and without a thorough analysis of these issues, no answer will be acceptable one. Hence, to get a satisfactory answer, if at all we can get one, we need to dissect the question.

Unpacking the question

It is analytic philosophy that calls for unearthing the inside story of the intricate question. Analytic philosophy tells us that the word 'meaning' has many meanings. John Hospers in his *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* tells us that the term 'meaning' has numerous meanings. Now the

moot question is: If the term ‘meaning’ has many meanings, then in what sense we are using the term in the present question? This question is a vexing one. Without entering into the intricacies involved, a study of literature gives us the impression that when philosophers dealt with this question, they mainly used the term in the sense of goal or purpose. The intent is like this: the human being is a superior creature. It has the intellect and the capacity for reflection. It has been assumed that its existence has a purpose. We need to discover that purpose. Lexicographers tell us that ‘meaning’ is a derivative word. It has been derived from the root word ‘mean’. The word ‘mean’ has a number of meanings and we get such a list in any dictionary. A reading of such a list is of course helpful. But philosophers instead of relying on lexicographers’ lists, try to make a list of their own. One such philosopher is Robert Nozick. He, in his ‘Philosophy and the Meaning of Life’, distinguishes between different senses and shows that it has at least eight senses. These are: ‘meaning as external causal relationship’, ‘meaning as external referential or semantic relation’, ‘meaning as intention or purpose’, ‘meaning as lesson’, ‘meaning as personal significance, importance, value, mattering’, ‘meaning as objective meaningfulness’, meaning as intrinsic meaningfulness’ and ‘meaning as total, resultant meaning.’ⁱⁱ Nozick then proceeds to explain all these meanings in detail. He thereafter goes on to hold “attempts to find meaning in life seek to transcend the limits of an individual life. The narrower the limits of a life, the less meaningful it is.”ⁱⁱⁱ This view of Nozick is incredibly significant.

Another thinker is Garrett Thomson. In his ‘Untangling the Questions’ he says that we need to realize the question “in a manner that has some practical implications concerning the way we live.”^{iv} Then he gives us three general ways for fathoming the question: 1) Does life have a purpose or point? 2) Does life have some value? and 3) Does my life signify something? Thomson at the end of his essay tells us that these

stated three ways are the most fundamental ways to understand the question. Even, he says, “meaning of life might be some special combination of all three types of value.”^v He also holds that it might also be possible that life has many meanings not one meaning as we are accustomed to thinking.

The discussion in the preceding para actually brought us to the word ‘the’. It was one of the words out of four which we were intending to untangle. This definite article ‘the’ indicates uniqueness. It is assumed, on account of the occurrence of the word, that life can have only meaning. But from the essays of Robert Nozick and Garrett Thomson, we understand that life can have many meanings too. If it is the case, we can say that life has many facets and in order to have a better understanding of the meaning of life we need to explore all these facets instead of concentrating only on one. It reminds us of the story of blind persons who touched different portions of an elephant’s body and then each of them thought that the description they gave was the only right answer. However, we know that only a combination of their answers can give us the true description of an elephant. This might happen in the present case too. We can presume that most of the philosophers who attempted to grasp the issue or suggested an answer to the question under discussion thought that their answer is the only definitive answer. Hence, we are inclined to say that the definite article ‘the’ occurs in the question.

The next words are ‘human’ and ‘life’. There is no gainsaying the fact that life is a matter of continuum. Its progression takes place from the lowest level to the highest level. Before Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose confirmed the fact that (in 1901) plants also have a life cycle, people thought that only animals have life. However, with the discovery of Acharya Bose now it is accepted that plants also have life. Hence, we can say that life begins with plants and the culmination of this is found in human beings. He is a rational being, a political being or we can say,

following Rabindra Nath Tagore, he has a surplus. Aristotle was the first philosopher who showed that only human beings have intellect and are therefore equipped with intellectual capacity. This distinguishes him from other animals. As humans can reflect upon, it is natural that only he/she can raise questions about the meaning of life. He searches for answers so that he can pursue a goal in accordance with the answer that he finds to the question under investigation. No other animals can do such an enquiry. The search for the meaning of life began at a time when through the process of evolution human beings came into existence. Even after thousands of years no definitive answers could be found. From this, we should not presume that it is a pointless task to search for meaning. We do not know whether in the foreseeable future science can help us to know the meaning of life. It might be a tone of pessimism. In spite of our unsuccessful attempts the search must go on. Our hankering for an answer is an irresistible one.

The above discussion might give us the impression that there will be only one answer to the question. However, there is no sufficient reason to think so. A. C. Grayling asserts that “there is not a one-size-fits-all answer to the question of what kind of life is worth living, but instead that there are as many answers as there are people to seek them.”^{vi} A survey of literature fortifies Grayling’s claim.

It is not the case that only philosophers showed their concerns for an answer to the supreme question of life. Intellectuals cutting across disciplines put forward their opinions about this question. A couple of months back CEO of a large business firm during an interview said that he wanted liberation through innovation. An analysis of his interview made me think that he considered this can bring meaning to a life. Albert Einstein in his *The World as I See it* wrote that “the man who regards his own life and that of his fellow-creatures as meaningless is not merely unfortunate but almost disqualified for life.”^{vii} Indian philosophers, barring

materialists, consistently maintained that life has a final end. Conducts performed in accordance with this end is a meaningful life. This is not to claim that all the schools were in agreement with the final end. Contemporary Indian philosophers, as they had knowledge of western philosophy also, attempted to provide an answer which on the one hand contained Indian wisdom and on the other assimilated western responses.

What becomes clear is that the question under investigation is not a simple one rather many threads are intertwined in this question. The first requirement is to untwine the question very carefully so that every strand can be separated. Garrett Thomson holds that there are certain questions that 'contain many questions rolled into one'. The question 'What is the question of human life?' is such a question. Such a question is not 'an unanswerable question, but rather a pseudo-question, which needs to be replaced by others. Indeed, this is what an analysis should do: improve the question.'^{viii} He reminds us that answering a question and improving a question are distinct tasks. "We can ask new and better questions only if we improve our understanding of the old ones. Better responses require better questions."^{ix} Hence, he urges for the reconstruction of the question before we begin the investigation 'with some set of ideological objectives already in mind.' We find a very laudable effort in Thomson's viewpoint. It is one of the main tasks of philosophy to improve the question.

Efforts to cross-examining the question are a recent phenomenon, and to my mind, it is a welcoming attempt. It has been triggered off for various reasons. The debate between thinkers upholding differing worldviews began challenging each other. The claim for universal acceptance of an answer given on the basis of an ideological standpoint has become no longer acceptable. In some cases, people thought that such answers should be given on the basis of values, customs, ways of life and so on. It might vary from civilization to civilization. Without taking into

consideration all these issues any attempt to give a universal reply on the age reason is no longer acceptable.

It is not that every time we think about the meaning of life. It crops up in our minds in certain situations—when we are in crisis, when we are to take certain crucial decisions, when we are in boredom, when life appears to be not worthwhile due to lack of quality and so on. All these situations cause *ataraxia* (anxiety), pain and despair. We, facing such an insurmountable situation, keep thinking about a direction in life or to put it differently search for meaning/purpose in life with the hope that once we get an answer to this question it will show us some direction in decision-making. John Kekes holding a similar view writes: “The problem originates in a disruption of everyday life. Because we are unsuccessful, bored, poor, tired, unlucky, grief-stricken, victims of injustice, or readers of subversive books, we start reflecting on the point of the routine activities we endlessly perform. Once we embark on this reflection, it is hard to stop.”^x In a single line, we can say that when we are concerned with the quality of life we try to search for the metaphysics of the quality of life.

There are thinkers who after a hair-splitting analysis hold that within the question there are ‘why’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions. When, e. g. existentialist philosophers, attempt to answer the issue their emphasis is on the ‘why’ aspect. When it is addressed from the ‘how’ angle, the main concern centers around how to organize (or, to say, reorganize) life. The debate about these different perspectives is still going on.

A number of thinkers raise questions about the cogency of the question itself as they hold that this question is a murky and bewildering one. John Wisdom is of the opinion that the question itself is not an absurd or nonsensical one. While dealing with the meaning of the question from different angles he imagines a situation where a viewer entered a theatre hall sometime after the play has begun and left before the play ended. He may be baffled by a certain action of the play and then ask the question

‘What does it mean?’ This question means what happened before his entry and will take place after he left. But for a person who has seen the entire play and asks the question ‘What does it mean?’ the intent of this question is different from the previous situation we have described. In the former case, the viewer wants to know what happened before his entry and how things will end. In the latter case, the viewer intends to know the significance of the play. In spite of two intents, the question does not turn out to be absurd.^{xi} He is of the opinion that it is a question which cannot be answered in a few words. Our inability to answer it in short does not make the question nonsensical.

We have seen before that the answer may not be and cannot be the same for all questioners. It will vary from person to person depending on the belief-system. A naturalist will see it from a perspective, a theologian will look at the issue from a different perspective. Some may be eager to know the answer to re-order his/her life in a better way. His enquiry is how he ought to live. Greek philosopher Aristotle tells us that the question has two sides one is theoretical and another one is practical. Practical sides will guide the person on how the person concerned ought to live. From this, it appears that the meaning of life is not a given one rather we **give** meaning to it. Hence, all persons’ life’s meaning is not similar as the agent chooses or determines them. It is like a department store containing numerous varieties. We are free to choose from these available varieties. Someone may say we can create a variety which is not available in the store. Perhaps, the answer will be positive. A. J. Ayer holds a kindred view. For him, life “has for each of us whatever meaning we severally choose to give it. The purpose of man’s existence is constituted by the ends to which he, consciously or unconsciously, devotes himself. Some men have a single overriding purpose to which all their activities are subordinated. ... but the fact is that there is no end that is common to all men ... there is no single thing of which it can truly be said that this is the meaning of life. All that

can be said is that life has at various times a different meaning for different people, according as they pursue their several ends.”^{xii}

Susan Wolf, an American philosopher, in her essay “Meaning in Life” gives us an assessment of meaningful life. She writes: “A meaningful life is... one that has within it the basis for an affirmative answer to the needs or longings that are characteristically described as needs for meaning.”^{xiii} In order to explain her point she names some persons of moral or intellectual accomplishment such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Albert Einstein. On the other hand, the condemned life of Sisyphus she considers meaningless. She, pinpointing further, states “meaningful lives are lives of active engagement in projects of worth.”^{xiv} Two expressions in the afore-stated line ‘active engagement’ and ‘projects of worth’ are important. For her ‘active engagement’ are those engagements if the person concerned is passionately involved in them. This is accompanied by pleasure. ‘Projects of worth’ is linked to “commitment to some sort of objective value.” Having stated two criteria of meaningful life she states her view about meaningless lives. “A life is meaningless if it lacks active engagement with anything. A person who is bored or alienated from most of what she spends her life doing is one whose life can be said to lack meaning.”^{xv} Her categorization of worthwhileness, i. e. her view that some actions are more worthwhile than others has been vehemently criticized by Steven M. Cahn. That we intend to discuss in the next para. However, what is interesting is to note that she twisted the question. Instead of using the preposition ‘of’ she used ‘in’ in the question. By her expression ‘active engagement’ and changing preposition she seems to tell us meaning is to be created by the agent. It is not a given one that we need to dig up.

Steven M. Cahn in her article ‘Meaningless Lives?’ brings out the shortcomings of Susan Wolf. Cahn is of the opinion that holding some activities as meaningful such as intellectual accomplishment and saying

some are worthless or are not meaning-generating Wolf demeaned certain activities that she should not have done. Cahn gives examples of numerous activities that Wolf does not consider worth pursuing but in Cahn's view, they are also important things for those individuals who pursue them. He asks: "Why not allow others to pursue their own ways of life without disparaging their choices and declaring their lives meaningless"^{xvi} Hence, Cahn goes on to assert that if an individual finds pleasure in a work that does not harm others, his/her pursuit should not be belittled, rather we need to appreciate his/her pursuit.

Opinions elicited from people of different walks of life

When I began to survey the literature on the topic under discussion, I started realizing that the question was an extremely intricate one. It is not at all a simple question. Moreover, there is no one universally acceptable answer to this question. Still, with the hope of having a minimalist definition I intended to take a different route. I decided to discuss this with common people living around us having no philosophical background. I went to different departments of our university and talked to a number of research scholars to elicit their opinion with the hope that it might bring some clarity in my mind. A research scholar busy with an experiment in the laboratory of the Physics department, encountering the question, told me that life is like an experiment that she was doing and such an experiment is done with the hope of results. Another research scholar from the Center for Himalayan studies tried to convey that life needs to be practical. Instead of reposing faith in luck, we need to struggle for the accomplishment of our desired goal. Such struggle and accomplishment make life meaningful. The next research scholar whom I visited was from the Department of Geography and Applied Geography. She held an opinion which followed a different line. For her, a constructive life is a meaningful life. There are expectations in life. If one expectation is not

fulfilled instead of mulling over it we need to try some other alternative. There will be obstacles on the way. However, we need to overcome it.

My intriguing mind also goaded me to meet people who are in distress. Hence, I visited an old age home and talked to a number of residents there. The divergent views and perspectives I found from these naïve minds made me think that even a lifetime effort cannot bring me to a conclusive answer to this question. Such an answer is perhaps impossible to get. For example, a resident of the Home told me—we understand the value of a person or thing when that is actually missing in our life. For him, we need to keep ourselves happy as without it we cannot make others happy. His view also had a theistic overtone as he held that we should not regret in our life as we are not responsible for our life. God gives us as much grief that we can bear. For another resident, his life is locked in a golden cage. Another resident holding my hand started crying and showing his forehead saying that everything is destined in this world. I talked to some other persons they also narrated their views. I became pensive finding no answer to their woes.

Hence, I felt the need to unpack the complex question. I began surveying literature again. This time I noticed that some answers are given following the theistic line who consider life as meaningful if it is in consonance with the divine plan. Some answers are given in a naturalistic way. This group of philosophers try to dig deep into the metaphysical issues lying behind the question. This group of thinkers attempt to show the intricacies involved and reminds us about the application of terminologies when applied to life's question. This helps us to remove obscurities in the question. Again, some philosophers hold that instead of veering around any particular line of thinking the need of the hour is an analysis of the question. Once we can unpack the complicated question, we will have a clearer vision and it will facilitate the formulation of a better answer.

Further study of the literature revealed to me that any philosophical venture is an effort which can ultimately be translated to an effort to give us an answer to the supreme question of life— be it Greek philosophy, analytical tradition, continental philosophy, Indian systems, and whatnot.

Glimpses of different lines of thinking

I intend to discuss here the attempts of three thinkers, two philosophers—Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Taylor— and a renowned psychiatrist, Victor Frankl, who wanted to construct an answer. Arthur Schopenhauer was a known German nihilist of the 19th century and Richard Taylor was a contemporary American philosopher known for his immense contribution to metaphysics. I am deliberately stating their views to delineate different lines of thinking. Victor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camp, narrated his experience and the valuable lessons that he learnt during this period of an ordeal. These three thinkers exemplify different lines of thinking.

Arthur Schopenhauer: A pessimist

Among the main reasons for which Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) is known in the history of philosophy, the most important one is his advocacy of pessimism. In his various writings, he tried to illustrate the universality of suffering. “The Vanity of Existence” is one such writing. Some other reasons for which he is known are— his espousal of atheism and his efforts to draw attention to *Upanishads* and Buddhism. He admired Kant and Plato but vehemently criticized Hegel, Schelling and Fichte. There are a number of reasons for adopting such stands. Will, for him, is the ultimate reality.

Schopenhauer makes effort to show the futility of pride in our accomplishments (before we saw that for some philosophers an accomplished life is a meaningful life) when it is put vis-a-vis the infinite

nature of time and space. Schopenhauer shows how time and space play an important role in metaphysics and how it helps in our understanding of the pointlessness of existence thus raising many important questions about the meaning of life. In the vortex of changes human beings exist only for a short time. It is only when put under the microscopic lens of time, it appears big. In these ceaseless changes, something that had meaning to us at a specific point in our life turns out to be meaningless at a later point of time and it shows that it has no intrinsic value. It also exhibits the relativity of things. He shows how in this swirl of changes the will to live, the thing which he considers imperishable, reveals that its efforts are futile. What has been considered important at a moment with the passage of that moment loses its importance and seems inferior to something else.

In his writing, his pessimism becomes more and more accentuated. For example, he shows the insignificance of human existence when he writes how after thousands of years of non-existence his existence occurs even that is also for so short span. Every evening makes us realize that we have become poorer by a day. He knows with certainty after some time again he will be non-existent and will obviously go to oblivion. Though our heart rebels against this, we find ourselves helpless.

The above view may force us to think that realizing the vortex of changes and short span of life we should concentrate only on the importance of the present and thus enjoy the present moment and consider it as the 'supreme object of life.' However, Schopenhauer finds pointlessness in such an attempt. He considers such endeavour as 'greatest folly.' He considers it a folly because it is so fleeting and an enjoyment which does not exist for the next moment is not a thing worthy of serious pursuit.

Schopenhauer shows how we are living amidst unrest. Though the present is our only footing, this present is also ever-fading. On account of this transient nature, we are every time in a constant rush. For this, we

cannot attain the rest that we aim for. Giving a number of examples fleeting and motion he illustrates how rest is actually will-o'-the-wisp. Comparing our life to a man who is running down the hill he shows human predicament. He cannot stop his legs from moving— he is like a hostage in the constant pull and push of the downward slope of the hill. He needs to run onward as he knows that if ceased to run, he will fall down and will ultimately fall into the trap of death. Hence, man is bound to maintain this pace. He is behaving like a slave to this motion. In a world where everything is unsteady, where man is dependent on constant motion and movement for keeping him erect, happiness is beyond the bounds of possibility. It is never fully attainable.

Like all other animals, says Schopenhauer, human beings' restless motion is produced by two prime impulses: hunger and sexual impulses. Sometimes boredom also assists it. Driven by these impulses he strives his entire life for something with the hope that the attainment of this aim will make him happy. Most of the time, his efforts go in vain. Even if he sometimes attains it, the next moment he realises its fleeting nature and this realisation makes him disappointed. Even after a state of full satisfaction, we feel the presence of boredom. It is some sort of feeling of absolute emptiness. This makes us think that life has no meaning.

Our life is a pull and push of expectation and repentance— expectation for better things in future and lamentation and longing for going back to the past again. When he realizes this, he finds himself in the arms of death.

Man is by nature greedy. His greed is unquenchable. Attainment of every satisfaction sows the seeds of some new desire and this cycle goes on endlessly. Schopenhauer finds out the cause of it. The cause is Will. For him, it is the lord of all words and hence all-important. No single thing can bring satisfaction to it, but the whole. For him, the entire universe is the representation of a single will. Individual wills are only part of it.

Schopenhauer shows the quandary of an individual. Life, to him, mainly is a struggle for subsisting. On its achievement, life becomes a liability to him what Schopenhauer calls 'boredom'. Then begins his next task of averting the boredom that the first task ensued. This makes the irony of fate—first, we try to win something and next make an attempt for abolishing the feelingness of its attainment. If it is not done, it results in a feeling of burden.

For Schopenhauer, our life is some sort of mistake. It becomes evident when we realize that man is actually a bundle of needs and necessities which are almost impossible to fulfil. Even if it is fulfilled, man attains mostly a state of painlessness which further engenders boredom. This endless process proves that life has no intrinsic value. Had life had intrinsic value, mere existence would have satisfied us— we would not have longed for anything else. Thus, the hope that the attainment of one goal would bring us satisfaction is an illusion. When we are not striving for any such pleasure and concentrate only on sheer existence, its worthless nature becomes evident to us. This state is called boredom by Schopenhauer. We are enveloped by such boredom.

The extreme pessimism advocated by Schopenhauer raises in our minds many questions. If we harbour only pessimism, it will devour even the happy or golden moments of our life. There is no gainsaying the fact that in the sea of unhappiness, there are islands of happiness. Should we ignore these moments? It is indeed a moot case. It is the expectation of good moments that helps us to pass through bad moments in life. Moreover, he is oblivious to discussing a life which is desirable or meaningful. Perhaps his pessimistic attitude engulfed him so much that he ignored this issue. The meaning of life is to be given by the person. He should author his own meaning. If somebody makes effort in this direction, he will find meaning.

Despite the fact that Schopenhauer ignored one side of our life, his view stated above brought forth some brute facts of our life that we can hardly afford to ignore. Perhaps at least in some moments of our lives, we sink into such thinking.

Richard Taylor: A Critical Thinker

Richard Taylor's (1919–2003) famous writing 'The Meaning of Life' first appeared in his book *Good and Evil* (1970). In this influential writing, he made an effort to explore the meaning of life through an examination of the myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus incurred the wrath of the gods for divulging divine secrets and on account of this he has been condemned to roll uphill a huge stone that always rolled down again. The process went on endlessly.

Taylor shows that the meaning of life is a recurrent question that appeared in the mind of thinkers though the answer seems to elude us. Yet the importance of this question has been admitted by any reflective person and hence it demands an agreeable answer. For him, the idea of 'meaningfulness' is difficult to understand and the opposite of it, i. e. 'meaninglessness' is less difficult. Therefore, if we can understand what is meant by meaningless existence, it may help us in understanding a meaningful existence. Thus, Taylor takes recourse to a circuitous route.

Sisyphus' activity of repeatedly rolling up a stone to the top of the hill which rolled down again is, for Taylor, a *meaningless* and pointless drudgery. It is not the *difficulty* and *endlessness* that contribute to the meaninglessness of Sisyphus' efforts. Taylor tells the reader to imagine a situation where the boulders that Sisyphus brought to the top of the hill were very light or the hills were not very high or steep. This change of situation will in no way reduce the meaninglessness. Sisyphus' attempts are meaningless as it ultimately leads to nothing and their nature is

repetitious. Taylor defines meaninglessness as ‘essentially endless pointlessness.’^{xvii} Meaningfulness is just the opposite of it. However, Sisyphus could bring meaning to his endeavour, suggests Taylor, if something came as an end of his struggle— e. g. the boulders he carried were used to create something such as a temple. Another conceivable way that might impart meaning to Sisyphus’ effort is that he *enjoyed* rolling uphill the stone and finds nothing more enjoyable than this task. Though the situation remained the same, i. e. endless rolling of the boulder to the hilltop, gods mercifully implanted in him this strange and of course such an irrational impulse— viz. an irresistible desire to roll stones. By implanting this impulse in Sisyphus, his life has been filled with a mission and meaning. He has now endless opportunities to indulge in his purpose without feeling boredom.

If meaninglessness is an endless pointlessness, the obvious question that comes next is: what meaningfulness is. For Taylor, an activity, even though it is long drawn out or repetitive, acquires meaning if it has some significant culmination. If it can be thought that the activity has direction and purpose, then it obtains meaning.

Taking instance from caves found in New Zealand where a strange living style of worms is found— where an endless cycle of eating and being eaten goes on, birds flying halfway all over the globe only to return later and its repetitions the author wonders how meaningless their lives are. Our own lives are also repetitive in many respects. Many a time they do not lead anywhere. Still, that rarely makes our lives less worth living. In contrast to non-human animals, we can choose our goals, achieve them and take delight in these achievements. In spite of the fact that we achieve our goals, they are transitory in nature and the mind is filled with another desire. If we disengage ourselves from this chain, we are engulfed by boredom.

Human beings have been repeating their activities in the same way. A grand structure built today will slowly turn to dust. Its rubbles then used for another foundation which will exactly meet the same fate. This exemplifies that our fate is not different from Sisyphus. Recognizing this, humans invented religions and philosophies to derive comfort in the face of this onslaught.

Does it imply that human life lacks meaning on account of these futile activities? Let us think that Sisyphus could erect a temple through his labour. On completion of this, it will one day eventually turn to dust. He will have nothing to do and hence only boredom. Given this predicament, it now becomes understandable that even erecting a temple would fail to give Sisyphus' life a meaning. For this, Taylor thinks that only this explains his strange impulse to labour, i. e. his irresistible desire to roll stones, imparts meaning. It becomes meaningful because of his abiding interest in it. Likewise, if human beings do something out of their inner compulsion, this explains its meaning.

Taylor says that though all our achievements fade away ultimately— be it scaling a tower or whatsoever— it only makes scope for renewed labours. What is important here is the state of mind and feeling with which such labours are undertaken. If past inhabitants of rubbled home come back and find that what was so important to them once now have turned to ruin, they would not be disappointed. Rather they would reminisce about their emotions, feeling, and sentiments which were involved in those toils when they were engaged in those tasks. They do not need those of now, those days were sufficient to itself. So is life. We need to look at life from this perspective— its justification and meaning come from that particular person who does the task. If it is done out of their *will*, it acquires meaning. This can be discerned in a person's will to live from the moment of his birth. Thus, Taylor writes in the last paragraph: "The point of living is simply to be living, in the manner that it is your nature to

be living.”^{xviii} We spend our entire life building castles, but with the passage of time, it fades away. However, it brings an opportunity for a new beginning. There will be no salvation if we put a full stop to all these. Such a situation will be condemnation like Sisyphus. It matters as it is there to be done and we have the will to do it. If we make a cage/home for the birds with plenty of food which fly around the globe out of their will, will be in a state of condemnation. For it flying round the globe that counts for them, ‘and not what they hope to win by it.’ Even the lives of worms which live in caves in New Zealand may appear pointless to us. But this same thing will look entirely different if we try to look at their existence from within.

On the basis of these arguments, Taylor holds that we are the author of the meaning of our lives. It is not conferred from without. More importantly, it cannot be measured in terms of its beauty and permanence. By this view Taylor beautifully brings out the fact and reminds us that those who become prey of despair on account of the repetitiveness of our works and lives have no sufficient reason to do so. We might be endowed to work in this way. However, what Taylor fails to show is that a meaningful life should be a creative one. All other lives fall short of meaning at least to some extent. It is this that creates a difference between creative workers and kings, military officers or builders of personal wealth. It is right that the later group’s followers may be more in number, but creative power alone brings about things of great value. In spite of these vital questions that he failed to address; his view is a very insightful one.

Viktor E. Frankl: a psychiatrist’s way of looking at the issue

Viktor E. Frankl, a professor of neurology and psychiatry in the University of Vienna Medical School, gave important insight on life’s meaning in his *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl was a survivor in Nazi Concentration camps. He narrates his experiences what led him to survive

and also his approach to what is known as Logotherapy. It presents an idea of how we can choose to see a purpose or meaning in any situation, including the worst conditions. The illustrations of his personal experiences infuse hope into the reader. During World War II, the author served three years in Auschwitz, Dachau and Turkheim concentration camps, while his family members died in camp. When Turkheim was liberated, Frankl came back to Vienna. During his stay in the concentration camp, Frankl observed that the inmates though showed their initial relief finally regret for being kept alive. This emotional turmoil led to a number of suicides. In order to tide over the situation Frankl developed the concept of Logotherapy. Such therapy helps people in finding the motivation to go on.

Frankl identifies three psychological reactions experienced by inmates to a different degree: A) shock during the initial admission phase to the camp, B) apathy after becoming accustomed to camp's life, in which the inmate values only that which helps himself and his friends' survivals, and C) reactions of depersonalization, moral deformity, bitterness, and disillusionment if he survives and is liberated. Frankl says that the meaning of life is found in every moment of living; life never ceases to have meaning, even in suffering and death. He concludes from his experience that a prisoner's psychological reactions are not solely the result of the conditions of his life, but also from the freedom of choice he always has even in severe suffering. The inner hold a prisoner has on his spiritual self relies on having hope in the future, and once a prisoner loses that hope, he is doomed. Frankl begins by explaining how a prisoner passes through three major phases in the camp, and also how each phase transformed the prisoners from their previous lives and how they developed various pathologies. The prisoner was first in a state of shock, which was followed by the phase of developing apathy and finally, on being liberated, prisoners

felt depersonalized at first and later manifested strong symptoms in differential ways.

A reader also learns about “Logotherapy” which the author attempts to explain in the second section. Frankl introduces every concept of Logotherapy (such as the existential vacuum, responsibility of survival, and existential frustration). He also describes the therapy process and techniques with some great figurative examples and case studies. A novice therapist may find these useful.

Having the capacity to adapt to anything at any situation, for Frankl, is very important in life, because it helps to keep life alive. So, adaptation is a quality in human life. When we can no longer change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves. History teaches us to be cautious. A man should always strive for the betterment of himself (tragic optimism), while keeping the lesson of history in mind.

Having justified the idea of finding meaning in life, Frankl coherently explains where and how one can find their purpose in life—reading this section of the book will most certainly spark a solution for every despaired reader. Frankl positively disregards a specific age group that can benefit from this book because he elucidates how old age and death must not be looked upon as an “end of opportunities and possibilities,” but as a repertoire of all the “potentials actualized, meanings fulfilled and values realized.”

He is of the opinion that “everything can be taken away from man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”^{xix} This line states an indomitable attitude of Frankl. Three important lessons that we learn from him are: in some situations surrender to death may be a strategy for survival, second, life has definitely a meaning and it is up to the agent

to find the meaning at any given point in time and finally, in order to drive away the fear he urges us to use paradoxical intention. For Frankl, if we go on searching for a general answer to the question (i. e. meaning of life), we shall surely be disappointed. Even for a single person, there is no single meaning. Hence, he asks us to think in a reverse way. We usually go on searching for life's meaning first. Instead of doing this, says Frankl, how much responsibly we act brings meaning in life. It is not the external factors but rather the internal state of mind that is more important; it generates meaning in life. He urges us to take control of our own life.

Blueprint of the next chapters

In the next chapters, I intend to delineate the views of some major thinkers who belonged to homogeneous groups either in respect of cultures or leaning toward a particular line of thinking. As it is not possible to discuss the entire panorama, keeping in mind the vastness of literature, I have decided to select some schools. Even selecting schools was not a very easy task. Hence, I have chosen only those schools that made seminal contributions in raising the question, analysing it, and wrestling with it in their entire philosophical journey. Such schools, to my mind, are classical western philosophers (i. e., Greek philosophers who raised fundamental questions and set directions of different lines of thinking), analytic philosophers (these philosophers of the last century immensely helped in bringing forth many nuances of the question), existential philosophers (whose main concern was shaping an answer to the question of the meaning of life), and Indian *darśana* (as this philosophy is out and out goal-oriented). After a review of these schools, I intend to give an outline of my own reflection and reason for holding such views.

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