

# *Meaning*

## **The direction of mankind**

I feel that, as a race, we are not currently aspiring to greater things. The majority of mankind does not seek to improve itself; to escape from constraints and become what it could be. The tendency is to 'get by' – to deal with our current situation by attempts at unguided incremental improvement – the fixing of errors, rather than imaging a goal and taking steps towards it.

This means that most people do not think far beyond their current situation, their current abilities. The vast potential of the human race is not something we even think about any more – it is beyond our reach unless we change our perspective. Society is so entrenched in its conventions, habits and traditions that change can only occur by inches, in the context of the current paradigm. This leaves us in a 'local maximum', where all significant changes are seen as detrimental because we do not see the potential long-term benefits. It is as if we are standing on a hill, and we do not aspire to climbing higher hills because any movement from our current location requires going downhill first. We cannot escape the mediocrity of human achievement without a 'paradigm shift' in which the context changes, not just the details.

The agencies that determine how society changes – the governments and businesses, act by changing these details, rather than providing a true vision for the future. We will not achieve utopia by tweaking the interest rates. I cannot see how this kind of change can be achieved without some cataclysmic event to provide a clean slate. For example, I cannot see the government agreeing to abandon participation in global capitalism in favour of another system under any circumstances.

What we need is a clear vision of what we want our world to be like and to take steps to change our world into that world. What we do at the moment is see problems with our world and try to fix them without an idea of where this will take us – where we are trying to get to. We are trying to build our world with sticking plasters. There seems to be no desire for progress beyond economic growth. What is this economic growth for? What do we expect to grow into? Is an increased GDP the limit of our leaders' imaginations? With each step, we should ask, is this taking us closer to our ideal world?

We need to ask bold questions to approach our ideal world. Is our ideal world made mostly of roads? If not, we need to find a way of making roads unnecessary. Are there guns in our ideal world? If not, we should stop making them. Do we spend the majority of our time trying to make profit in our ideal world, rather than working for a purpose? If not we need to abandon Capitalism in favour of an alternative. If we want people to start making decisions based on right and wrong rather than amoral profit and self-interest, we need to move away from a society based on profit-making. Do we want to get things done by

communicating with companies rather than individuals in our ideal world; dealing with policies rather than reason? If not, we need to move away from legislature, policy and generality and start letting individuals make rational choices. Do we want morality to be determined by rational human decision in our ideal world, or do we want to be forced into decision by legislature? If so, we need to let real people make decision, rather than allowing ourselves to be trapped by poorly conceived generalisations embodied in 'the law'. Do we want the welfare of the individuals in the populace to be a lottery, where some have vast excess and some have nothing in our ideal world, with only greed, selfishness and ruthlessness as our tools to tip the balance? If not, we need to stop relying on the free market economy to somehow produce equality. We need to stop relying on charity to redress the balance when this process fails. We need to structure out government in such a way as to allow it to provide every person with what they need to live.

I am not suggesting we try to make a perfect world. Nothing can be gained from such absolutism. Also, I am aware that certain things are seen as necessary evils, mostly due to the perceived problems inherent in human nature. Weapons, for example, are only 'necessary' because they exist. *We* require weapons to defend ourselves against *their* weapons. This should be a clear indication that we should not be *developing* weapons, as creating new weapons simply makes them 'necessary' and makes the world a more dangerous place. More advanced weaponry makes it easier for someone to *become* dangerous. It is only in reducing the number and power of weapons that we make the world safer, and the weapons less necessary. Someone needs to take the bold step of being the first to do this. The only weapons research that could be justified is in researching things to make other weapons useless (or less dangerous) without being dangerous themselves.

All I am saying is that we look at our world and say "Is this the best we can do? Can't we imagine something vastly better than this?" We will get nowhere as a race if we continue to operate as we do now; society changes by incremental adjustments intended to solve problems we are currently experiencing, as well as constant unconstrained 'growth'. We are constantly asking "What do we do now?" where we should be asking "What is our goal?" We should determine what our ideal situation would be (how we would like society to function) and take steps to implement that, rather than tinkering with our current system because it is what we are used to and what we have inherited. The former requires radical change.

In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche says, in reference to raising children:

*"You shall build over and beyond yourself, but first you must be built yourself, perpendicular in body and soul."*

I like the use of the word 'perpendicular' here. I am not sure what the original German was, but although it seems a strange word to use, I am sure Walter Kaufman did not use it lightly in his translation. The word 'upright' might seem a more obvious choice, but it misses the possibility for the two interpretations of 'perpendicular'. Although 'perpendicular' means 'upright', it can also mean 'at odds with'. This is what I like about the phrase. What I take from this is that in the struggle to be an evolved human being – a complete and worthy person in the modern world, one must be 'upright', honest, and self-improving, as well as

being unconstrained by current conventions and current thinking. We should not be afraid to abandon all we have achieved in order to improve upon it.

## **The need for meaning**

In our teenage years, we start to become aware of what it is like to be a person; the way the world works; the human condition. We come to realise that being a human is lonely, often frustrating, disappointing, unfair, and apparently meaningless. We can reduce the loneliness by finding people to share our experiences with: friends, a partner. However, this will never make the loneliness go away completely. This is simply a consequence of the way our brains work.

We can try to reduce the frustration and disappointment by having a purpose to our lives. This gives us a reason to tolerate the bad things that happen. Again, this may reduce our disappointment, our meaninglessness, but it will not go away. This is again, a consequence of the way our brains work. We see things as happening for a reason – cause leads to effect, actions have consequences. Our minds work by evaluating probabilities and applying these to rules: A leads to B with a probability  $p$ . We generate these rules and probabilities through interaction with our environment and the evaluation of past experience. This is how our lives make sense – if something happens, it happens for a reason. The consequence of this is that we have a constant desire to see things in terms of an underlying cause.

This is how our brains are wired and it is a good way to make decisions – by thinking in a serial fashion – one thing leads to another. The world, however, does not always fit in with this process, as cause and effect is often a very complex relationship – we live in a parallel world where many things interact at the same time. Furthermore, we often confuse the causality of the physical world with our own intentions – human causality; a ball rolls downhill because in some way it *wants* to. We trace everything back to an original cause, and we want to know *why* something is happening, even if *how* it is happening explains it entirely. We apply this not only to individual events in our lives, but to the entirety of our lives, and to existence itself. What we are looking for is meaning – a Golden Thread that joins everything and makes everything make sense, even if such meaning simply does not exist.

This gives mankind an obsessive nature – a desire to find one thing to devote ourselves to and that may give our lives context. For some it is religion, for some a search for scientific or philosophical truth, for some it is rock-climbing or surfing. Furthermore, we have a constant fascination with things that link us to the wider world, to nature, and to history. There is an innate desire in man to find a link between himself (and his time) and the eternal; in history. This is a way of making sense of the heritage into which he is born, and to infuse himself with significance. Also, the myths of prehistory demand closure. Having one's history contained in myths and legends is unsatisfying, in so much as it is unresolved. To find remains, ruins and evidence provides this closure, to a degree. This search happens throughout history; the attempt to resolve a mythologised past with one's own present. These things show us that we are not lost little islands of insignificance, but part of something larger, something eternal – The Golden Thread.

## What is the meaning of life?

We think of 'The Meaning of Life' as if it already exists, as if it is a secret to be discovered. My opinion is that there is no intrinsic meaning to life – the only meaning it has is that which we assign to it. We have to *inject* meaning into our lives, otherwise they are pointless. 'Meaning' suggests a purpose, which implies that life was initiated with some purpose in mind. This requires intelligent design, which I feel I can discard without further discussion. Life has come about as a consequence of the physical laws that define the operation of the universe. Thus life exists, without the need for an explanation that one could term 'meaning'. One might just as well ask "What is the meaning of water?"

'Meaning' as a concept is an invention of intelligent life; the reason a thing exists or was designed, or the purpose for which it is used by some agency. Meaning in this sense requires intentionality and so, to a degree, requires intelligent life. As products of the evolutionary process, we find ourselves driven to maximise our chances for survival, just as any other form of life. Unlike other forms of life, we now find ourselves with the time and resources to reach a stable position with relation to our chances for survival and have time to spare. As with many other animals, our mental processes seek to provide the answer to the question "What should I do now?" Having satisfied survival requirements, the question remains but without a goal. What is left is our desire to determine what we should do with our time. Where previously the 'meaning' of life (that to which life aspires) is to survive long enough to reproduce, when we satisfy this goal, "What should I do now?" becomes "What is the meaning of life?"

As there is no intrinsic meaning to life, any meaning our lives have is that which we determine for ourselves. This is, for the individual, whatever seems like a worthwhile use of their life. The meaning of life for an individual is the result of that individual's analysis of their own position within the universe.

One possible result of this analysis is an extension of the evolutionary imperative – to survive and continue – to extend one's influence beyond the limits of mortality. Although mortality has never been anything I worried about, it feels hugely frustrating that I will not be able to see future advances of the human race – the end to the story of which I am an insignificant part. How will we evolve? Will we inhabit other planets? What is to come thousands of years from now? It is like reading the first chapter of a book and having the burning desire to see what comes next, how does it all end? Then you realise that one chapter is all you have. You can only speculate the ending. Also, your chapter is in the middle; you want to know what happened in the first chapter. How does your chapter fit into the entire story? The next best thing seems to be to leave something behind, in effect to send a part of you into the future. This could be any way of leaving some mark on the world after one's death – through one's children, the things one has built or the ideas or skills one has passed on.

Another way of looking at your life is as a preparation for death. To accept nothingness, a person must be sure that he has done all the things he should have done. Death will not then seem a waste, and there is nothing to regret; nothing is left undone. There is nothing more left to do, and death is all that is left. How can a person know what they must do to prepare for death? You must imagine you are dying. What do you regret? What is it that you wish you had done? What do you wish you had left behind? The answers to these questions must then become your mission in life.