Meeting 12: Chapter 6 (Nozick on the Meaning of Life)

I. Modes of Meaningfulness
Nozick’s final topic: “How is it possible for life to have meaning?”
He starts by distinguishing eight different senses or kinds of meaning (pp. 574-75):

I. meaning as external causal relationship (e.g. “Smoke means fire”);
II. meaning as external referential/sematic relation (e.g. “Brother’ means ‘male sibling’”);
III. meaning as intention/purpose (e.g. “She meant well”);
IV. meaning as lesson (e.g. “Gandhi’s success means that nonviolent protest sometimes works”);
V. meaning as personal significance/importance/mattering (e.g. “You mean a lot to me”);
VI. meaning as objective significance/importance/mattering;
VII. meaning VI in itself, apart from any connections to anything else;
VIII. meaning as total resultant meaning: the sum total web of something’s meaning I–VII.

He argues that it is easy enough for a life to be meaningful in senses I–IV, for instance if the plan around which a person intentionally and transparently structures their life provides a positive lesson to others.

But, Nozick point out, even then we might doubt whether such a life has meaning in sense VI:

We can look at the person’s life (together with its lesson), stand outside it, “see it as the particular thing it was, notice its limits, and wonder whether it really has any meaning” (pp. 578-79).

The rest of the chapter is devoted to explaining how it is possible for a life to be meaningful in senses VI or VII.

II. God’s Plan
One prevalent view: people’s meaning is to be found and realized in fulfilling the role allotted to them by God.
Nozick’s question: how can playing a role in God’s plan provide our lives with meaning?

The role must be not just any role:

We want to play an important role in fulfilling some important purpose of God’s, and we want that role to focus on valuable aspects of ourselves qua their value.

And the purpose should be not just any purpose:

God’s purpose for us must itself be meaningful.

But this raises the question: what is it about God’s purposes that make them meaningful?

Not, Nozick argues, the mere fact that God is the creator of all we see. (A child from a vast civilization in a parallel universe who created our universe would not automatically have meaningful purposes.)

It also seems to matter that there not be a hierarchy of other gods above the creator of our universe, as the Gnostics held.

Eventually these ruminations lead Nozick to the following hypothesis:

“Perhaps the intrinsic meaningfulness of God’s existence and his purposes lies in his being unlimited and infinite, in his being at the ground floor and not undercut or dwarfed or put in a smaller focus by any underlying level or being or perspective” (p. 593).
Nozick proposes that we use the plausibility of this hypothesis to tell us something about the nature of meaning: “How must the notion of meaning be structured, what must be its content, for (only) unlimitedness to provide a secure basis for meaning and a stopping place of questions about meaning?” (p. 594).

III. The Problem: Transcending Limits
If unlimitedness strikes us as a solution, then the problem of life’s meaning must generated by our limits.

Nozick’s proposal: “Attempts to find meaning in life seek to transcend the limits of an individual life. . . . For a life to have meaning, it must connect with other things, with some things or values beyond itself” (ibid.).

Some intuitive support for this proposal: a life with extremely narrow limits that are not transcended (e.g. the life of a severe amnesiac) strikes us as low in meaningfulness.

More support for the proposal: “The particular things or causes people find make their life feel meaningful all take them beyond their own narrow limits and connect them up with something else. Children, relationships with other persons, helping others, advancing justice, continuing and transmitting a tradition, pursuing truth, beauty, world betterment—these and the rest link you to something wider than yourself” (p. 595).

Nozick sees his proposal as showing why there is a grain of truth to the thought “There is a problem about the meaning of life because of our morality."

In fact, Nozick holds, there is a problem about the meaning of life because of our limitations.

But mortality is one of those limitations: a temporal limitation.

He also sees his proposal as showing why there is a grain of truth to the thought “A life which leaves permanent traces is meaningful.”

Traces are one way (but only one way) of seeping beyond a life’s temporal limits.

The search for a meaning that transcends our limits leads to a regress:

Start with X_1 (our life, or an aspect of it), which— it is claimed— has meaning in virtue of its connection with X_2.

Standing outside of X_1 and X_2, we ask for the meaning of X_2 (or of X_1 + X_2 together).

This leads us to find a wider and less limited context or entity, X_3, such that X_2 (or X_1 + X_2) has meaning in virtue of its connection to X_3.

Standing outside of X_1, X_2, and X_3, we ask for the meaning of X_3 (or of X_1 + X_2 + X_3 together).

And so on.

This regress can seem to undercut the meaning of X if two things happen:

1. Eventually we reach a context, X_n, that is so wide that it no longer seems plausible that X_1 has meaning in virtue of it connection to X_n, because X_1 is so insignificant from X_n’s perspective.

   Ex.: “From the point of view of all human history, what difference does my life make?”

2. Eventually we reach a context, X_n, that is so wide that it is not clear how it could have meaning.

Here two assumptions are being made:

A. X has meaning in virtue of its connection to Y only if Y itself (or X + Y together) has meaning.

B. If X has meaning in virtue of its connection to Y, and Y (or X + Y) has meaning in virtue of its connection to Z, then X has meaning in virtue of its connection to Z.
IV. A Religious Solution: The Unlimited

One solution is to end the regress at something without limits that encompasses everything, so that there is no way to stand outside of it and ask about its meaning.

Nozick proposes to call this thing ‘the unlimited’ or ‘Ein Sof’ (from the Hebrew term for ‘without end or limit’). The unlimited includes all possibilities in addition to everything in actuality, all abstract objects in addition to every concrete entity, etc.

Two proposals about the unlimited’s meaning:

- **First proposal**: Because there is nothing external to the unlimited, the question of its meaning cannot even be asked, so the unlimited transcends the pair meaningful–meaningless and has no meaning.

  **Problem**: Then it’s not clear how and why connecting up to the unlimited provides meaning to our lives.

- **Second proposal**: The unlimited is its own meaning, and it is the only thing that can be its own meaning.

  (So the unlimited has meaning in virtue of being connected to itself and that thing to which it is connected having meaning? But then its having meaning would seem to be explained, in part, by its having meaning.)

Why is the unlimited (and only the unlimited) its own meaning? Two ways of explaining this:

i. An analogy to infinite sets: “only an unlimited being can map onto and so connect with something apparently larger and external which turns out to be itself” (p. 603).

   Is this true? What about Ein Sof$, which is Ein Sof minus one meaningless thing. Why can’t that thing’s meaning be itself?

ii. It is because meaning involves transcending limits that meaning, for a limited and finite being, involves external connections. But then meaning for an unlimited being, and only for an unlimited being, need not be due to any external connection.

How can the unlimited’s meaning bring meaning into our lives?

Either by our being connected up to the unlimited (as in the case of God) or by us ourselves being, in our fundamental natures, the unlimited (as in the case of the Vedanta doctrine that Atman is Brahman)

V. A Secular Solution: Connecting to Value

I read Nozick as granting that the unlimited, if it existed, could provide meaning to our lives, but as being not confident that the unlimited does or could exist.

He rejects the deductive arguments for God’s existence (the ontological, cosmological, etc. arguments) as “fruitless,” and although he thinks people’s mystical experiences carry some epistemic weight, they don’t carry enough weight to give us sufficient reason to believe in God (p. 609; see also pp. 157-64).

So instead Nozick proposes a secular solution to our problem that involves rejecting assumption A above:

X can have meaning in virtue of its connection to Y, insists Nozick, even if Y does not have meaning.

This can happen when, and only when, Y has value.

(Do we also need to require that Y is external to X?)

As he puts it: “Meaning involves transcending limits so as to connect with something valuable; meaning is a transcending of the limits of your own value, a transcending of your own limited value” (p. 610).

And: “The meaning of a life [is] its perspective on the [whole] realm of value as a function of its interconnections with it” (p. 611).
A person’s life can have meaning, and it can also have value.

Nozick suggests that these are partial aspects of one underlying thing we care about, which he dubs worth.

He proposes that we specify the notion of worth so that “no matter where the line is drawn between a life and what is external to it, although the particular placement affects the assessments of the value and of the meaning of the life, raising one while lowering the other, it does not affect the assessment of the (overall) worth of the life” (p. 612).

(Why is Nozick so confident that we can specify worth in this way?)

This solves a leftover problem from ch. 5, namely that the strength of the value sanction on immoral behavior seems to depend on where we place the boundary between one’s life and what is external to it.

Nozick’s solution: where we draw that boundary doesn’t affect the worth sanction on immoral behavior.

(Does this mean we should go back to earlier parts of the books and replace ‘value’ with ‘worth’ in Nozick’s various theses? Is being a unique, worth-seeking ‘I’ the moral basis, etc.?)

VI. Philosophy as an Art Form

The sciences aim at truth and explanations, but the truths that scientists discover can just as well be presented in other people’s words.

That’s why scientists do not expect or even hope that the articles and books they write will be read one hundred years from now.

Works of art and literature, by contrast, are produced with the intent that they be experienced directly.

The “truths” they contain are not extractable or paraphrasable without loss.

Works of philosophy (broadly construed, to include religious thought and social theory) are puzzling because they aim at truth and explanations (like the sciences), yet are intended to be read directly (like literature and art). Why is this so? How could it be so?

Nozick first argues that some legitimate ways of doing philosophy make it part of the humanities:

According to Nozick, a work in the humanities is characterized by at least a–d, and maybe e–f as well (pp. 621-22):

a. the work responds to value as value;

b. the work responds to meaning as meaning;

c. the work is concerned with value and meaning in relation to humanity;

d. it is intended that through the work produced the audience will respond to the values and meanings with which the work is concerned qua value and meaning;

e. it is intended that the work itself have a value to which the audience will respond qua value;

f. it is intended that the artist’s response to value have a value to which the audience will respond qua value.

Nozick insists that philosophy “can fit this structure of responsiveness to value and meaning, and thereby be carried out as part of the humanities” (p. 622).

Nozick also thinks that non-coercive, explanation-seeking philosophy has an even tighter fit within the humanities, because it better respects the reader’s value and autonomy.

Nozick then argues that some legitimate ways of doing philosophy make it a form of art:

The key is the degree of creative molding and shaping that takes place, where the materials being molded, shaped, separated, juxtaposed, etc. are “ideas, questions, tensions, concepts. . . . In the medium of ideas, [the philosopher as artist] sculptures a view” (p. 645).