What This Book Is About

Was Socrates right when he said, "The unexamined life is not worth living"? In order to disagree with him, you still have to examine your life. Besides, even if he was right, it doesn't follow that the examined life is worth living.

Was Camus right when he said, "Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined"? There's only one way to find out.

Asking basic questions about yourself can be painful. Suppose the answers hurt or there aren't any. You may wish to return to the garden of ignorance and innocence, but by now it is too late. The trap of thought is sprung.

Fortunately, as Camus observed, "We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking." And for most of us, there are enough daily distractions to keep us going once we've acquired that habit. So to be realistic, we shouldn't overestimate the difference that thinking makes. Nevertheless, this book is based on the assumption that it does make some difference.

The thoughts in this book are reflective not only in the Socratic sense (of examining life) but also in the sense of being about thought itself (thinking about thinking). I use "reflexive" to mean the latter. The reflexive quality of consciousness is the basis of the quest for meaning and the idea of oneself. The process of examining reflexiveness is itself reflexive. As you get into it, you may find this labyrinth of echoes and mirrors to be teasing and dizzying. But don't give up too easily!

This book deals both in experiences and in concepts. Particularly experiential are the first three chapters, where an attempt is made to articulate by example and explanation a variety of feelings and experiences of meaninglessness and alienation that many of us have. Philosophers may be disquieted by the concreteness of this approach, and nonphilosophers may be skeptical of the attempt to put such feelings and experiences into words.

Despite the psychological observations and the sprinklings of anthropology and sociology, the book is essentially philosoph-
ical. For it seeks to outline the basic features of the experiences described and to analyze and connect the concepts involved in their expression. If a label had to be applied to this approach, it might be “analytic phenomenology.” The approach is analytic because the nature of the concepts is spelled out, and phenomenological because these are concepts of experience, rather than theoretical ones.

I should mention how this book fits into the contemporary philosophical scene. Anglo-American philosophy, dominated by the methods of logical and linguistic analysis, is noted for its clarity and refinement but also for its technicality. It often gives the impression of being divorced from the traditional philosophical practice of reflecting on life. Some philosophers seem to find such reflection sentimental and unprofessional. Some refuse to call it philosophy, thinking it to be either not serious or not philosophy. Some are embarrassed by the question of the meaning of life, and others, on philosophical principle, brand that question “meaningless.”

Existential philosophy, a European breed, has carried on the reflective tradition, using both phenomenological and literary methods. Unfortunately, it has developed a reputation, largely through Heidegger and Sartre (in his philosophical rather than literary writings), for obscurity and verbal mystery. Many analytic philosophers are sensitive to smog and, regretfully, seem to conclude that the philosophy of life is, by their professional standards, inherently sloppy and obscure.

There’s no reason why philosophy can’t be done clearly even on such questions as the meaning of life. That’s what I try to do in this book.

Before giving a brief chapter-by-chapter picture, I want to mention a couple of snags to be avoided in reading this book. First, don’t get fooled by the style. ITS informality is meant to make the book easy to read, unlike many philosophy books. It may not be so easy to understand, however, and thoughtful effort will be necessary. Secondly, don’t get hung up over the absence of academic appenances like footnotes and references to the views of particular philosophers. Certain ideas expressed here bear likenesses to ones associated with other philosophers, especially those labeled “existentialists.” I make no attempt to delineate such resemblances. Instead, I have appended an extensive annotated bibliography that refers you to treatments of topics dealt with in this book. Hopefully, they make up for the many spots where I could have gone farther and deeper. The philosophically experienced reader should appreciate that philosophical neophytes, for whom this book is primarily intended, would get insufferably bogged down in technical details, however necessary these may be for accuracy and completeness. Here is a brief indication of the progress of chapters:

1. What can happen when you think too much and ask too many questions? You may lose all sense of meaning as you strip the world of all semblance of purpose. Reflecting on the fact of your own ultimate end, you wonder if anything can really matter. Things may seem comically or tragically absurd, or alternately both. Is it possible to escape the mental circumstances in which this sense of the absurd crops up?

2. However, escapism is an impromptu solution—nasty thoughts return. So another tack is taken, that a person can find meaning by finding something worth identifying with. He can, yes, but again only if he doesn’t think too much. Reflection reveals identification as a most tenuous relationship. Indeed, the very act of reflecting undermines that relationship, by underlining one’s separateness from everything else. Various examples of alienation illustrate this point.

3. There’s always yourself to turn to, if you can’t identify successfully with anything else. But there are obstacles to self-identification, as illustrated by numerous examples of self-alienation involving your actions, your feelings, your body, and your image. These difficulties raise serious doubt whether self-identification can ever fully succeed, whether any idea you have of yourself can be fully accurate and up-to-date.

4. There’s a reason for this. It has to do with the sort of thing you are, which is that you are not a mere thing. After all, you are conscious, indeed self-conscious. But what is it that you are self-conscious of? What is this Self that you seemingly refer to automatically and confidently, every time you say “I”? The more you think about it, the harder it is to isolate and identify. And yet what could be more familiar to you than yourself? Part of the difficulty has to do with the reflectiveness by which you are self-aware. By being reflectively conscious, you are always a step ahead of yourself.

5. Being a step ahead of yourself, what you are is always indefinite. Therein lies your freedom—what you are is not what you have to be. The world’s silent indifference to what ought to be and what you ought to do about it leaves it all up to you. Well, some of it anyway, for the ideal of total control is a chimera. Fulfilling your possibilities doesn’t always mean controlling them. Part of them are unpredictable experiences that can occur any moment. With that in mind, there’s no point in forcing the future to spite the present.
Reflection is the recurrent theme of these chapters. It is what is being done in them, and it is what they are about. A striking feature of the whole reflexive process is found in its cyclical (or dialectical) character, in its persistent ability to create its own barricades and then to break through them.

It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists.

Wittgenstein

Where Have All the Meanings Gone?

Being alive is one thing; being aware of it is another. Can you recall the first time you realized you were here? I recall when I did. I wondered what in the world I was doing here. I could make no sense of it. Don’t get me wrong; I was terribly glad to be here, but why I was here I hadn’t the foggiest idea. Even then (I was young, ten maybe) I questioned the popular religious notions of why we’re here, and I was willing to accept no substitutes. Here I was, through no fault of my own nor anyone else’s. I knew enough biology to deny even my parents the credit for me. They may have wanted a baby, but they had no idea who it would be. What’s more, the odds of the particular sperm fertilizing the particular ovum that produced me were less than one in a billion.

I’m glad to be alive, as I said. That’s more than someone else I know, who entitled his memoirs, “Why Was I Born, or, Who Can I Kill to Get Even?”

I have no complaints, personally anyway. I haven’t been hit hard by disease, poverty, war, or injustice. Millions have. So what’s my complaint? None, as I just said. I have no specific problem, just a general one. I’m aware of being here—for no reason and only for so long.

No matter when you realized you were alive, you realized, too, that you were alive before you realized it. By cosmic standards, you hadn’t been alive for long, maybe, but longer than you could remember. You know also that you won’t be here for long. And when you think about this, it bothers you.
That’s putting it mildly. When I think that the universe has been here practically forever and will continue likewise, I feel rather small. But then I reflect on the peculiarly human qualities that distinguish me from everything else known to me except other people, and then I don’t let the vastness of the universe bother me so much. Most of it is space anyway and the rest, merely combinations of particles.

In thinking of humanity, particularly of its few thousand years of so-called civilization, I feel swamped by the tide of history. Little that has happened is my doing. Little that will happen will be my doing. Others may do a little more or a little less (grains of sand vary in size). Sobering, yet liberating, is the thought that history is nothing but the cumulation of people’s acts. I am one person, neither more nor less, just like you, and that’s all anybody is. Societies, cities, institutions, and organizations are composites of people, people like you and me, and nothing more.

You might get the idea that although I respect people, I don’t have much respect for the world in which they (we) live. I don’t. Sure, its magnitude and complexity amazes me, but I don’t read anything into it. It is, and it is the way it is. Nobody made it that way. Nobody cared that it was that way until it long since had been. I’m glad to be here, but grateful to nobody. I see myself as but another component in what is (in this part of the universe) the most advanced stage of a lengthy process of mindless geobiological development, a process which is more improbable than the previous. Only after the fact can we entertain the idea that somebody planned it that way.

I don’t disrespect the world, either. I just accept it for the unlikely thing it is. It isn’t going anywhere. It hasn’t come from anywhere. Quite the contrary. The world is precisely that in which things are coming and going, among them, ourselves.

This “scientific” view of the world is a relatively new outlook, considering the historical prevalence of all sorts of religion and myth. To primitive man, the world was rife with meaning. The world made sense and everything in it made sense. At least made sense within the context of the mythic system that he and his fellows happened to live under. A mythic system is a unified coherent picture of things by which all humanly significant natural phenomena are integrated into the supernatural. Acts of men correspond to acts of gods. The human role in maintaining the scheme of things consists in observing practices and rituals that please or appease the forces that be and that recreate the patterns of yore. In such a scheme of things, the literal and the symbolic converge. Meanings aren’t conventional attachments to things, as our meanings are attached to words. Meanings are in things. The sun is the sun god. Things reflect their mythic archetypes. Events are acts, not occurrences. Sacred objects and holy rituals are not mere tokens and gestures. They are embodiments and reenactments.

That was the way it was—a wholesale view of the world fully and unquestioningly held by one’s fellows like oneself. It wasn’t a matter of mere belief. Such a world view determined how the world looked. It defined what was there, not what was merely thought to be there. Therefore, any person or any people who didn’t see things that way weren’t mistaken but deluded.

A primitive mythic system played the joint role of theology, science, ethics, and ideology. These modern fields are, of course, separated from each other and abstracted from experience. A mythic system was integrated and concrete. In one fell swoop it organized the phenomena of birth and death and everything before and after and in between. Seasons and stars, droughts and diseases, terrors and territories all fit into the system. The people whose system it was were unaware of it. Rather, the system was how they were aware of the world.

Over the centuries, there has evolved a highly complex division of mental labor. Religion, science, ethics, art, and politics connect at the fringes. Or they overlap without being tied together. In either case, there are loose ends. More fundamental is that experience today is fragmented: the personal is separate from the social, the perceptual from the conceptual, the spiritual from the theoretical. For me, what I feel in the privacy of my own head may have little to do with my actions in everyday social situations. My perceptions of things have little to do with my knowledge of them. For example, my awareness of my own body has nothing (fortunately) to do with my knowledge of physiology. And, of course, my concern with why I am here and what it all means is not helped at all by my accumulation of scientific knowledge.

Science is wonderful but spiritually barren. It makes the world make sense, but impersonally and placemally. To me, unlike to primitive man, things and events are not laden with personal and holistic meaning. Everything that is just happens to be, despite all the fascinating relationships discovered and imagined by science. Scientific explanations make the world make but relative sense—they always take something for granted. Science cannot explain why the world makes scientific sense. It cannot explain in ultimate terms why we are here. For example, an evolutionary theory of life doesn’t explain the existence of the matter from which life emerged. And a cosmological theory of the origins of the universe must ultimately content itself by saying.
"That's the way things were." Not only can science not explain in ultimate terms why we are here, science is silent on what we should do about being here.

Modern religion has difficulty picking up where science leaves off. First of all, religion is but one among other fields. It is not a unified whole and a whole unified like a mythic system. Moreover, as dogma, it is something merely to be believed, not to be lived. People who really live their religions often have great difficulty communicating with others, and vice versa. We may regard them as fundamentalists or fanatics. They live not an ordinary integrated life with society, but as cultists or missionaries. Finally, modern religions suffer from competition with each other and with science. As a result, they become watered down and "demythologized." They are all thought of as saying the same thing, as being merely symbolically different from each other and as not really competing with science at all.

Where does all this leave a person? Either you accept some religion on faith (that is, with no reason), or you reject it. That's assuming you think about it. Many people never bother to examine their beliefs, content as they are to believe what their parents taught them to believe and to pretend to think otherwise. Naturally, I am assuming that anyone reading this book has done at least a little thinking.

As I mentioned earlier, I did a little thinking when I was ten. I have accepted no religion since. I can see no reason for accepting one. All the arguments for dogmatic religion, especially those for the existence of God, have been butchered time and time again.

I know I sound dogmatic here, but after all the burden of proof is on the believers. Some of them adopt the medieval "A contrario absurdo" ("I believe because it's absurd"). But lack of a reason doesn't strike me as a good reason to believe. If a choice must be made, I'll adopt God's nonexistence as a working assumption. If I am mistaken, I hope He is not offended by my demand for evidence. (Many believers seem to think that God is offended by atheists. Is He overly proud or merely insecure?)

I can sympathize with people's need for religion, but to me, their acceptance of it is wishful thinking, if it involves thinking at all. I have little sympathy for those who embrace a watered-down version of religion, who interpret its texts "symbolically," and who partake in its rituals "culturally." If they cannot accept it intellectually, why fool around? "As-if" religion strikes me as a self-deceiving exercise in futility. If you can't take hymns and psalms literally, you might as well face the music.

The trouble, of course, is that there is little comfort in a world constituted by the mindless, inexorable workings of matter and energy. If that is all the world is, it is not exactly the sort of place to call home. And it is equally hard to think of the world as God's waiting room. The world just happens to be and we just happen to be in it. Love it or leave it.

Can Anything Really Matter?

You may not like my attitude, but I am just trying to face reality. To find my outlook objectionable is no objection to it. I'm trying not to take things for granted. That means pulling the rug out from under myself. I don't think I'm riding a magic carpet through life. Are you?

If my attitude bothers you, it is probably because you think that without myth or religion nothing can matter whatsoever. That's it, isn't it? If the world makes no sense to me, except scientifically; if I attribute no purpose to it and hence find no place for me in it, then nothing can possibly matter. Therefore, you're telling me, my life can have no meaning to me. And my death can be nothing but the curtain to the charade. That may be what you think I must think, and maybe you think the same thing yourself. And maybe you try to forget that that's what you think.

The fact is that many things do matter to me. At this moment of writing, those words and these thoughts matter to me. Their meaning to you matters to me. At other times other things matter: music, chess, family, friends, food, sex, peace, and sleep. These things and others matter to me at different times and in different ways. Some things are more important than others; some occupy me more than others. Some conflict with the rest more than others. And I am sure that whatever your values and interests happen to be, the same could be said for you.

Still, you might wonder, how can these things really matter to me? For if I see the world as a vast array of mostly mindless activity, then these little pockets of purpose in my life and in yours cannot amount to anything. If the world as a whole has no meaning and purpose, then the isolated meanings of this and that cannot be tied together. They are but passing fads and fancies. And if, moreover, I treat death as the end, then the things that matter from moment to moment can have no lasting value. For momentary pleasures and the life they pretend to enrich must come to an end. All they have in common is their ultimate futility.
Similarly, when I adopt the cosmic perspective, I feel engulfed by the vastness of space and time, and by the number of things therein. Even to focus just on my own life, but as a whole, swamps my consciousness. All the little bits compete for attention, but none is mighty enough to catch it. This is a case of what today is called “information overload.” We might even call it “cosmic shock.”

Have you ever been in a restaurant with an interminable menu and suffered from overchoice? I mean being unable to decide on anything particular because there is far too much to choose from? The problem is not just making a decision. After all, you could simply close your eyes and point, thereby picking at random. There is also the problem of trivialization—the sheer quantity of items makes each one seem insignificant in the company of the rest.

On the previous page, I admitted that if things matter to me, then I must be kidding myself about my outlook on life. I must be pretending (to myself) to hold an impersonal, “scientific” view of things. I admitted this then but didn’t explain why. Now I can.

To have a view of life as a whole requires assuming a global perspective. As we have just seen, for such a view to be full of meaning rather than devoid of it, there must be some principle of unity and permanence. If for me there isn’t, how can things matter to me?

The answer is simple. Things matter to me precisely when I am not in the state of assuming a global perspective. They matter to me when I am involved with them specifically and obliviously to the rest. What I am kidding myself about, then, is not what my outlook on life is but the relevance of my outlook to my life. Every time I look at things from a global perspective, indeed everything I am doing losses its meaning and fades into a wisps of triviality. But when I am involved in something, my outlook on life as a whole doesn’t enter in. And when it does, I am no longer involved in what I am doing.

I would be kidding myself if I pretended that my outlook on life were irrelevant to my life. After all, whenever I have this outlook, what I am doing dissolves before my very eyes. The relevance of my outlook is not that it renders everything meaningless automatically and absolutely. Rather, it does that only when it comes to mind. These moments are part of my life, but only part. The rest of the time I can forget them.

When something matters, it matters; when it doesn’t, it doesn’t. These are important truisms. When, from the global perspective, everything that matters is exposed to matter at all once, nothing matters. Each thing is wrenched from the experiential context in which it normally mat-
ters. Instead, it has to compete with everything else. Each thing becomes trivial and arbitrary. Meaning, then, is what something needs in order to matter when one takes the global perspective. In its own context, something doesn’t need meaning to matter. When I’m involved in it, it simply matters. It cries for meaning only when I’m reflecting on it, in the rather larger context of the cosmos. Only then is that cry unanswered.

Vanity Fair

Now that we have put this gloomy global perspective itself in perspective, let’s take a look at it, recognizing that it needn’t be chronic. What we are looking at, if you haven’t yet labeled it such, is the absurd sense of life. The ingredients of the absurd emerge from the vantage point of too much perspective: (1) The impersonality of the workings of the universe clashes with the personality of human endeavors; (2) the universe has no apparent purpose, although it dwarfs and thereby trivializes the purposes that people find for themselves. (3) from so far away, things look roughly equal—their differences dissolve, and (4) seen against no background, the universe appears mere happenstance.

How indeed can anything in particular be significant if nothing that exists must exist? The whole world is a contingency. It might not have been. Still, it is pretty impressive, even if construed as nothing but occasional matter in occasional order. Obviously, I am assuming that there isn’t or wasn’t a God who created the whole ball of wax. You might think that were there such a Being, the world would have a Purpose. If so, then I could value whatever conforms to that purpose. But then I ask, why should what matters to God matter to me? The absurdity of a God-created universe is no less than the absurdity of an un-created one. From my point of view, God’s existence, if indeed He happens to exist, is no less arbitrary than the existence of the world itself. Either way, here I am, thrown into a world not of my own choosing.

Another point about God and His Purpose: why should God have a purpose? Why should He need one? After all, He’s not the one obsessed with purpose. I can’t seem to justify my own purpose, but why should I demand a Higher Purpose to subsume my own under it? If I made this demand I would fail to recognize that if anything should matter to anyone, God or otherwise, something should matter to me. This lesson is hard to learn and easy to forget. Many go through life without a purpose of their own. That includes slaves, wives, soldiers, and workers. I mean those of them to whom nothing matters unless it matters to somebody else, whether master, husband, government, or boss. (This is one form of alienation that we’ll look into later.) For now I insist if anything should matter to anyone, something should matter to me, and not because it matters to someone else. In the global perspective, however, it is difficult for anything to matter to me. For it is then that the overall meaninglessness emerges. This philosophical sense of absurdity occurs in me often when I observe others. Right at this moment I see outside my window an old man tending his garden. Now his wife has joined him. They spend much time caring for their ephemeral flowers. Ignoring the beauty they sense, I am struck by the utter futility of their efforts. Their flowers bloom briefly, soon to wither away.

Almost every day I drive on the freeway. There are thousands of other drivers and passengers, each going who knows where. I sometimes wonder what difference it could possibly make where anyone is going or whether he makes it. That so many of them are in such a rush only underscores the gap between the magnitude of their intentions and the triviality of their fulfillment. Of course, such realizations don’t prevent me from getting upset if the traffic grinds to a halt or my car blows a tire.

Sometimes I perch on a hill overlooking the whole city. As I contemplate the incredible complexity of this socioeconomic arrangement, this network of places to live, places to work, places to play, and places to shop, and the maze of roads and the signs and lights that show the way: as I contemplate the fact that some are working, some are sleeping, some are loving, some are dying, I think of the dust from which it all began and into which it all will ultimately return. This Ecclesiastical reflection is nothing new. All is vanity still.

When I become overwhelmed by the feeling I have in contemplating these towering trifles, the feeling turns coat completely. For I realize it is my feeling, not its object, that bothers me. And then I realize that all these people or almost all of them are normally oblivious to such reflections as mine. They go on their merry way or suffer their petty pains, reap their hollow harvests or succumb to their dour defeat, without being overwhelmed by the perspective of the whole. Suddenly they strike me as silly, even ludicrous. They are part of a huge joke, which consists of one part absurdity and one part my consciousness of it. Then the perception of the joke of it all gets mixed with the tragic sense. They don’t mix well, and the feeling is like a pendulum swinging between sorrowful compassion and amused contempt.
The tragic irony of the life of others, of the cosmic drama itself, is not bypassed in my own life. For my own life is where the real problem is, for me at least. My exuberance, when I am exuberant, is mine, but so is my depression, when I am depressed. My own feelings and moods are not merely objects of my consciousness but states of it. Thus, they cannot be shut out but at best shut off. This goes especially for the sense of the absurd. How to shut it off, if that is what should be done with it, will be deferred for now. I haven’t yet finished describing this sense of the absurd.

Isotopes of Absurdity

"It’s all a joke!" “Somebody’s putting me on.”

If there is a God, He pulled one helluva fast one. And if there isn’t, it’s a joke that nobody played. In fact, it is a joke precisely because nobody played it.

The joke of life is that most people take it so seriously. They don’t get the joke. I’m sure you’ve been told a joke you didn’t get. Maybe you didn’t even realize the person was telling a joke. And then, suddenly, after the conversation had veered in another direction, you see it. You have a genuine “Aha!” experience. You laugh in delight and feel painlessly stupid for not having understood it immediately. “How silly of me,” you think, and you laugh again.

The joke of life is a different kind of joke—one that nobody gets immediately. You have to take life pretty seriously at first. You had to have made some sense of it all. Sooner or later, if you’ve thought long enough, you begin to see that this “sense” makes none, and if you aren’t too hungry or too sick, you laugh heartily at the thought that life doesn’t make sense and isn’t supposed to. Why should it?

Once you see the joke of life and you’ve got your laughing out of the way, what next? The joke is stale, but the fact that made it a joke remains—that everything, as a whole, makes no sense. People plan for future yesterdays. They live with purposes perhaps forgotten, but founded on the fantasy that their lives have meaning. Do you feel contempt for their groundless designs? Or do you envy them for responding in illusion to the proud prod of purpose? Whatever you do, you have your own outlook on life to deal with.

"It’s all a game."

That’s a good way to look at it when the joke wears off. Games define a little world of their own and make no pretense to a meaning larger than themselves. You can take them lightly or seriously, but any meaning they possess is temporary. When the game is going on, you can be wholly involved in it. When it is over, you can feel the joy of victory or the agony of defeat or just the exhilaration of having played the game.

There are as many different ways of viewing life as there are different games. But they all have in common the idea that like a game, life has no meaning beyond itself. They don’t necessarily require winners and losers, and they allow for seriousness as well as levity. They even allow for players who take the games with ultimate seriousness.

There is just one problem with this analogy. Games occur within the context of life. They last for a certain length of time, and then they’re over. But if life itself is a game, it is one of a kind. There are no rematches. It has no finish that can be looked back upon. It has no winners, only born losers.

Most of the players in the game of life don’t realize that it is a game they’re playing. But that, of course, is why life struck you first as a joke and now as a game.

Life is a funny kind of a game, then. You have no choice which game to play, only whether or not to keep on playing it. Sleep is the only time-out, death the final gun.

Perhaps you’re getting sick of this “life is a big game” or “it’s all a joke” nonsense. “So what” is your reaction. “So what” is another way of dealing with the absurd. Nothing really matters anyway. Everything is the same as everything else.

The “so what” attitude is an attitude of total indifference. No difference makes any difference. Any enthusiasm for something can be premised only on the illusion that something will come of it. Any depression about misfortune can be based only on the illusion that positive fulfillment was really possible. Any strong emotion, one way or the other, imputes importance that simply can’t be there. It is not a mere acceptance of fate—“that’s the way the cookie crumbles”—but recognition that even what one’s fate is doesn’t matter. The cookie crumbles. Impassive indifference seems a most regrettable trait, however objectively justified it may be. Something is lacking in a life of indifference, its justification notwithstanding. But illusions are not easy to recover.

You need to have had an illusion in order to become disillusioned. Illusions come in many shades. Seeing through them varies in difficulty with the illusion and with its victim. We ask the most basic questions when we’ve seen through our respective illusions. Perhaps we realize what the question is when the illusion no longer answers it. As we hopelessly seek an answer, the thought gradually sinking in that none is to be found, but only
I don't have any objection to living, per se, though pain and suffering are not to my liking, nor to anyone else's. I don't happen to have too much of either, and I would be grateful for that if there were someone to be grateful to. I am not that depressed by the suffering of others. Do you know of anyone who is contemplating suicide just to relieve himself of the overwhelming burden of compassion for others? Fortunately, the more general the compassion, the more diluted it becomes. I can't say I am in love with life (that would be an exaggeration) but I can't complain either. So why put an end to it? Since I am not undergoing any excruciating and unending agony, why should I kill myself? Being bored occasionally is not sufficient reason. Being bored chronically is another problem, but imagination is its solution.

Though I don't have a reason to live, I don't have a reason not to. Life doesn't require a reason. Terminating life does. Maybe this is a gross rationalization. Maybe I am simply afraid of death. No wonder that suicide is out of the question for me.

Death's Honesty

Everybody seems to fear death, but what, exactly, is frightening about it? It's not the pain of dying, for most people survive greater pains. Besides, a painless death is fearful nonetheless. The fear seems to have little to do with what happens after death. To be sure, some people still believe they'll burn in hell, but most of those who believe in a life after death should, you'd think, look forward to it. And if death is regarded as less than a dreamless sleep, namely nothing, then the answer given by the ancient Roman poet Lucretius should suffice: "When I am, death is not; when death is, I am not. Therefore, death is nothing to me."

If death were only that, it would be nothing to me. The problem is that I am aware of it before it occurs. Moreover, I have no idea when I am going to die. People who do know when they will die either seem to feel relieved or live it up until the final moment comes. It is more difficult to resign yourself to a death that is always at or below the horizon of time.

People tend casually to treat the fear of death as a case of fearing the unknown. But what is unknown about death? If death is a state of sheer nothingness, of no longer being and of never again to be, then what happens after death is known all too well. Perhaps it is the indefiniteness of its moment of occurrence that makes death so terrible to people, when they think about death. (Being led to the gallows or to the gas chamber is another experience entirely.)
The fear of death is not like the terror of being subject to a great and immediate danger, such as a wild animal or a violent psychopath. It is a fear of something inevitable, not immediate, and final. The thought of one’s ultimate end is a reminder that whatever one is and whatever one will become will not remain. Death is an uncompromising attack on one’s dignity. It renders everything puny. When one’s death is in mind, nothing deserves serious attention, impassioned desire, or lasting ambition. People who think big haven’t looked beyond the meager scope of their ambitions. The thought of death is a reminder that everyone is essentially the same: a helpless corpse-to-be.

Traditionally, death has been a promise or a threat of things to come. Or just part of the cycle of life. It has been conceived of as a moment of transformation or of transmigration. To me death is the end, period. For people to whom death defiance is a way of life, whose greatest thrill is challenging death, the meaning of death undergoes a peculiar twist. Instead of rendering everything meaningless, death is the source of meaning. Everything else is the boredom between the acts. On going back up to the high wire after his troup’s fatal Detroit accident, Karl Wallenda, the leader of the Flying Wallendas, put it, “To be on the wire is life. The rest is waiting.”

Is the life of death defiance sheer madness or existential heroism? The judgment is left to you. The point about this way of life is its implicit acknowledgment of the relation of death to the significance of things in life. It is a way, perverse or not, of responding to death’s threat to render life utterly inconsequential. Defying death is an attempt to conquer death by either holding it in contempt or beating it to the punch.

Death entered this discussion from two doors. First, death is the only alternative to life, and therefore it seems to be a possible answer to a life with no meaning or a life without a reason for continuing. We saw, however, that no reason for living is no reason for dying. The other way in which death came up was as the damper to anything meaningful or worthwhile in life. In passing, we looked at both the fear and the defiance of death. Now I wish to ask whether death is the source of the absurd or whether it only seems to be.

All along I’ve talked as if the finitude of our lives, the fact of death, renders everything in life insignificant. True, it succeeds in doing this only when we adopt the global perspective on things, but it is only from this standpoint that questions of ultimate meaning arise in the first place. It seems that the thought of death is enough to reduce the loftiest ambitions to triviality, since their fulfillment can never give lasting satisfaction. On the other hand, why should life be interminable in order for anything in it to be worthwhile? It need be only so long as the thought of its termination keeps nagging. Transience is significant only from a long-term perspective.

Moreover, it is not just the transience of mortal life but the transience of the things within it that counts. Even if life lasted forever, still the experiences and accomplishments at different moments within it would be brief. You could still be obsessed with the meaning of life. You might even be shocked by the fact, given the eternity of life, that there would never be the time when everything could be added up—there would always be more.

Death, then, is not the source of the absurd.

Thinking Too Far

Next, I’d like to consider what makes possible this realization of the absurd, and then I’ll try to see if there is any way to eliminate it or transcend it.

The sense of the absurd results from failing to answer the question of the meaning of life. It is reinforced by the recognition that there is no answer, that is, no positive answer. And this recognition results from the observation that any attempted answer takes something dubious for granted and perhaps even begs the question. People who accept some positive answer don’t really understand the question in its full generality. Or, in trying to answer it, they don’t look far enough. If they did, they would see that the answer they accept is subject to the very same question it pretends to answer. Thus, if a God or some elaborate cosmology is supposed to explain the existence and meaning of things, what explains the existence of God Himself or whoever are the principals in the cosmology? This last question often fails to get asked. To continue asking is sooner or later to give up hope for an answer. The next step is to see that there was no step to be taken in the first place.

Seeking the meaning of life requires a little dissatisfaction and the ability to ask questions. It requires reflective thought—the kind of thought that looks on life as a whole, not on this or that to the exclusion of everything else. Today there are many thinkers whose thoughts are corralled into narrow fields. They take much for granted, including the value of what they’re doing in their field and the legitimacy of the fence around it. To take nothing for granted is to raise the most basic questions and to doubt our capacity to answer them.

What does reflection on life involve? It requires looking at life as a whole, not just on what is happening right now, but on life’s
duration. It requires abstracting from the individual differences between my life and yours and generalizing to the life of anybody.

Everybody is aware of the past and of the future, at least to some extent. Some people are more "time conscious" than others. While some may live almost wholly in the present, others may be living in the future or in the past (or both). Time consciousness may be short-term or long-term and it may shift from one to the other. Individual acts involve short-term time consciousness, plans and schemes long-term. Some people live solely for the sake of the future; others survive on nostalgia. Whatever the scope and whatever the direction of a person's concerns, they extend only so far. When your finger hurts badly, nothing else matters, then. When you've just met the woman (man) of your dreams, nothing else matters, then. When you're trying to adjust your TV set, or when you're seeking the presidency, or when you recall your first love affair, nothing else matters, then.

A person's consciousness is oriented in time, differently at different times. In particular, concerns are so oriented, but when you're asking about life as a whole, the temporal scope of your concern is unlimited. Thus, to ask such a question requires not only looking beyond the popular answers but also beyond ordinary values and interests. It is to be in a frame of mind in which these values are not then valuable and these interests are not then interesting.

As we saw when we first enunciated the sense of the absurd, it arises from a ghastly, global perspective, an awful look at life as a whole. It sees a vast expanse of time and space, piddling regions of which are occupied by brief bits called people. The problem is how to incorporate this view from afar to your own life within. It is a very general problem of problem.

Specific concerns can be dealt with specifically. If you are thrilled or excited enough about something to forget everything else, you have no problem at all. If you are hurt or have just been fired, you have a problem. But it's a specific problem. You may or may not know how to deal with it, but it is clear to you what counts as solving it. Your arm is healed; you have a new job.

In everyday circumstances, your consciousness operates against a wider, vaguer background. This background neither matters nor fails to matter. It is just there. Something in it may subsequently catch your attention or arouse your concern, but that just changes the focal point. Still there is a specific object of concern against an amorphous background.

When you are faced with a particular problem and you are facing it squarely, solving it seems in effect to be solving everything. "Your problems will be over," as the savings and loan commercial says. Your debt worries, anyway. The current problem seems the only one, until there arises a new one or an old one you had swept under the rug. Narrowness of focus is not limited to problems. Let's say you're about to go out with someone exciting, or to see your favorite superstars in action, or to get away from it all for two weeks. You're looking forward to the big moment when it all begins: the excitement of anticipation. Oops! You forgot that it will all soon be over and you'll be back where you began, albeit one gratification more to the good. But until you realize that fact, obvious as it is when you think of it, the thrill to come is what counts. Even if it will soon become the thrill that was.

The general problem of life has no particular solution. It concerns that amorphous background that's normally unquestioned. Is there any way to deal with it?

Transcending Transience

All things must pass. So, what else is new? Indeed, all things must pass. This is nothing new. Realizing this is nothing new either. What is newer than this realization is a realization about it: if all things must pass, then among them is the realization that all things must pass. You can't spend all your time contemplating the fact that everything is transient.

Still, it might be suggested, anyone who realizes, if only from time to time, that all things must pass is affected in between by that realization. He may, for example, be chronically depressed, though only occasionally conscious of the reason for his depression. Or he may be cynical, contemptuous of others and himself alike for what they all have in common—the miserable destiny of doom lurking behind the delusively purposeful endeavors of everyday life. Or he may play the fool, seeing silliness as the only alternative to dreariness and defeatism. Whatever his attitude and his mood, surely it can be the product of his occasional conscious recognition of everything's fleetingness. He is living out that recognition in the way he sees others and in the way he acts in the presence of others.

If nothing has any ultimate significance, who said it should in the first place? Who are we to think that there must be a reason for our being here? Out of ignorance, primitives found a place for themselves in the cosmos. For us, even to try is out of arrogance.
We know that the question of life's meaning and our perception
that it lacks an answer comes from taking a cosmic perspective.
Looking at things as a whole, we find nothing. Nothing but the
things, that is. What did you expect? A prize for being here? A
certificate of participation? Don't be silly.

Try to understand that the only way in which things can
become meaningless is by your being in a frame of mind that
renders them so. If you insist on things having a lasting value, if
you insist on things adding up to something, if you insist that
there is some ultimate tie-up, forget it. But why this insistence?
Who needs unity, permanence, and ultimacy? "We do, that's
what," you say; I say we don't. We only think we do as long as
we retain the cosmic frame of mind that imposes these all-
embracing demands in the first place.

So the source of our problem is the frame of mind in which we
perceive there to be a problem. Should we therefore rid our-
selves of this frame of mind? Should we make an attempt to
return to our everyday follies? Can we do this in good con-
science? Can we do it at all?

Surely our cosmic reflections cannot be forgotten, and should
not if they are valid. That's assuming the respect due truth, even
the truth that hurts. But this respect needn't become obsession.

There is no reason why you should spend the rest of your life
thinking to yourself, "I'm going to die... Nothing matters... It's
all a joke... I'm going to die..." There are other things to think
about.

Still, the nagging thought that these dreadful reflections,
even when dormant, will permeate your life nonetheless.
Maybe they do already and have done so for a long time. Maybe
this book only reinforces them. It may be that these reflections,
whenever they occur, are simply the conscious articulations of
an endless mood perhaps of alternating benign depression and
malignant despair. But then again, this chronic mood may be the
long-term effect of these occasional reflections.

Well, there must be some way out. There must be some way
to deal with the gruesome effect of looking at life through an
unsparring wide-angle lens. Forgetting doesn't seem to be the
answer. True, the quest for the eternal, for what transcends tran-
sience, begins with the reflection that everyday experiences,
however pleasant and delightful, cannot last. Forget their fleet-
ingness and you forget the brevity and futility of life itself. But
how to forget? You can't do it directly. For you might not remem-
ber to forget. Or you might, in trying to forget, be afraid that you
will remember. This is something like the feeling you might have
at the edge of a cliff. You're not afraid of slipping; you're not
afraid that someone will push you—but you're afraid you will jump.
The very thought that you might makes you think that you will.
Similarly, the thought that you can go on living without getting
obsessed with how short and futile your life is may give rise to
the thought that you won't be able to get rid of these thoughts.
And the thought that you won't be able to get rid of them is
enough to multiply them. (There is a certain lack of freedom in
all this. It is the inability to cope with your lack of freedom. More
on this in the last chapter.)

My approach to the problem is to follow its source to its logical
conclusion. Let me show you what I mean. The problem is the
recognition of life's brevity and of the transient experiences
that make it up. The conclusion reached so far is that life, when and
only when viewed as a whole, is futile and worthless and that the
realization of this generates one or another of several chronic
attitudes, none of which is chronically desirable. You can
become obsessed with death, chronically bored, or permanently
depressed. You can take the cynical and sarcastic approach or
you can play "Let's Pretend" and treat it all as a vast joke or
game. Whatever the tack you take, it would seem to be either
alarmist or escapist. But maybe you can do better.

This all began with a reflection on the transience of experi-
ences and therefore the transience of values. My response is:
What did you expect? Of course you can't hold onto experiences.
The best you can do is prolong them until they fade or fatten. You
can remember them from time to time, but memories fade also.
The point is that experiences are essentially temporal. When
they're finished happening, they're over. What can you do about
that? Nothing. That's the way experiences are. What else could
they be?

Thus, to seek the permanent and the eternal is in effect to try
to hang onto the past. But the past, like the present and future,
consists of experiences that can only pass. To seek the eternal
is to try to escape time itself. The absurdity of this attempt lies
in the fact that even if you were to live forever, you'd still be living
in time. You could still be worried about the meaning of every-
thing, about whether you really would never die, whether your
suffering might someday be endless, and so on.

I have said that to hold onto experiences, as if you could, is to
live in the past. Of course the thought that all your experiences
will someday be past is probably what really bothers you. But
why should that bother you now? It is as if your worry consists
in thinking ahead to after your death and, once dead, having
nothing but your life, which is now in the past, to look back upon.
In any case, why look back upon it when it isn't even over yet?
Most important is the realization that now is forever. I don’t mean that now lasts forever. The point is that you can never outlive the present. It always keeps up with you. I admit this is a truism from the logical point of view; since now, by definition, is that moment contemporaneous with the reference to it. But it is still a truism worth focusing on. There will never come the time when you can look back and say of life, “It’s all over now.” Life as a whole can never be looked back upon, because the moment of looking back is part of life, even if the last. Besides, the last moment of life can never be experienced as such. You may know you’re about to die, but you cannot experience dying any more than you can experience falling asleep.

To live eternally is not to live endlessly. It is to live in the present. And that is all you can ever do. You can think of the past and the future, but you can only be in the present. You will never be anywhere else.

It isn’t easy trying to face up to life as a whole, but being conscious makes it hard not to. The feelings expressed in Chapter 1, and the attempt to deal with them, arose from a sense of isolation and separateness that will be described more fully in this chapter. There seemed to be no way to rationalize one’s life in a world devoid of ultimate meaning, no way to bridge the gap between one’s own smallness and the vastness of a pointless world. The solution given—living in the present—required a kind of calculated amnesia to stifle such dreary thoughts once and for all and to rub out the need for meaning. That solution is easier said than done, for what is to keep those thoughts and that need from returning? Distractions aren’t effective enough. Perhaps there is a more positive and helpful answer.

The idea we will examine here is that a meaningful life can be achieved if a person is able to find something larger than himself to identify with, something whose meaning and value transcend the scope and duration of an individual life. Part of this idea is that meaningful personal relationships and meaningful involvement in activities of whatever sort require identification with the situation at hand.

Sounds like a pretty good idea, doesn’t it? I wish I could agree. Instead, I’m going to spend the whole chapter trying to show that the only outcome of this effort at meaningful identification is alienation of one type or another. Such identification turns out to be an alluring pipe dream.

Since I define alienation in relation to identification, I want to make as clear as I can what I mean by identification. When a person identifies with something, he ascribes an essential connection between himself and it. He feels himself to be part of it, not just casually but in a special way. What makes this connection special is that he feels that the “object of identification” somehow represents him. If he identifies with a group, for example, he can feel pride in the group and, derivatively, in its mem-
bers, just as if he were feeling pride in himself. Pride, after all, is an emotion that is ordinarily self-directed. Again, if the person identifies with a cause, then the feeling of importance he has about this cause is like a feeling of self-importance, not just in degree but in kind. Also, a person can identify with the particular situation he's in and the people he's with. His conception of himself, for the time being, is inseparable from his conception of the situation and the others.

Identification isn't automatic. Instead of a unity, the person may feel an opposition between himself and what he might be, but doesn't identify with. He might feel isolated from the group, undervolte to the cause, or separate from other people. He doesn't "relate." This lack of identification is one form of alienation we will discuss.

Alienation comes in many varieties, but there are two main types. Today it is common to speak of being, or feeling, alienated from something, be it your job, your family, your country, or even yourself (more on self-alienation in the next chapter). This type of alienation is a lack of identification with something you feel you ought to be able to identify with. I'll call it the alienation of non-identification. There is also what I call the alienation of mis-identification, of falsely identifying with something. I'll explain this later on.

This type of alienation may be specific to a particular situation or it may be general and pervasive. An example of the first may occur during a conversation with friends. Perhaps they're discussing something of no interest to you, like the stock market or auto racing. As a result, you feel entirely "out of it," or maybe downright disgusted. Whatever the case, you feel separate from the others, at least for the time being. After all, if the conversation turns to your favorite subject, say rock-and-roll music of the mid-fifties, your feeling of alienation quickly vanishes. For all you know, somebody else is now alienated.

Generalized alienation doesn't need a dull subject or a boring activity to generate it. No matter what is going on, you just can't get involved. Nothing catches your interest and produces excitement. It's not the people, either. You're not put off by them. It doesn't matter whom you're with, and your feeling isn't due to headache, worry, or momentary depression. You don't have "irrit blood," or any other commercially popular complaint. Nothing in particular is the matter.

What is it, then? What keeps you from getting involved, from being motivated, from relating to others? Maybe your problem is that you think too much. Maybe it keeps occurring to you that everything going on will sooner or later come to an end, that the people around you will die, and that you yourself will die, too. Nothing can excite you because you immediately see beyond it to its conclusion. In a sense, it's over before it begins. Or, you look backward. You realize that you've done this, said this, or heard this a million times before. In short, nothing is fresh, curious, or appealing to you. Everything is old hat.

If this is how you feel, what can you think about other people who, so far as you can tell, naïvely accept the joys of life without question and whose idea of a big problem is a tax increase? On the one hand, you feel utter contempt for them, seeing how their consciousness is so restricted that they can enjoy themselves despite what there is to be realized about life. On the other hand, you feel a certain envy toward them. You wish you could turn your thinking off, if only you could just relax. Perhaps you wonder what they think of you. You probably think they consider you unfriendly, boring, depressing. Oh well, they can't be expected to understand.

Of course, it might occur to you that there are others who share your feelings—maybe even one of your group. He simply happens to be better than you at faking interest. Or did you suppose yourself to be the first ever to have such feelings? Don't be silly, thinking has been indulged in before. Your plight isn't unique.

In everyday life, this utter despair of relentless, mindless matter impinging endlessly on our puny lives tends to be suppressed. Life must go on, and for this purpose masks, screens, and habits help. People prefer boredom to agitation, repetition to revolution, rocking chairs to rocking boats. Conventions and conveniences, schedules and procedures keep things going, tell you what to do, make sense of what others do, and make life, if not easy, at least relatively clear-cut.

On rare occasions, there is some comfort in sharing your feelings with others, depressing as these feelings are. "Share and share alike," I always say. But part of the feeling being shared is one's essential aloneness. Despite sharing the feeling, there is still your having it as opposed to the other's having it, and that's part of the feeling. It includes the sense that whatever is going on will ultimately amount to nothing. Your feeling of alienation from others and their activities, felt even during your feigned participation (especially), has a counterpart in your view of those who don't seem alienated. As you observe others engaged in their affairs, the observation is clogged with the thought that all
use of stereotyped devices such as “How are you?” “Nice day today,” and “I’ll have to be going now.”

Now you might feel grateful for social conventions that prescribe moves for all sorts of situations. Interacting with people you don’t know is not easy, after all, precisely because you don’t know each other. The unwritten code book provides convenient ways of filling time in the social situations that crop up during the day. Besides, you can’t get personal with everyone, but what about your friends and those others you frequently see? Of course, any relation of one person to another is always partial. However much you may share interests, feelings, and thoughts, there is inevitably a surplus of each person that is not shared. All communication is partial, however complete the rapport. Indeed, a person doesn’t even notice much of what he himself thinks and feels. Figuratively speaking, then, people can overlap but never coincide.

Suppose you are with another person. To the extent that you reflect about the situation, you are bound to question your own interest in the other person and in what is going on. Equally, you may question the other’s interest in you and in the situation. You may even wonder about the other’s doubts about you and about his wondering about your doubts about him. This sort of doubting and wondering can occur, since it entails reflection about the situation, only if the intensity of talk or activity is not too great. Involvement yields intensity, but hesitation limits involvement. Also, such doubting and wondering is possible only for someone capable of serious reflection. Apparently, most people aren’t capable of it most of the time. For them, routine transactions will do. And even when people become relatively open and intimate, still there is a residue of secrecy. There is always something to hide.

Now one of the things about consciousness is that it can’t be consciously turned off. Once you’re aware of something, you can’t just decide not to be aware of it any longer. That would require the impossible achievement of being aware of being aware and deciding that being aware is not what you want to be. What is needed and what is usually available is not decision but distraction. Things, events, duties, and people provide it. They catch your attention and prevent you from continuing to be aware of what you were aware of. Even when you’re aware of being aware of the situation, distractions inadvertently inhibit your reflection and squelch your doubts. In short, they make it easy to limit reflexive awareness. Of course, the blessings of companionship are not without the burdens of devotion. And when this burden is, for example, having to listen to an interminable story, moments of reflection recur, perhaps yielding feelings of separateness. The other person may appear an alien thing that produces words, displays feeling, and expects response. You may remind yourself that the other is a person but still a distinct, separate one. Whatever the other says or does, there is always more to him than those things, or maybe there isn’t.

There is a positive side to all this. When we filter out all the individual differences, the things we like or admire in others and the things we don’t, there remains one thing that can tie people together—the very thing, paradoxically, that keeps people forever apart. Insofar as we are aware of others as being the same sort as ourselves—conscious beings aware of being conscious—we feel a closeness to them, particularly when we recognize the relative irrelevance of the qualities that distinguish us one from another. As a conscious being aware of my own finitude and helplessness in the face of time, I am aware of others as being the same as I. My sense of smallness gives way to a compassion for others, who are no bigger or smaller than I. And then I can’t feel sorry for myself so easily.

This general empathy is not wholly good, I must admit. To experience it, one must abstract from the individual differences between people and generalize from any particulars that one knows. For this feeling to apply to everyone, familiar and unfamiliar, past, present, and future, one must be alienated from any concrete situation that one is in. How can you engage in a conversation, play a game, or demonstrate for peace while maintaining a generalized feeling of empathy that applies to all people, both good and evil and in between? How can what is happening right now be meaningful and involving when dwarfed by such an atomistic feeling? How can you love anyone or care for anyone in particular, your friends or those who need help, when the feeling felt is so awfully universal? You can’t.

So, what ultimately ties you to everyone also separates you from anyone in particular. United with everyone by the bond of consciousness, you are at the same time barred from everyone by the gulf of consciousness. You are alone. Even if you bring up the subject of the preceding paragraphs, this strange feeling of general empathy and the alienation that goes with it, in an attempt to share it with someone else, no sooner do you sense this feeling in the other’s reverent expression than you begin to wonder whether what he feels is really the same as what you feel. You might even think, “How could he feel what I feel?” No sooner said than undone.

Perhaps you harbor no such doubts. You and the person you’re with really do share this feeling of empathy, complete with a
smile of comprehension and a tear of sorrow. But what do you do? What can you say? Any concrete option seems puny and pathetic: even discussing this feeling seems useless. You have the choice between paralysis and going on, anyway. Or is there a choice? Not really. You feel paralyzed, but it weeps off and you go on, anyway. You share this feeling with your friend; the two of you meditate on it briefly, and then it’s back to work or whatever. The coffee break is over.

If there is any relationship that can transcend the alienating power of consciousness, surely it must be love. Mutual love, in which each feels an unconditional affection, respect, and concern for the other, comes closest to overcoming the feeling of aloneness. Sometimes love is described as the merging of two into one, and certainly it can feel that way. But how long will it last? Sooner or later, a person in love must raise this question, not because he wants to but because he can’t help it. The question just comes up.

Love makes a person forget his troubles, his responsibilities, the miseries pervading the world. Love makes one oblivious to the future, at least for a while. It may make him forget himself. The trouble is that these side-effects don’t last forever. The emotional peak that love attains eventually levels off, and the rest of reality rears its head. Then it’s down to earth. Thinking returns. Or without any concrete reason, you may wonder how long the love will last; will the other change too much; will you yourself change? What if something happens to the other? The terror of doubt and uncertainty needs no special impulse. Maybe it’s the fear of boredom or a sense of the absurdity of love: what makes that person so special? It’s a dangerous question. Love is the answer only when there is no question. Questioning, and the self-reflection it entails, brings back that feeling of aloneness.

Misidentification

I hope the preceding examples illustrate the extent to which identification with something can fail. All it takes is the spontaneous realization of your separateness from whatever it is you’re trying to identify with. This realization needn’t be incessant. For some, it may occur rarely if ever. You may succeed in identifying with something, something other than yourself. That’s what I call the alienation of misidentification.

Before explaining what I mean by misidentification, I should explain the reason for calling it alienation. An old legalistic (and philosophic) usage of alienate is to transfer or convey. Misidentification, then, means selling out, that is, trading what you are for what you’re not. Unlike the alienation of nonidentification, the alienation of misidentification need not be conscious or felt. Indeed, when it is conscious, as we will see, it is likely to yield to the alienation of nonidentification.

By misidentification I don’t mean simply having mistaken opinions about yourself. No doubt everyone thinks certain distorted things about himself, and no doubt there are certain things about himself that he doesn’t think. What I am talking about is mistaken identification with something. People identify with other persons, with groups, with causes, with professions, with principles, and even with the entire universe. To identify with something doesn’t mean to think you are the same thing as it, not literally anyway. If I identify with philosophy, for example, I don’t think that I am philosophy. True, identification can involve ascribing literal identity, as when Hitler said, “I am Germany.” He didn’t merely identify himself with the fatherland—he identified himself as the fatherland. Normally, though, the identity is only metaphorical. I don’t believe I am literally philosophy, but perhaps I feel a part of it and identify my interests with its interests. What’s good for me is good for it, and vice versa.

Sometimes identification with something includes a personification of the object. That’s how a captain sees his ship and how a loyal citizen sees his country (in both cases as a “she”). Or without personification, this identification includes the phenomenon of ordinarily self-directed emotions felt toward the object of identification. Such emotions are pride (or honor, or dignity) and shame (or disgrace, or humiliation). Normally, a person is proud or ashamed of himself. Of someone else he feels admiration or contempt. But when there is identification, these other-directed feelings are replaced by self-directed ones. An obvious example is a parent’s feelings about his child, whom he regards as an extension of himself, whose actions “reflect” on him, who “carries my name.” I might mention that names, which are symbols of both the identifier and the object of identification, help mediate the process, uniting the identifier and the object.

For example, to think of yourself as an American is in effect to identify with America.

Patriotism is a classic example of identification in the metaphorical style. Patriots are proud of their country (and its flag, also symbolic of the country), unless it (they) happens to suffer from “national disgrace.” An attack on their country is an attack on them, and it must be defended at all costs. Those able to fight for its (their) honor must be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice.
in the cause of its [their] defense. Plainly, patriotism is a socially reinforced type of identification. More on such reinforcement in the next section.

The feeling of oneness that some people claim to have with the universe is another illustration of metaphorical identification. Such people may regard each thing as nothing more than a manifestation of the universal Self. There is no genuine division in the world, they think, no real conflict but only the illusion of it. This identification is not only the identification of part with whole but of part with part. Everything and everyone has a mystical identity with each other since each is a manifestation of the whole.

On a smaller scale, in a group of people, there is a felt identity not only with the group but between the members (as brothers, teammates, or children of God). Identification with the whole (as in "Deutschland über alles") thus generates identification with the parts: "E pluribus unum."

The felt connection here among persons is not itself personal. Rather, it is mediated by the whole that each person belongs to or is a part of. It can be politically useful to connect people via their respective connections to the whole, that abstraction with which they mutually identify. "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." I refer to the whole as an abstraction because countries, for example, are not conscious entities that have the capacity for joy and sorrow, with interests independent of those of its citizens. And yet countries and other institutions are treated as if they were sentient things in their own right. Patriotism and other types of loyalty (for example, corporate) are directed at these abstractions, rather than to the people who compose them. And where there is identification with the achievements of particular members, such as with American athletes or Russian cosmonauts, it is focused on what they represent (America or Russia), not on who they are individually.

Sometimes the members’ mutual identification with each other and with the group is the product of their treatment by another group. Obvious examples include racial, sexual, and economic oppression. In each case, the mutual identification of the members of the oppressed class stems from their conscious recognition of their oppression as a class. To overcome this oppression, perhaps it is necessary for them to adopt in a positive form the very identification (for example, as black or as female) by which they are distinguished for oppression. The quality that previously disgraced them becomes the quality that enhances them.

Despite its psychological advantages, especially in the case just mentioned, all identification is mistaken. Whether it’s with your town, your team, or your temple, identification with anything but yourself is mistaken. You have no business whatsoever being proud of the achievements of anyone else, in being ashamed of anyone else’s failures. You are you and they are they. You can admire them or, if you insist, despise them for what they are or do. But the identity between you and them, like the identity between you and what you belong to, is fantasy. Admittedly, I called it metaphorical, but as long as you feel pride or shame—emotions that belong only to you—the identification might as well be literal.

Such identification is mistaken insofar as it generates emotions that are inappropriate. In other words, these emotions are vicarious. They are prompted by actions and experiences that are not your own and you respond as if they were your own. This "as if" is provided by identification. Identifying with a group is a psychologically appealing act that has no logical basis. Pride in the deeds of others is vicarious, shame gratuitous. To be sure, the alienation of misidentification may be gratifying. I never denied that. People who are proud of their leaders and heroes, their culture and traditions, perhaps need something bigger and better than themselves to be proud of. Still, the collective is a collection of individuals. People can care for each other and share with each other, but nobody can be represented by anybody but himself.

In denouncing identification and in associating love and mysticism with it, I am not objecting to them but only to a certain way of describing them.

Love is sometimes thought of as a relation of oneness with another, and mysticism as a similar relation with the universe. Now, if they really were "relations of oneness," then indeed they would be cases; however blissful, of misidentification in the way just explained. I want to suggest an alternative description, one that accounts for why the first way of describing these experiences (as relations of oneness) is so plausible.

From my own experience and from others’ reports, it seems that these heightened moments of seeming relatedness with another or with the universe involve what is sometimes labeled ego loss. A person loses the sense of himself as separate and feels a sense of merging instead; thus the appealing term oneness. I would prefer to describe these experiences as the result of losing self-consciousness. These blissful moments are essentially unreflective. In such a state, you can’t say, "I have lost my sense of self."
Afterwards, it is perfectly natural to describe the experience in this way. Later, in the state of reflecting upon that egoless (unreflexive) state, you recall not feeling separate from the other or from the world as a whole. It is appealing to describe the situation as one of unity. Rather, the experience was lacking in the usual sense of disunity, of separateness, that results from self-consciousness.

Alien Values

Let's digress (ever so slightly) to the subject of what I call alien values. By these I mean values that a person accepts as his own even though they're not. They may or may not be genuine values (that's why I don't call them false values). What makes them alien is how they are accepted. The most common example is of something that people accept because, each person thinks, people accept it. Social habits such as smoking and drinking, religion and wearing neckties, are done (or not done) because "everybody" does them. In different cases the referent of "everybody" varies—it depends on the group a person refers to in making his decisions. Much hackneyed social psychology might be mentioned here, for example, the talk about peer groups, status, and social acceptance. But, suffice it to say that each person in a group acts in reference to the group as a whole, that is, to everybody else. Everybody subordinates himself to everybody else.

Interesting psychological and philosophical points can be made about this phenomenon. I suspect my next book will deal with this sort of thing. For now, it is enough to say that each subordinates himself to the group and that it is the reference to the group, the idea of group acceptance, that legitimizes the group's values for each member. "If everybody accepts it, it must be good." Ten million Elks can't be wrong. Furthermore, as a rule, members of a group who reject or even question the group's values are ostracized or pronounced insane or subversive.

Particularly important are the groups you are born into, such as family, religion, and country. They and the values they embody seem to admit of no alternatives. As a child surrounded by adults who support country and religion as sacrosanct, who are you to think any differently? Nobody, that's who. You're aware that there are awful people around like commies and atheists but you would never be one of them. Even when you reach adulthood, itself a socially defined category, and begin to question some of the basic values that "everyone" accepts, outright rejection of these values is possible only with a lot of courage or a little company. Most people, it seems, never seriously question, let alone reject, the values of groups they're born into. Those who do are regarded as "going through a phase," as engaging in "typical teenage shenanigans," or, if they don't "get over it," as belonging to a "lunatic fringe." Thus, the socially accepted system of values is equipped to deal with those who don't accept it.

The result is that most people accept social values as real, natural, universal, and unconditional. They may even be unaware that alternatives are possible, let alone plausible. In this case, they cannot be aware of their beliefs as beliefs, for they accept their values as unopposable realities, not as options with alternatives. Thus, there is no obstacle to accepting these social values as their own.

The social acceptance and resultant entrenchment of values do not occur in a vacuum. The routine and ritual of everyday life that maintain the legitimacy of these values by making them seem objective. Certain styles of clothes are worn; different styles signal different roles and positions in society. Different roles and positions signify different degrees of social importance. Again, there are certain ways in which "things are done." Except for those things that are not permitted at all, "there's a time and place for everything." More examples of routines and social forms:

Eat three meals a day.
What do you do? For a living, I mean.
Time to get up. You're wasting your life away.
How are the Mets doing? Lost again.
Nice day today.
Everybody's against war, but...
Where are you from? Oh, I passed through there once.
I'd like you to meet...
We met here last year.
It's a pleasure to meet you.

The very existence of something may give it significance. A number of people doing it substantiates its significance: going to church, trying to lose weight. Mass media provide the ultimate sanction. If it's on the news, it must be terribly important. Often,
what's happening is not the news but people seeing or hearing the news of what's happening. Anything unreported isn't worth considering and might as well not be happening.

The Dilemma of Alienation

The two types of alienation, nonidentification and misidentification, constitute a dilemma. One leads to the other, the other leads back to the first, and both are unsatisfactory. The dilemma is really with identification itself. You identify with something until you realize that it isn't you, that you have been falsely identifying. People have this experience with family, college, and country. Having recognized the falsity of your identification, you thereby can no longer continue with it and come to feel alienated from whatever you previously identified with. At this point, either you realize you're on your own, or you look for something else to identify with, say the "Movement." You haven't figured out that identification is false in principle, no matter what you identify with. And then, for one reason or another (for example, boredom or disillusionment), you lose this identification and feel alienated again. The process can go on and on until you settle into some permanent identification (for example, with middle America), or until it dawns on you that identification with something other than yourself is fundamentally mistaken. Even when you realize that, the process may still continue, to the extent that you are subject to pressures from others. There will always be people around you rooting for the home team, supporting their President, or backing the union. You will be forced into either identifying (or pretending to) or being alienated from those around you.

I want to make it clear that I am not advocating personal separatism. The dilemma of alienation does not mean you shouldn't relate to other people and support worthy causes. It's identification I'm objecting to. treating as your own what isn't. I'm advocating personal integrity, not separatism. As long as you insist on identifying with things, you'll be stuck in the dilemma of identification. First you'll resort to one kind of false identification or another, until you wake up to the fact that it's delusional. Then you'll suffer from the conscious type of alienation, that of non-identification. You may feel the need to find something else to identify with. For this purpose, there are plenty of established organizations and countless offbeat cults available. (Consult your local directory.)

The only way out of this dilemma is to recognize that you can't identify or define yourself in external terms. That is, you can't conceive of what you are as what you're not without being grossly mistaken. In the next two chapters, we'll look at the problem of self-definition. First, we'll examine what it means to feel at home with yourself, and then we'll investigate the unpleasant alternative of self-alienation. Finally, we'll look at what is involved in having a self-conception, an identity.