CHAPTER 8

MORITZ SCHLICK

On the Meaning of Life

Not everyone is disturbed by the question whether life has a meaning. Some—and they are not the unhappiest—have the child's mind, which has *not yet* asked about such things; others *no longer ask*, having unlearnt the question. In between are ourselves, the seekers. We cannot project ourselves back to the level of the innocent, whom life has not yet looked at with its dark mysterious eyes, and we do not care to join the weary and the blasé, who no longer believe in any meaning to existence, because they have been able to find none in their own.

A man who has failed of the goal that his youth was striving for, and found no substitute, may lament the meaninglessness of his own life; yet he still may believe in a meaning to existence generally, and think that it continues to be found where a person has reached his goals. But the man who has wrested from fate the achievement of his purposes, and then finds that his prize was not so valuable as it seemed, that he has somehow fallen prey to a deception—that man is quite blankly confronted with the question of life's value, and before him lies like a darkened wasteland the thought, not only that all things pass, but also that everything is ultimately in vain.

How are we to discover a unitary meaning, either in the perplexities of a man's lifetime, or in the stumbling progress of history itself? Existence may appear to us as a many-hued tapestry, or as a grey veil, but it is equally difficult either way to furl the billowing fabric so that its meaning becomes apparent. It all flaps past and seems to have vanished before we could render an account of it.

What is the reason for the strange contradiction, that achievement and enjoyment will not fuse into a proper meaning? Does not an inexorable law of nature appear to prevail here? Man sets himself goals, and while he is heading towards them he is buoyed up by hope, indeed, but gnawed at the

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same time by the pain of unsatisfied desire. Once the goal is reached, however, after the first flush of triumph has passed away, there follows inevitably a mood of desolation. A void remains, which can seemingly find an end only through the painful emergence of new longings, the setting of new goals. So the game begins anew, and existence seems doomed to be a restless swinging to and fro between pain and boredom, which ends at last in the nothingness of death. That is the celebrated line of thought which Schopenhauer made the basis of his pessimistic view of life. Is it not possible, somehow, to escape it?

We know how Nietzsche, for example, sought to conquer this pessimism. First by the flight into art: consider the world, he says, as an aesthetic phenomenon, and it is eternally vindicated! Then by the flight into knowledge: look upon life as an experiment of the knower, and the world will be to you the finest of laboratories! But Nietzsche again turned away from these standpoints; in the end, art was no longer his watchword, and nor were science, or beauty, or truth; it is hard to reduce to a brief formula what the wisest Nietzsche, the Nietzsche of *Zarathustra*, saw as the meaning of life. For if it be said that henceforth the ultimate value of life, to him, was *life itself*, that obviously says nothing clear and does not find the right expression for the deep truth which he then perceived or at least suspected. For he saw that life has no meaning, so long as it stands wholly under the domination of purposes:

> Verily, it is a blessing and no blasphemy when I teach: Above all things standeth the heaven of chance, the heaven of innocence, the heaven of hazard, the heaven of sportiveness.
>
> "Sir Hazard"—his is the most ancient title of nobility in earth: him have I restored to all things, I have saved them from the slavery of ends.
>
> This freedom and heavenly brightness I set over all things as an azure dome, when I taught that above them and in them there willeth no "eternal will."

In truth, we shall never find an ultimate meaning in existence, if we view it only under the aspect of purpose.

I know not, however, whether the burden of purposes has ever weighed more heavily upon mankind than at the present time. The present idolizes work. But work means goal-seeking activity, direction to a purpose. Plunge into the crowd on a bustling city street and imagine yourself stopping the passers-by, one after another, and crying to them "Where are you off to so fast? What important business do you have?" And if, on learning the immediate goal, you were to ask further about the purpose of this goal, and again for the purpose of that purpose, you would almost always hit on the purpose after just a few steps in the sequence: maintenance of life, earning one's bread. And why maintain life? To this question you could seldom read off an intelligible answer from the information obtained.

And yet an answer has to be found. For mere living, pure existence as such is certainly valueless; it must also have a content, and in that only can the

meaning of life reside. But what actually fills up our days almost entirely is activities serving to maintain life. In other words, the content of existence consists in the work that is needed in order to exist. We are therefore moving in a circle, and in this fashion fail to arrive at a meaning for life. Nor is it any better if, in place of work itself, we direct our attention to the fruits of work. The greater part of its products is again subservient to work of some kind and hence indirectly to the maintenance of life, and another large part is undoubtedly meaningless trash. . . . Nor, indeed, can any work-products as such ever be valuable, save insofar as they somehow fulfil and enrich life, by launching man into valuable states and activities. The state of working cannot be one of these, for by work—if we understand this concept in its philosophical generality—we simply mean any activity undertaken solely in order to realize some purpose. It is therefore the characteristic mark of work that it has its purpose outside itself, and is not performed for its own sake. The doctrine that would wish to install work as such at the centre of existence, and exalt it to life's highest meaning, is bound to be in error, because every work-activity as such is always a mere means, and receives its value only from its goals.

The core and ultimate value of life can lie only in such states as exist for their own sake and carry their satisfaction in themselves. Now such states are undoubtedly given in the pleasure-feelings which terminate the fulfilment of a volition and accompany the gratifying of a desire; but if we sought to derive the value of existence from these moments, in which life's pressure is momentarily halted, we should at once become ensnared in that argument of Schopenhauer's, which displays to us, not the meaning, but the absurdity of life.

No, life means movement and action, and if we wish to find a meaning in it we must seek for *activities* which carry their own purpose and value within them, independently of any extraneous goals; activities, therefore, which are not work, in the philosophical sense of the word. If such activities exist, then in them the seemingly divided is reconciled, means and end, action and consequence are fused into one, we have then found ends-in-themselves which are more than mere end-points of acting and resting-points of existence, and it is these alone that can take over the role of a true content to life.

There really are such activities. To be consistent, we must call them *play*, since that is the name for free, purposeless action, that is, action which in fact carries its purpose within itself. We must take the word "play," however, in its broad, true, philosophical meaning—in a deeper sense than is commonly accorded to it in daily life. We are not thereby lending it any new or surprising meaning, but are merely repeating what was perfectly clear to at least one great mind, who apprehended the nature of the human with the eye of a poet—which is to say, in deep truth. For in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Friedrich Schiller utters the following words:

> For, to declare it once and for all, Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*. This proposition, which at the moment perhaps seems paradoxical, will assume great and deep significance when we have once reached the point of applying it to the twofold seriousness of duty and of destiny; it will, I promise you, support the whole fabric of aesthetic art, and the still more difficult art of living. But it is only in science that this statement is unexpected; it has long since been alive and operative in Art, and in the feeling of the Greeks, its most distinguished exponents; only they transferred to Olympus what should have been realized on earth. Guided by its truth, they caused not only the seriousness and the toil which furrow the cheeks of mortals, but also the futile pleasure that smooths the empty face, to vanish from the brows of the blessed gods, and they released these perpetually happy beings from the fetters of every aim, every duty, every care, and made idleness and indifference the enviable portion of divinity; merely a more human name for the freest and sublimest state of being.

These are exalted words, which ring down from the poet's world into a care-dimmed age, and in our own world sound untimely to most ears. The poet sees a state of divine perfection among men, in which all their activities are turned into joyous play, all their working-days become holidays. Only insofar as man shares in this perfection, only in the hours when life smiles at him without the stern frown of purpose, is he really man. And it was sober consideration that led us to this very truth: the meaning of existence is revealed only in play.

But doesn't this notion lead us into mere dreams, does it not loosen every tie with reality, and have we not lost beneath our feet the solid earth of daily life, on which we have ultimately to stay planted, since the question of life is by nature an everyday question? In the harsh reality, especially of the present, there seems no room for such dreams; for our age, for the peoples of a war-racked globe, no other solution seems possible save the word "work," and it appears irresponsible to speak ill of it.

Yet we should not forget that the creation which the hour demands of us is work only in the economic sense, productive activity, that is, which leads to the engendering of values. There is, however, no irreconcilable opposition between play in the philosophical sense and work in the economic meaning of the term. Play, as we see it, is any activity which takes place entirely for its own sake, independently of its effects and consequences. There is nothing to stop these effects from being of a useful or valuable kind. If they are, so much the better; the action still remains play, since it already bears its own value within itself. Valuable goods may proceed from it, just as well as from intrinsically unpleasurable activity that strives to fulfil a purpose. Play too, in other words, can be creative; its outcome can coincide with that of work.

This notion of creative play will be accorded a major part in the life philosophy of the future. If mankind is to go on existing and progressing by way of playful activities, they will have to be creative; the necessary muse somehow be brought forth by means of them. And this is possible, since play is not a form of doing nothing. The more activities, indeed, become play in the philosophical sense, the more work would be accomplished in the economic

sense, and the more values would be created in human society. Human action is work, not because it bears fruit, but only when it proceeds from, and is governed by, the thought of its fruit.

Let us look about us: where do we find creative play? The brightest example (which at the same time is more than a mere example), is to be seen in the creation of the artist. His activity, the shaping of his work by inspiration, is itself pleasure, and it is half by accident that enduring values arise from it. The artist may have no thought, as he works, of the benefit of these values, or even of his reward, since otherwise the act of creation is disrupted. Not the golden chain, but the song that pours from the heart, is the guerdon that richly rewards! So feels the poet, and so the artist. And anyone who feels thus in what he does, *is* an artist.

Take, for example, the scientist. *Knowing*, too, is a pure play of the spirit, the wrestling for scientific truth is an end-in-itself for him, he rejoices to measure his powers against the riddles which reality propounds to him, quite regardless of the benefits that may somehow accrue from this (and these, as we know, have often been the most astonishing precisely in the case of purely theoretical discoveries, whose practical utility no one could originally have guessed). The richest blessings flow from the work that is engendered as the child of its creator's happy mood, and in free play, without any anxious concern for its effects.

Not all the activity of the artist or thinker falls, of course, under the concept of creative play. The purely technical, the mere management of the material, as with the painter's colour-mixing, or the composer's setting-down of notes—all this remains, for the most part, toil and work; they are the husks and dross that often still attach to play in real life. Often, but not always; for in the process of execution the working acts involved can either become so mechanized that they hardly enter consciousness, or else develop so much charm and attractiveness that they turn into artistic play themselves.

And that is also true in the end of those actions which engender neither science nor art, but the day's necessities, and which are seemingly altogether devoid of spirit. The tilling of the fields, the weaving of fabrics, the cobbling of shoes, can all become play, and may take on the character of artistic acts. Nor is it even so uncommon for a man to take so much pleasure in such activities, that he forgets the purpose of them. Every true craftsman can experience in his own case this transformation of the means into an end-in-itself, which can take place with almost any activity, and which makes the product into a work of art. It is the joy in sheer creation, the dedication to the activity, the absorption in the movement, which transforms work into play. As we know, there is a great enchantment which almost always brings this transformation about—rhythm. To be sure, it will only work perfectly where it is not brought externally and deliberately to the activity, and artificially coupled with it, but evolves spontaneously from the nature of the action and its natural form. There are some kinds of work where this is impossible; many are of such a nature that they always remain an evil and—except, perhaps, among men entirely blunted and incapable of happiness—are invariably carried out

with reluctance and distaste. With such occupations I advise a very careful scrutiny of their fruits: we shall invariably find that such mechanical, brutalizing, degrading forms of work serve ultimately to produce only trash and empty luxury. So away with them! So long, indeed, as our economy is focussed on mere increase of production, instead of on the true enrichment of life, these activities cannot diminish, and thus slavery among mankind (for these alone are true forms of slave-labour) will not be able to decline. But a civilization which maintains artificial breeding-grounds for idle trumpery by means of forced slave-labour, must eventually come to grief through its own absurdity. All that will then remain over will be simply the avocations serving to generate true culture. But in them there dwells a spirit that favours their evolution into true forms of play.

At least there is no law of nature which in any way obstructs such a development of action into an end-in-itself; basically speaking, the road lies open to the realization of Schiller's dream. The idea of a human race thus liberated from all tormenting purposes, all oppressive cares, and cheerfully dedicated to the moment, is at least not a contradictory or inconceivable idea. The individual would lead an existence, as in the profound and beautiful saying of the Bible, like the life of the lilies of the field.

The objection may be raised at this point, that such a life would represent a relapse to a lower level, to the status of plants and animals. For the latter assuredly live for the moment, their consciousness is confined to a brief present, they certainly know pain, but not care. Man, on the contrary, has the privilege of embracing long periods, whole lifetimes, in the span of his consciousness, of coexperiencing them through foresight and hindsight, and that is how he becomes the knowing, supremely self-conscious being, in which capacity he confronts all the rest of nature.

But this objection is easy to meet. Man does not have to forfeit the range of his life, his joy in the moment will not be blind and bestial, but bathed in the clearest light of consciousness. He does not escape the menace of purposes by putting his head in the sand, so as not to see the future at all; it stands before him, calmly and clearly, in the light of hope, just as the past stands behind him in the light of recollection. He can shake off the curse of purposes and liberate his vision from the blight of cares, without lessening the boon of his hopes. He still sees even the remotest consequences of his action clearly before him, and not only the real consequences, but all possible ones as well; but no specific goal stands there as an end to be necessarily attained, so that the whole road would be meaningless if it were not; every point, rather, of the whole road already has its own intrinsic meaning, like a mountain path that offers sublime views at every step and new enchantments at every turn, whether it may lead to a summit or not. The setting of certain goals is admittedly needed in order to produce the tension required for life; even playful activity is constantly setting itself tasks, most palpably in sport and competition, which still remains play so long as it does not degenerate into real fighting. But such goals are harmless, they impose no burden on life and do not dominate it; they are left aside and it does not

matter if they are not achieved, since at any moment they can be replaced by others. Stretches of life that stand under the dominion of huge inexorable purposes are like riddles with an answer that we either find or fail at; but a life of play might be compared to an endless crossword puzzle, in which new words are constantly being found and connected, so that an ever larger area is progressively filled in, with no other aim but that of going on further without a halt.

The last liberation of man would be reached if in all his doings he could give himself up entirely to the act itself, inspired to his activity always by love. The end, then, would never justify the means, he might then exalt into his highest rule of action the principle: "What is not worth doing for its own sake, don't do for anything else's sake!" All life would then be truly meaningful, down to its ultimate ramifications; to live would mean: to celebrate the festival of existence.

Plato, in the *Laws* (803c), had already declared that men should make play, song and dance, as the true divine worship, into the proper content of life. But though well over two thousand years have passed in the meantime, perhaps men were closer in those days to such an order of life than they are today. In the present age, assuredly, the daily activity of man can in large part be justified only by distant purposes. In itself such activity is unpleasurable and unjustified, and the deification of work as such, the great gospel of our industrial age, has been exposed as idolatry. The greater part of our existence, filled as it is with goal-seeking work at the behest of others, has no value in itself, but obtains this only by reference to the festive hours of play, for which work provides merely the means and the preconditions.

Unremitting stern fulfilment of duty in the service of an end eventually makes us narrow and takes away the freedom that everyone requires for self-development. We have to be able to breathe freely. Hence arises the task of releasing, for a day, an hour, a minute, at least, the life that is fettered in its entirety to the purposes of utility; and these hours and minutes, however few they may be, form the content for whose sake all the rest is there, and for whose sake all the rest is on occasion sacrificed. At bottom we find man always ready to give up the senseless remainder of life, for an hour that is filled with value.

Man's teachers and benefactors, his seers and leaders, can strive for nothing else but to permeate the broadest possible stretches of existence with meaning. The achievement of a John Ruskin was based on the idea that human life must allow of being shaped into a chain of festive acts; the daily round can be made meaningful if it is filled in every detail with beauty. If it is not possible to lead the whole of life on the bright side, we must at least be able to break surface from time to time. If it is not possible to realize Schiller's dream, there is all the more need to follow Goethe's rule of life: "Work by day, at evening guests, toilsome weeks and joyous feasts." In our own civilization, joyous feasts are not possible without toilsome weeks, but in no age is a lasting life possible without joy and festivities. A life that is constantly focussed only on distant goals eventually loses all power of creation whatsoever. It is like a bow that is

always bent: in the end it can no longer loose off the arrow, and with that its tension becomes pointless. Work and toil, so long as they have not themselves become joyous play, should make joy and play possible; therein their meaning lies. But they cannot do it if man has forgotten how to rejoice, if festive hours do not see to it that the knowledge of what joy is, is retained.

Yet let us beware of confusing joy, on which life's value depends, with its surrogate, mere pleasure, that shallow enjoyment of which Schiller said that it smooths the empty face of mortals. Pleasure wearies, while joy refreshes; the latter enriches, the former puts a false sheen upon existence Both indeed, lead us away from daily toil and distract us from care, but they do it in different ways: pleasure by diverting us, joy by pulling us together. Diversion offers the spirit fleeting excitement, without depth or content; for joy there is more needed, a thought or feeling which fills the whole man, an inspiration which sets him soaring above everyday life. He can only joy whole-heartedly about things which completely take hold of him, he has to be utterly devoted to something. Pain is commended for deepening us (perhaps because otherwise we have nothing good to say of it), but true joy has a very much greater effect. Joy is deeper than heartache, says Nietzsche. Pleasure, however, merely ruffles the surface of the soul and leaves it as featureless as before; it even tends to silt up the soul, for it leaves behind a stale after-taste, as symptom of a spiritual turbidity. And by this, indeed, it can be distinguished from exalted joy, which is an affirmation of existence conferring meaning upon life.

Here we can learn from the *child*. Before he has yet been caught in the net of purposes, the cares of work are unknown to him; he needs no diversion or release from the working day. And it is precisely the child that is capable of the purest joy. People everywhere are wont to sing of the happiness of youth, and this is truly more than a mere invention of the poets; youth is really not overshadowed by the dark clouds of purpose.

And with that I come to the heart of what I should here like to say.

It is not in every expression of life, not in the whole breadth of it, that we are able to find a meaning—at least so long as Schiller's dream of divine perfection remains a mere dream; the meaning of the whole is concentrated and collected, rather, into a few short hours of deep, serene joy, into the hours of play. And these hours crowd thickest in *youth*. It is not only that childish games are play even in the philosophical sense of the term; it is also that later youth, which is already well acquainted with aims and purposes, and has been brought up to serve them, still does not stand entirely under their yoke, does not have its gaze fixed on them alone, is not concerned solely with attaining them, as is often the natural attitude later on. Youth, on the contrary, does not really care about purposes; if one collapses, another is quickly built up; goals are merely an invitation to rush in and fight, and this enterprising ardour is the true fulfilment of the youthful spirit. The enthusiasm of youth (it is basically what the Greeks called Eros), is devotion to the deed, not the goal. This act, this way of acting, is true play.

If it is clear in this fashion that what makes up the meaning of existence is nowhere so purely or strongly to be found as it is in youth, some notable

questions and clues emerge from this. Youth, after all, is the first phase of life, and it seems incongruous that the meaning of the whole should be found only at its beginning. For according to the traditional view, life is to be regarded as a process of development, whose meaning is constantly unfolding, so that it ought to be most clearly apparent towards the end. What, then, is youth? On the received view it is the time of immaturity, in which mind and body grow, in order later to *have* grown up to their vocation; the time of learning, in which all capacities are exercised, in order to be equipped for work; even the play of youth appears from this angle as merely a preparation for the seriousness of life. It is almost always so regarded, and almost the whole of education is conducted from this point of view: it signifies a training for adulthood. Youth therefore appears as a mere means to the later purposes of life, as a necessary learning period, that would have no meaning of its own.

This view is directly opposed to the insight that we have obtained. It has seldom been remarked, what a paradox it is that the time of preparation appears as the sweetest portion of existence, while the time of fulfilment seems the most toilsome. At times, however, it has been seen. It was primarily Rousseau, and perhaps Montaigne before him, who discovered the intrinsic value of youth. He warns the educator against debasing the youth of the pupil into a mere means and sacrificing his early happiness to later proficiency; the aim should be to fill the days of youth with joy, even for their own sake. At the present day this idea has begun to make a little headway. It is a leading conception of the modern youth movement, that a young life is not only going to receive its value from the future, but bears it within itself. Youth, in fact, is not just a time of growing, learning, ripening and incompleteness, but primarily a time of play, of doing for its own sake, and hence a true bearer of the meaning of life. Anyone denying this, and regarding youth as a mere introduction and prelude to real life, commits the same error that beclouded the mediaeval view of human existence: he shifts life's centre of gravity forwards, into the future. Just as the majority of religions, discontented with earthly life, are wont to transfer the meaning of existence out of this life and into a hereafter, so man in general is inclined always to regard every state, since none of them is wholly perfect, as a mere preparation for a more perfect one.

For modern man there is little doubt that the value and aim of life must either be totally of this world, or else cannot be found at all. And if man were to run through a thousand successive lives, as the theories of transmigration maintain, this would not absolve contemporary thought from seeking in every one of these stages of existence its own special meaning, independent of what has gone before or is yet to follow. Present-day man would have no right to look upon other, metaphysical worlds, if they existed, as superior or more meaningful, and ungratefully to despise our own world by comparison. The meaning of the life that he knows can only be sought in this world, *as* he knows it.

But within life he now commits the same mistake that he committed earlier in thinking of its metaphysical continuation: from immature youth he

shifts the value of life into mature adulthood; in his prime, he sees that he is still not yet ripe, that his nature and achievements are not complete, and therefore shifts the meaning of life still further on, and expects it from the peace and mellowness of old age. But on actually arriving at this peace, he then projects the meaning of existence backwards again into the days of acting and striving, and these are by then over and past recovery. And the final result is that man lets his whole life fall under the curse of purposes. It is the unceasing search into the future and concern for the future that casts its shadow over every present and clouds the joy of it.

But if life has a meaning, it must lie in the present, for only the present is real. There is no reason at all, however, why more meaning should lie in the later present, in the middle or final period of life, than in an earlier present, in the first period, known as youth. And now let us consider what "youth" must actually mean for us in this connection. We found its true nature, not in the fact that it is a prelude and first phase of life, but rather in that it is the time of play, the time of activity for the pleasure of acting. And we recognized that all action, even the creative action of the adult, can and must, in its perfect form, take on the same character: it becomes play, self-sufficient action that acquires its value independently of the purpose.

But from this it follows that youth, in our philosophical sense, can by no means be confined to the early stages of life; it is present wherever the state of man has reached a peak, where his action has become play, where he is wholly given over to the moment and the matter in hand. We talk in such cases of youthful enthusiasm, and that is the right expression: enthusiasm is always youthful. The ardour which fires us for a cause, a deed or a man, and the ardour of youth, are one and the same fire. A man who is emotionally immersed in what he does is a youngster, a child. The great confirmation of this is genius, which is always imbued with a child-like quality. All true greatness is full of a deep innocence. The creativity of genius is the play of a child, his joy in the world is the child's pleasure in pretty things. Heraclitus of old it was who compared the creative world-spirit itself to a child at play, building things out of pebbles and bits of wood and tearing them down again. For us, therefore, the word "youth" does not have the external meaning of a specific period of life, a particular span of years; it is a state, a way of leading one's life, which basically has nothing to do with years and the number of them.

It will now no longer be possible to misunderstand me when, as the heart of what I am moved to say, I assert the proposition that the *meaning of life is youth.*

The more youth is realized in a life, the more valuable it is, and if a person dies young, however long he may have lived, his life has had meaning.