

HUMAN PURPOSE IN LIFE

by Ward H. Goodenough

I suspect that, as men, we may be interested in "the purpose of life" in its cosmic or evolutionary setting because once we have found it and have put ourselves in tune with it, we believe we will have an answer to more burning questions: What is *our* purpose in life? Where are *we* going? What should *we* strive to become? But to ask what is the purpose of man, or the destiny of my race or my country—all questions on which much print is expended—is to take as object an external collectivity with which we readily and habitually identify ourselves and to project upon the resulting "we" what is the basic and crucial question: Where am *I* going? What should *I* strive to become? Whenever we ask "What is the meaning of life?" what we want to know is the meaning of our own individual life. As far as I know, this last is something to which all men everywhere feel either that they have an answer or that they are in need of one. We rarely find men content with no answer; and when we do, they no longer care much about anything, including life. They are men without purpose.

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ZYGON

I submit that this concern is natural, that it arises inevitably in any creature, such as man, that has purposes and that is also capable of self-awareness. Since our purposes are an object of our own awareness, they are something in our experience of self in need of rational ordering. Social life, moreover, makes the purposes of each of us a matter of concern to our fellows, with the result that they feel impelled to make us concerned with our purposes and their social consequences as well. It inescapably follows that purpose should be an object of intense concern to every emotionally healthy human being.

We have reasons, on which I shall touch later, for dissociating the problem of our own personal destiny from ourselves and projecting it onto our tribe, race, nation, species, all living forms, and onto our planet, solar system, and very cosmos. My point now is that concern with purpose is natural to man. In the course of evolution it has been selected as something without which a mobile, social, and self-conscious animal species cannot long survive. I do not think it is out of order to say that not one of man's attributes is more important for his survival than his endowment with the capacity to have purposes. We are so constructed that we cannot live except as we engage ourselves with our surroundings in a purposeful manner. In this, the genes provide the foundation; but the elaborate structures we erect upon this foundation—the structures by which we actually live—are largely a product of learning. Our specific purposes are a part of this product. We acquire our purposes, and through them a sense of purpose, as we order our experience of our surroundings in an effort to hold at bay our deterioration or entropy as an organism. Because human purposes arise from experience, there is considerable variation in the form they take and in the particular purpose people emphasize as *the* purpose in their lives. But there are some constants, too, which serve to keep the variations within bounds.

Among them, we all readily recognize such universal purposes as relate to the physical maintenance of the organism. The physical sciences are creating new possibilities for increasing our technical ability to implement these purposes in more efficient ways for greater numbers of people in the future. Nor are these purposes without religious significance. In the great new religion we call Communism, they have been made symbolic of all human purpose. These purposes play a role in the conception of human salvation from which we also derive our own inspiration. Deny it though we will, Mammon is indeed a vital part of our religious life as we actually live it. But I am not

going to talk about it further. We are none of us content with bread alone, even when we make it the symbol of all our purposes.

It is of two other primary purposes stemming from man's emotional needs that I wish to speak. These needs, too, are a product of our animal nature as it has evolved to the present.

RELIGION'S ROLE IN HARMONIZING EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCE TOWARD OTHER PEOPLE

From our earliest moments in life, it is the *human* element of our surroundings that we experience most intensely and dramatically. Events impinge upon us largely through the direct action of people who are themselves mature enough to have well-developed purposes of their own. In their purposes, moreover, we play a significant part, partly as a direct source of their fulfilment, partly as a means to other sources of their fulfilment, and partly as a frustration of their fulfilment. As we ourselves mature, our fellows come to have similar significance for us in relation to fulfilling our own developing purposes. As a population dependent on one another for many things, and being required to live together in our mutual dependencies, we are at the same time, through our competing purposes, the principal agents of one another's frustration. Indeed, the "pecking order" in human societies, whether imposed by force or arrived at by consensus, is a consequence of the competition resulting from human purposes.

To the extent that purpose is essential to life, the thwarting of purpose is a danger to life. Natural selection has provided us with a built-in reflex to the thwarting of purpose—aggressive destruction of what is perceived as the thwarting agent. But the principal targets of this hostile reaction are the persons on whom we are also most dependent. Emotional ambivalence toward those nearest to us is a natural and inescapable condition of human existence. How to deal with it, live with our aggressions, give them necessary outlet in a way that does not destroy what we most depend on, is one of the great problems of human life. The inner harmony that many religions depict as the consequence of salvation—"consequence" is here a disguise word for "purpose"—results from a resolution of the emotional conflicts within ourselves as they are engendered by our ambivalent relations with our most intimate fellows. For some people the problem is overshadowed by other problems of greater moment, but for those who find the problem acute, its resolution becomes a major, if not *the* major emotional goal or purpose in life.

The routes by which to achieve this goal are many. One is to resolve

the ambivalence in favor of hate, all-out hate. But this is a self-destructive solution, however exhilarating momentarily. Our very survival requires us to sublimate our hate. In some societies the sublimation is minimal, and it is one's nearest kin whom one most fears as witches. This makes it terribly important to be nice to them. Another solution, the successful repression of all feelings of hostility, requires the co-operation of others in that they must not give us too much reason to feel hateful. Without it, this approach becomes a masochistic route to ulcers and ultimate self-annihilation. Far more successful is the redefinition of our more important purposes in such a way that they are not liable to frustration by others, so that the inescapable frustrations of everyday life relate to purposes that are unimportant by comparison with those that are now dominant. When such redefinition comes in a rush as a result of a sudden new perspective on our lives, we may well say that we have had a religious experience.

Since the problem of ambivalence has its genesis in social life, people are also inclined to look for social solutions to it. One solution of which we all dream, at least some of the time, is a social order in which the dreamer enjoys absolute power to accomplish his own purposes, while others are free to accomplish theirs only as their doing so does not interfere with the accomplishment of his. He has rights over them, and hence his dependence on them is something he can command and is never thwarted, but they have no counterclaims on him. Whatever he does for them—and he may, like the Great White Father, altruistically intend that it be much—it is still something that he gives, or not, at his convenience and not at their command. For everyone to seek this solution in practice puts us into an all-out struggle for dominance. This, too, is self-defeating when it involves people who are part of the same interdependence system. Competition for dominance must be held within bounds if the group or species is to flourish. The human solution is some kind of publicly sanctioned status system by which competition is limited, and such expression as it is allowed is clearly defined and regulated. This is one of the essential things for existence that the social order of every human society provides.

Yet even the best-regulated competition necessarily rests upon a system of inequalities. It provides all kinds of fulfilment for the few winners and increases the frustrations of the many losers who must then look for other routes to the solution of their ambivalence problem and for bypassing the added burden of frustration which their personal lack of fulfilment within the social order gives them.

One obvious other route is a new social order, if not to be achieved in this life, then in some life hereafter. In some of these envisioned new orders, there will be a simple reversal of the pecking order: "the first shall be last and the last shall be first." In others, the dream is for a completely different pattern of existence. If only we could *all* conduct ourselves in such a way as to offer minimum frustration to each other and be maximally responsive to one another's needs, this would minimize the ambivalence problem for all—equalize it, anyway. We even envision Utopias where the problem is completely resolved for everyone. Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. Of such, too, is the Communist millennium in which everyone will be able to have the material things he wants without having to get in anyone else's way. Of such, too, is the hoped-for "social progress" on this earth to which most if not all of us here are personally dedicated.

The problem of ambivalence, then, is universal to men. For all of us it contributes to the purpose in our lives. The purpose may be simply to find and keep some *modus vivendi* with the problem or it may be to eliminate or transcend it altogether. When we find techniques for living with the problem that are in balance with the solutions we have for other problems in our lives, it ceases to be of serious concern to us. But each new generation must find these techniques for itself. Until it does or when the balance is upset, the problem is likely to be a major orienting force and its solution a dominant life purpose. And because we can never really get rid of it, we become devoted—perhaps "addicted" is a better word—to whatever ways we discover that enable us to live with it.

WAYS OF MEETING THE CONFLICT OF SELF AND SOCIETY IN TRUK

To illustrate such devotion and give more of the flavor of what I am talking about and how it all ties into religion, I shall briefly relate how this problem is handled in another society and how it contributes there to a conception of salvation somewhat different from any that we are used to contemplating for ourselves. The society I have in mind is that of the people of Truk in the western Pacific, where with several others I engaged in ethnographic study in 1947. At that time, nearly all of Truk's 10,000 people were Christians, at least nominally, and had been so for a generation. Many were sincere and active participants in church affairs. Christianity had not, however, displaced a number of pre-Christian beliefs and practices. Beliefs relating to the nature of the human soul and its survival after death, especially, continued to be actively held by everyone I knew; and traditional practices asso-

ZYGON

ciated with the spirits of the dead were still largely followed in private, though not entirely in public because of church disapproval.

According to Truk's people, everyone has two souls, a good and a bad. Both survive the body, but their fate after death has nothing to do with conduct during life. The Trukese are not interested in their own souls, as they conceive them, but in the souls of those who have already died. When someone dies, his relatives bring perfume, cosmetics, fine clothing, and jewelry as gifts to be buried with the deceased. They remain to watch over the grave for four nights after burial in order to see if the dead person's good soul will possess one of them. If it does (a relatively rare and unpredictable event), it means that this particular good soul intends to maintain contact with the living through the possessed person as its medium. On the fourth day after burial, the intimate personal effects of the deceased are burned, and his good soul rises in the smoke to a sky world to live much as people live on earth. Nothing more is heard of it, unless it has already possessed someone during the previous four nights. When a soul does this, it becomes one of a special class of spirit that is actively concerned with human welfare. The medium makes a model canoe and hangs it from the rafters of his family meetinghouse. He keeps it decked with scented flowers and jewelry, things in which the spirit delights, and summons the spirit from the sky world via the model canoe to enter his body and through him to speak to the people.

The spirit helps to diagnose sickness. It predicts times and places for good fishing. And it teaches men the medicines and white-magic formulas it has learned from the pantheon of great spirits in the sky. All white magic came thus to men from the spirit world. If the spirit's prognostications prove reliable, it becomes the object of a cult. But if they prove unreliable, as indeed they may, the medium terminates the relationship by eating preserved breadfruit, whose strong cheesy smell is obnoxious to spirits. As this last observation suggests, the spirit's willingness to help must be cultivated. The medium must avoid contact with offensive odors. When under possession, he must eat special delicacies and drink perfume, all as the spirit desires. At the spirit's demand, people come and perform special dances to entertain it. In short, what the spirit most likes are precisely those things that, to most of Truk's people, are symbols of narcissistic self-indulgence.

In contrast to the good soul, the bad soul of every dead person invariably becomes a cannibalistic ghost. It is classed with evil spirits, which "bite" or "devour" people and thereby cause most forms of

illness which, if not properly treated, will result in death. All Trukese whom I knew walked in genuine dread of ghosts, who haunted the night. Many had seen ghosts. Their reality was not to be questioned.

The persistence of such beliefs for a generation after the almost universal adoption of Christianity suggests that they answered some important needs felt by Truk's people and gave them something that they wanted and that Christianity failed to give them. What then were the purposes that were served here?

It is noteworthy that, not their own souls, but the souls of the already dead were the object of concern. When we ask who the already dead are, it is obvious that they are one's seniors, one's elder kinsmen, one's parents. Clearly, the good soul of the dead that possessed a medium was hopefully expected to play a parental role—feeding, curing, and educating the living. But if we see the good soul as a projection of the beneficent side of one's senior kinsmen, what about the bad soul? What in the relations between senior and junior kinsmen in Truk leads the juniors to conceive of their seniors as cannibalistic ogres?

I cannot go into all the details. Suffice it to say that Trukese society is organized into matrilineal family groups, that everyone is absolutely dependent on his family group for his welfare during his entire life, and that authority in the group is based on strict age seniority, so that for most of his life every individual is subject to someone else's power to veto most of his major decisions. No Trukese can revolt against this authority because he has no place to go if he does. Nearly all his life his senior kin are those on whom every individual depends for his own welfare and from whom he constantly receives his major frustrations.

As we might expect, psychological tests show tremendous ambivalence toward elder kinsmen among most of Truk's people. Other data also indicate that feeding and the meeting of other dependency needs in early childhood tend to be capricious. Small children are presented with gratification and denial alternating unpredictably. In many ways the people exhibit a strong oral focus of their anxieties. They also display a fairly high degree of narcissistic concern. All of these things are reflected in their beliefs and practices relating to the two souls. Thus, a dead person's good soul may, provided its narcissism is indulged, become a dependable parental figure, but one never can tell in advance. To it hopefully attaches symbolic fulfilment of all the tantalized dependency desires. At the same time, hatred for these same frustrating elders is directed toward the bad soul, the ghost that feeds itself on its children. The intensity of feeling is so

ZYGON

great that even its indirect symbolic expression is terrifying. Other evil spirits cause sickness much more frequently than do ghosts, but they are not something that people hold in such frank terror.

For Truk's people, then, the idea of the duality of the soul gives expression to a subjective problem in their own emotions, a problem generated by the pattern of life within their social order. The belief provides a means for working the problem out, draining off the excess accumulation of emotional steam so that it does not blow the society apart. It also provides a vehicle for realizing an ideal state of being in which at last one finds the all-supporting, nurturing, parental figure who will fulfil one's never properly required, infantile dependency cravings. Such is the form of the ambivalence problem in Truk and the means of living with it. The means, moreover, disclose the kind of ultimate fulfilment that has been a dominant spiritual purpose in Trukese life.

If we think that our own present emphasis on finding social solutions to our ambivalence problem is superior to the Trukese way, let us remember that our social-reform approach is a very recent one and still far from being universally appealing within our own society. Not long ago we emphasized the total repression of hostility and the cultivation of hair-shirt virtues to help us do it, including our ability to turn the other cheek. Fortunately, in our system of independent, small families, we had to wean our children from dependence on their parents and could permit them a greater show of direct hostility in adolescent rebellion—at least in boys. Girls, who ideally were submissive all their lives, were the chief targets of the turn-the-other-cheek approach. It is no accident that women have been the principal upholders of traditional Christian virtues in our society. They needed them more. The great social changes of recent times, including the emancipation of women, have been followed by a shift to new approaches emphasizing social progress. The churches echo the shift with their current stress on the need to improve society rather than our individual selves. Since the conditions that have led us to see the ambivalence problem in social rather than in personal terms will not continue to be with us forever, it is safe to predict that our way of handling it will inevitably change, too. But one thing is certain, we can never escape the problem. It arises in the life of every individual. Some way of handling it will always remain a human concern and, I suspect, will always contribute to human conceptions of the purpose of life.

RELIGION AND THE IDENTITY PROBLEM

The ambivalence problem is, of course, only one of the several that help to define spiritual purposes in human life. The solutions we seek to it, moreover, are often combined with the solutions we contrive for other problems. Our concern with social progress relates to much more than the ambivalence problem alone. So, too, do the Trukese beliefs about the soul.

Deriving from human nature, and of tremendous concern to all men, are the problems relating to our individual and collective identities. There can be no social order, no regulation of the competition among purposeful humans, except as there is some classification of kinds of persons and an allocation of rights and duties among them according to some basis for differentially valuing them. In every society, it is vital for people to know how to classify themselves and others with whom they deal, so as to order their mutual dealings in mutually predictable ways. The fact that some identities are more highly valued than others, moreover, provides a basis whereby people determine the personal worth of themselves and others. Furthermore, human nature requires that any workable system of social identities be geared in some way to the realities of ontogenetic development, the growth of the individual from conception to death. Children and adults cannot have exactly the same social identities. Human life is characterized, therefore, by a progression from one identity to another, each change being accompanied by changes in how we must conduct ourselves. Techniques by which we successfully handle our other emotional problems, such as the ambivalence one, may be incompatible with the requirements of our new identities. We must give up childish behavior—our immature solutions—as we grow older. Thus, every identity change threatens to re-expose us to our problems. How we handle our emotional problems, moreover, like the skill with which we conduct ourselves in other matters, provides some of the bases for determining what kind of person we are and for evaluating our worth. For reasons such as these, identity changes that we desire are at the same time anxiety-provoking, as any prospective bride and groom know. Every change, moreover, requires the eradication of something in one's former identity and an initiation into the mysteries of a new one with a resulting new sense of self. The successful accomplishment of such change is among the most exhilarating of human experiences. The language of religion frequently speaks of such identity change, of dying to our old selves and being born anew—so frequently indeed,

ZYGON

that whatever we mean by religion, it is clear that problems relating to our identities are in the very thick of it.

I would suggest that what we are talking about is akin to (but not limited to) the territorial instincts of animals. These are the genetically based motivations or purposes that identify an animal with a territory that is its homestead and the source of its nourishment, a territory which it defends against intruders. Identity is not simply territory in a physical sense, but a neuropsychic phenomenon in which physical territory forms but one of many potentially significant dimensions. More generally, we might say that an organism's "territory," where it actively fights intrusion, is comprised of those aspects of its physical, social, and psychological environment by which it discriminates its own identity. While the features of the environment with which he identifies himself are involved in defining man's identity, as they are in defining animal territoriality, the ego-space in man is not so specifically coded genetically as it is among birds and other animals. If land is an important aspect of my identity, I may resent trespass upon it. Also, if my professed ideas are important to me, I resent anyone's tampering with them. Whether it is my occupation, my children, my home, my favorite chair, my social prerogatives, my pet hero, or, if I am a small child, my fetish blanket, a liberty taken with something with which I identify myself (or which I identify with myself) is a liberty taken with me. The humiliation and the murderous impulses aroused by invasion of ego-space may represent the homologue in man of mammalian territoriality. From this point of view, then, the emotional problems that men suffer in dealings with their fellows derive much of their steam from our mammalian heritage as so-called territorial animals.

Because our identities are objects of our own awareness and because they must continually change in the course of our individual lives, we inevitably acquire a sense of direction, of destiny. The mysteries attaching to our destiny, the dangers to our self-esteem, the degradations to which we may be exposed along the way, make our destiny a matter of intense emotional concern to each of us. That very concern, I have suggested, brings us to consider the purpose of life. That concern is likely to remain with us even if we are able to succeed to the prestigious identities of our social order, even if we are fairly successful competitors for scarce and highly valued identities. But few of us are consistent winners. Think of the emotional control it takes for each of us "territorial" animals to be good losers!

SOME RELIGIOUS SOLUTIONS TO INEVITABLE IDENTITY LOSSES

We try by various devices not to be losers. We court access to all kinds of power sources outside ourselves—both human and extra-human, material and non-material—in order to enhance our chances of being winners. Religious exercises around the world devote a lot of attention to the problem of improving one's chances, as in our own prayers for divine guidance and in an American Indian's vision quest. But learning how to lose is the really painful experience that nearly all of us must also face.

One device for dealing with our losses is to include the winner in our own psychosocial territory, to make him a part of our own extended identities. By identifying with others, we recoup, at least vicariously, the territories they have taken from us, and salvage the features of our identities that they have destroyed. Few of us feel so invulnerable personally that we do not identify with others. And as we do so, as we extend the boundaries of our psychosocial territories to include our nation, race, or species, we become fiercely determined to defend their integrity from intrusion, be it from defeat in diplomacy or war, from contamination by foreign "isms," or from the supposedly damaging effects on the gene pool by miscegenation or nuclear radiation. Wherever we draw the bounds of our identities, there we fight our holy wars. There is justification for our feeling that elimination of such war among men requires that all men identify themselves with all other men. This is what the "Brotherhood of Man" is all about. It will not eliminate holy wars, to be sure, but it may keep them from being wars of men against men.

An obvious adjustment to being losers is to identify with individuals who are winners. They may be real or mythical—gods, heroes, Br'er Rabbit, or Hollywood stars. As we follow their exploits in newspapers, movies, and books, or in recitations and dramatic enactments of the legends about them, we vicariously realize for a while our own purposes for ourselves. Through identification with our heroes we can all be winners.

Another adjustment to losing is to declare the game in which we have lost to be of no real value anyway. Who cares about money? Cultivating the spirit is what is important! The humiliations that come from Caesar do not matter, because I have staked my territory in the pasture of God (so speak Jehovah's Witnesses today). Or in the words of the *New Yorker* cartoon, the other monastic order may be better in this or that, but ours is second to none in humility! Pious fraudulence? Yes, all of it. To make invidious comparisons at all is to

ZYGON

protest too much. But they help to heal our damaged selves. Fraudulent or not, they restore our souls. They are as essential to human well-being and survival as the food we eat and the air we breathe.

Man's capacity to disidentify, to shift his territory from this world to another, if need be, in order to keep himself inviolate and preserve or regain his inner sense of dignity and integrity, is one of the most important things shaping religious activity. The quest for an identity that is immune from outside assault—whether by the acquisition of "medicine" or entrance into a "state of grace"—is one of the great concerns in the private religious life of many people in many different societies. Collective action in such a quest is continually giving rise to the formation of new religious movements.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

These then are some brief glimpses into what I see as among the more insistent human problems in life, problems that help to define major human purposes and make it inevitable that we should be concerned with our purposes, should insist on seeing life as having purpose, and should project our concern with purpose out to the borders of the cosmos itself and, ultimately, to whatever we conceive as lying beyond.

What I have been arguing, then, is this. We ask about the purpose of life, not because there necessarily is a purpose at all—and I myself choose to believe that there is not, at least in the sense of any "grand design" or final cause—but because our nature requires that we have a sense of purpose. When we lose it, we struggle to find it, and when we give up in the struggle, we die. As human knowledge has increased through time and as the emotional climate of living has changed, it has become necessary over and over again to find new formulations of the purpose of life that are intellectually and emotionally satisfying. The growth of science is once again forcing us to look for new formulations that we can reconcile with present knowledge, without at the same time destroying everything else we value. This has become for many of us one of the great emotional problems of our time, its resolution one of our great purposes in life.

Science, of course, cannot say what is the purpose of life. What it does is to provide the knowledge with which our conception of that purpose must be intellectually compatible in order to be credible. Perhaps our knowledge has already grown to the point where such credible reconciliation is no longer possible. Perhaps we must stop looking for credible answers and be content with what we know are fictions, taking as our criterion of selection not the plausibility of

our choice but its foreseeable consequences for whatever it is we most value in life.

In any event, if concern with the purpose of life is a product of human nature, then it may be fruitful to bypass the unanswerable question and to ask what is the nature of life and what is the nature of human nature as a part of life. If the question "Where am I going?" is a product of what I am, then perhaps I can best answer it by trying to find out what it is I am. This is not an approach that is likely to appeal to many. Our concern with what we ought to become, a concern which arises from our human nature, makes us impatient with our present selves. The fate that forces us all to become something else in the course of our lives requires a frame of mind in which we reject what we think we now are. If we are honestly to investigate what we are, we must be prepared to accept what we find, something which goes against the grain of our nature. But the answer to our questions about the purpose of life, the best answer at least that I think we are likely to find, will come if we can find the patience to get to know ourselves, our own nature as men. To do this, we must restrict the problem of what we ought to be to our own individual persons, living in our own particular society, with our own particular values for ourselves. We must stop trying to find vicarious fulfilment by worrying about what mankind ought to be so that we can free ourselves to find out what mankind is. But to do this, as I have said, is emotionally very difficult. It means that we must stop trying to get the mote out of our brother's eye and do him the honor of letting him be responsible for himself. It means that we must renounce any right to say what men ought to be for as long as we remain ignorant of what men are and of what their nature will permit them to become. A proper study of man is itself a difficult religious exercise.

This approach to the question, moreover, reminds us that evolution goes on apace and that our own nature as men is gradually changing in the process. Any answers that knowledge of our present nature may permit us must lack permanence by the very nature of things. They will be answers for us—not the answers by which our evolving descendants will be able to live.