Dostoevsky and the Meaning of “the Meaning of Life”

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It appears innocent enough. In the conversation leading up to the famous metaphysical challenges in the “Rebellion” chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan responds to his brother Alyosha’s assertion that we must all love life. “Love life more than its meaning [*smysl ee*]?” Ivan asks. “Certainly,” Alyosha answers, “love it before logic, as you say. Certainly it has to be before logic, and only then will I understand the meaning [*smysl poimu*].”¹ Today we take no notice of the English phrase “meaning of life,” or its Russian equivalent (*smysl zhizni*), so widespread has its use been for so long, and we’re unlikely to think a Russian author in the 1870s was doing anything unusual when he used it, just as we’re unlikely to pause, when we read it, to wonder what it means.

But what *does* it mean here, in this dialogue? Ivan is distinguishing *life* itself from *the meaning of life*, apparently insisting that to love one is not the same as to love the other. He understands his brother to be placing a higher value on loving life itself than on loving the meaning of life, suggesting that the meaning of life—or at least a concern for it—somehow falls short of just plain life—and

1 Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* [PSS], ed. V. G. Bazanov et al. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–90), 14:210; abbreviated hereafter as Dostoevsky, PSS. All translations in this chapter are my own.

a concern for *it*. And we know that Ivan has a whole list of images that he himself appears to associate with just plain life (sticky leaves in the spring, for example), and that those images somehow correspond to the less cerebral and less rational Ivan, the Ivan who unthinkingly loves children. Is the meaning of life the thing you get once you come to *understand* life? Almost certainly not, unless Alyosha is choosing his words carelessly, for what he speaks of understanding is not life but life's *meaning*. Is each brother using the word *meaning* and, by implication, the phrase "meaning of life," in a different sense? Will *meaning* have a purely scientific-materialist definition for Ivan, so that loving life itself, rather than its (scientific) meaning, is a refusal of the scientific-materialist point of view? Alyosha appears to be steering his older brother away from such an understanding when he urges him to love life before *logic*, only outside of which, he thinks, one can find meaning.

The full phrase "meaning of life" (*smysl zhizni*) shows up a few pages later. Right before announcing that he doesn't accept God's world, Ivan offers his surprising list of concessions: "And so, I accept God and not only willingly but, what's more, I accept his wisdom too and his purpose [*tsel'*]"—completely unknown to us—I believe in order, in the meaning of life, I believe in the eternal harmony in which we will apparently merge together, I believe in the Word toward which the universe is tending and that 'was with God' and that is God, and so on and so on, etc., to infinity" (Dostoevsky, PSS, 14:214). The "meaning of life" thus shows up on a list of what Ivan, always a sort of orthodox Kantian, would consider metaphysical ideas "unknown to us."

But what does it mean? There are no further references to it in *Brothers Karamazov*, so we would look in vain for an additional context that might help us discover what Ivan has in mind (or, to be more precise, what Dostoevsky might have had in mind for Ivan to have in mind). Does "the meaning of life" in this passage mean the same thing it meant in the previous chapter? Does Ivan use the phrase casually and carelessly, as it has been used so often in everyday conversation and popular writing in more modern times? But that would suggest that, in the late 1870s, the phrase *smysl zhizni* had been around in everyday conversation and popular writing in Russia for long enough that real people similar to the fictional Ivan could use it casually and carelessly, betting that no one would press them to define their terms.

As best I can tell, it hadn't. The phrase in its Russian incarnation had emerged recently. As always in cultural matters, Russia lagged behind the West, but the equivalent phrases in other European languages were also of relatively recent vintage. The use of the phrase “meaning of life” and its equivalents in other languages was a modern phenomenon, dating back no farther than the end of the eighteenth century. The *frequent*, casual, and uncritical use of it outside Russia, by the time Dostoevsky wrote *Brothers Karamazov*, was a very modern phenomenon indeed, dating back no more than a generation or so.

So, where did Dostoevsky get it, and how does he want us to construe it?

Neither question is easy to answer in any simple or definitive way, but we can take a look at the evolution of the phrase in its non-Russian contexts, its emergence in Russian writing, and Dostoevsky's own use of it before *Brothers Karamazov*.

The Non-Russian Contexts

There's a whole academic cottage industry that might be called “meaning of life studies.” Many of the books and articles produced in this industry are *about* “the meaning of life.” With one or two exceptions, these are of no help to us whatever, as most of the authors either never bother to define *meaning* as they're using it or define it in such a way as to leave us no farther along than we were without the definition. A group of German scholars has taken on the task of studying the *history* of the phrase *der Sinn des Lebens* (“the meaning of life”) and its equivalents in various European languages. The editors of an anthology titled *Der Sinn des Lebens* have written an introduction that includes a short historical subsection titled “‘Sinn des Lebens’—seit wann?” (“‘The meaning of life’—since when?”), much of it drawn from the work of a historian of “the meaning of life,” Volker Gerhardt of Humboldt University.² The editors cite a lengthy work by the late German philosopher Hans Blumenberg titled *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (1981) (*The Readability of the World*), in which the author historically traces the idea of “reading”—and, by obvious extension, discovering meanings in—the world.

All the evidence suggests that the story of “the meaning of life” begins in German-speaking lands in the late eighteenth century. In *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*,

2 Christoph Fehige, Georg Meggle, and Ulla Wessels, eds., *Der Sinn des Lebens* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000), 19–22.

Blumenberg (whose topic was *not* exclusively “the meaning of life”) showed that the Romantic era gave rise to a tendency to represent nature and the universe itself as possessed of language, therefore as carrying meaning in the same way that words in a book carry meaning. Among those in the Romantic era who first formulated the conflation of world, book, holy book, and history was Novalis. In one of his mysterious philosophical fragments, dating from 1798, he writes, “Only an artist can guess the meaning of life.”³ A couple of years later, in another fragment, he writes, “The meaning of the world has gone missing. We’re left with nothing but the letters [of the alphabet].”⁴ The remark occurs in a broader context in which *God, world, poet, symbol, words, hieroglyphs, and letters* appear to have mingled so as to become almost indistinguishable.

Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, and Friedrich Schleiermacher circulated a collection of ideas at the turn of the nineteenth century that constituted an important early contribution to the rise of the phrase *Sinn des Lebens*. Schlegel regarded religion as a synthesis of philosophy and poetry and contemplated a new Bible that would be an “absolute Book,” an “ever-becoming Book” in which “the gospel of mankind and culture [*Bildung*] is revealed.”⁵ In the *Transcendentalphilosophie* (1800–1801), Schlegel calls the world an “allegory,” claiming that, for this reason, “every being has only so much reality as it has sense [*Sinn*], meaning [*Bedeutung*], spirit.”⁶

Schleiermacher, of course, is the author of *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (*On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultivated Despisers*, 1799), which to the historian of ideas conveniently serves (with due allowance for simplification) as the work that inaugurated the modern comparative study of religion. That’s principally because, despite the intention suggested in the work’s title (namely, to *defend* religion), Schleiermacher, by distinguishing between existing religions (plural) and religion (singular) as an overarching concept, and then by characterizing religion (singular) universally as the expression of an essentially human impulse, uncoupled the study of religion from the

3 Novalis, *Schriften*, ed. Richard Samuel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960), 2:562; cited in Fehige et al., *Der Sinn des Lebens*, 22.

4 *Ibid.*, 2:594; cited in Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 256.

5 *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler (Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1958–2006), 2:265; cited in Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, 269.

6 *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, 12:40; cited in Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, 273.

particular religious faith of the investigator. The insight that led to Schleiermacher's distinction paved the way for the modern science of hermeneutics and the secular, scholarly study of Scripture in the nineteenth century. The work of David Friedrich Strauss and Ernest Renan (both of whom Dostoevsky despised), each the author of an antimetaphysical *Life of Jesus*, is unthinkable without that distinction.

Schleiermacher was a Romantic thinker, determined, like Novalis and Schlegel, to tear down boundaries. In the collection of writings gathered together under the title *Hermeneutics* (composed between 1805 and 1833), he speaks of merging two seemingly incompatible perspectives: the philological perspective in interpretation, from which we seek to identify individual sections of Scripture with individual authors, and the "dogmatic" perspective, from which we regard Scripture as a single text by a single author, namely, the Holy Spirit. The natural consequence of merging the two is that meaning, which from the first perspective inheres in words, now possibly comes to inhere in the world. Like his fellow Romantics at the turn of the century, Schleiermacher had been thinking about *reading* the world, with the consequence that meaning (*Sinn*) emerges in that world. "The artist," he wrote in 1800, "chases after everything that can become sign and symbol of mankind; he rummages through the treasure of languages, he forms the chaos of tones into the world; he seeks secret meaning [*Sinn*] and harmony in the beautiful color play of nature."⁷ But note well, the impulse here is artistic creation, not religious faith conventionally construed.

By the time we get to Ludwig Feuerbach in the early 1840s, an author with whose ideas Dostoevsky was all too familiar, *meaning* will have lost any connection with texts, real or metaphorical, but it will have become indispensable to a view that seeks in far more radical terms than we find in Schleiermacher to reduce religious faith to the human. Here quite possibly is a source, if not *the* source, of the concept of "the meaning of life" in Russia—or at least in Dostoevsky. Feuerbach's language, replete with grossly simplified Hegelian terms but also with references to existence, being, and non-being, points ahead to the language of twentieth-century existentialism. Early in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), Feuerbach is attempting to ground the claim that religion is reducible to human

7 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Hans-Joachim Birkner et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980–), 1.3:20.

reason, which he holds to be roughly the same thing as self-consciousness—self-consciousness, of course, being the ultimate human attribute. Here's where he finds himself speaking of meaning (*Sinn*). It's *Unsinn* ("nonsense/nonmeaning"), he suggests, to say that the world does not exist, but in this *Unsinn* you find the true *meaning* (*Sinn*) of the world. Why? "Nothingness, non-being," he writes, "is aimless [*zwecklos*], meaningless [*sinnlos*], understandingless [*verstandlos*]. Only being has an aim [*Zweck*], has a cause [*Grund*] and a meaning [*Sinn*]." Next, *meaning* emerges organically (if not persuasively) from Feuerbach's Hegelian-materialist worldview. Reason, he says, is the self-consciousness of being, and therefore it *is* self-conscious being: "The aim [*Zweck*], the meaning [*Sinn*] of being first reveals itself in Reason." That's because "Reason is being that is objective to itself as an end in itself [*Selbstzweck*]." The clunky Hegelianism of the last sentence aside, what Feuerbach is claiming here at least fits an overarching theme of his book. It all comes down to self-consciousness, seen from a purely materialist perspective. Self-consciousness implies something that understands itself. In a materialist world, that something cannot be spirit; it must be simply *being*. Being (self-consciousness) therefore understands being (the world). To understand is to discover *meaning*, and thus self-consciousness discovers the *meaning of being*, which is the same as the meaning of the world—or of life.⁸

Of course, it would be absurd to claim that Dostoevsky or any other nineteenth-century Russian writer carefully studied *The Essence of Christianity* and culled from it Feuerbach's concept of *the meaning of life/world/being* and then began to use the equivalent Russian phrases with all the nuances I've just described. In fact, it's entirely possible that Feuerbach, never a particularly rigorous thinker, was relatively uncritical in his use of phrases that included the word *Sinn*, suggesting that by the early 1840s these phrases had established themselves in German so solidly that they could be used uncritically. But even if that is so, the context matters. The phrases show up in a discussion of religion at a moment when conventional forms of religious belief (however defined) are under assault and European intellectuals are fishing around for a vocabulary that they can press into service in order to characterize from *outside* religion what's happening *inside* religion (What are all those benighted people searching for?). That's when the word *meaning* surfaces.

8 Ludwig Feuerbach, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Wilhelm Bolin and Friedrich Jodl (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann Verlag, 1960), 6:52–53.

Meaning Comes to Russia

In a dictionary article on "Sinn des Lebens," Volker Gerhardt speaks of a shift in the meaning of the German word *Sinn*, which in an earlier era, very much like *sens* in French and the corresponding words in Italian and Spanish, meant "sense" (as in our five senses) or "direction" (*Richtung*; in fact, its most primitive meaning) and only more recently came to mean *meaning* (*Bedeutung*).⁹ Shifts in the meaning of a word don't necessarily result in the complete replacement of an older meaning with a newer one, and in the case of *Sinn*, Gerhardt shows, we end up with a nexus of possible meanings: aim (*Ziel*), purpose (*Zweck*), target (*Skopus*), telos (*Telos*), and value (*Wert*). And in German writers, these other words often appear in place of *Sinn* before the words *des Lebens* ("of life") in passages that make it difficult for the reader to determine whether or not the resulting phrases all mean the same thing. In *The Essence of Christianity* alone, Feuerbach uses variously *Zweck des Lebens* ("purpose of life"), *Wert des Lebens* ("value of life"), *Bedeutung des Lebens* ("meaning or significance of life"), not to mention *Sinn der Geschichte* ("meaning of history"), *Sinn des Seins* ("meaning of being"), and *Sinn unseres Wesens* ("meaning of our essence"). It hardly needs to be stated that the English word *meaning* in modern metaphysical contexts, from the popular to the academic, is often indistinguishable from—and often substitutes for—the words *value* and *purpose*.

And this brings us to Tolstoy. The word that will overwhelmingly be used in the Russian phrase corresponding to the German *Sinn des Lebens* (and the English "meaning of life") is, of course, *smysl*. This Russian word has a provenance different from the German *Sinn*. Because of the *mysl* root, it originally has to do with thinking, understanding, reasoning, as in the phrase *zdravyi smysl* ("common sense"—English curiously took its phrase from French). It then comes to denote "meaning"—what words possess. One could perhaps argue that the German word's original association with sense experience and the Russian word's original association with mental life suggest a common association with subjectivity, as in the English *meaning* when it means "intention." But there is less in the Russian word to suggest "direction," "aim," "purpose," "target" than in the German *Sinn*.

9 Volker Gerhardt, "Sinn des Lebens," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Basel: Schwabe & Co., 1971–2007), 9:815.

And yet these meanings are what the word appears to take on in Tolstoy, once he begins to use the phrase *smysl zhizni*. A diary entry from April 1847, among the earliest writings we have by Dostoevsky's great rival, is filled with instances of the phrase *tsel' zhizni* ("the goal/purpose of life"). The majority of these occur in places where the young university dropout is wondering in the broadest terms about human life. "The purpose of man's life [*tsel' zhizni cheloveka*] is the greatest possible promotion of the most thorough development of all that exists," he writes, for example.¹⁰

A reference to the meaning of life makes an appearance in a famous letter that a thirty-year-old Tolstoy wrote to his cousin Aleksandra Alekseevna Tolstaya in 1859. He is offering up a *profession de foi*, listing (not for the last time) the stages in his own spiritual-religious development. He had spent ten years living peacefully with logic, in the absence of religion. "Then came a time," he writes, "when everything became open, there were no more mysteries in life, but life itself began to lose its meaning [*smysl*]."¹¹ Nothing that follows clarifies his use of the word *smysl*.

The phrase *smysl zhizni* then appears in *War and Peace* (1869). In fact, there's a fascinating passage that shows the transition from *smysl* in connection with words and language to *smysl* in connection with life. Pierre has been taken prisoner and has watched the French execute five of his compatriots. He meets an older peasant man named Platon, who is a veritable fount of folksy and therefore truthful sayings. When Pierre asks Platon to repeat something he has just said, Platon can't remember the words, nor, when asked, can he remember the words of his favorite song. He has no comprehension of the words when they're detached from their context. Words in their context (a song) then become an analogy for individual life in *its* context (some unnamed larger whole):

[The words] *Rodimaya* ["my dear"], *berezan'ka* ["birch tree"], and *toshnen'ko* ["my heart aches"] were all in there, but [when these sentiments were] put into words, no meaning [*smysl*] came out. [Platon] did not understand, nor could he understand, the meanings [*znacheniya*] of the words taken separately from speech. Each word of his and each action was the manifestation of

10 Leo Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, ed. Vladimir Chertkov (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1928–58), 46:30–31. Hereafter Tolstoy, PSS.

11 L. N. Tolstoy and A. A. Tolstaya, *Perepiska (1857–1903)*, ed. N. I. Azarova et al. (Moscow: Nauka, 2011), 158. Thanks to Irina Paperno for pointing out this passage to me.

a reality unknown to him, which was his life. But his life, as he looked at it, had no meaning [*smysla*] as a separate life. It had meaning [*smysl*] only as a part of a whole, which he constantly felt. His words and actions poured out of him as evenly, necessarily, and immediately as a scent detaches itself from a flower. He could understand neither the value nor the significance [*znachenie*] of a separately considered action or word. (Tolstoy, PSS, 12:50–51)

Naturally, the language Tolstoy's narrator uses to convey the outlook of the peasant is language that only someone from Tolstoy's or Pierre's social and educational class could understand, and yet the feeling that the narrator attributes to the humble-yet-admirable peasant requires the use of the word *meaning* as applied to life.

Tolstoy began to use *smysl zhizni* in earnest in *Anna Karenina* and then never quit for the rest of his life. But here is where the meaning of *smysl* begins to become unstable. In many instances, it's difficult to know whether the word *smysl* should be understood as synonymous with *tsel'* ("aim," "goal") or whether it denotes or connotes "meaning," as in the meaning of a word. In the two famous passages from *Anna Karenina* that feature the word *smysl* in connection with life, it's not easy to tell. As in *War and Peace*, there's a peasant named Platon who inspires the use of the word. Konstantin Levin is told by another peasant that Platon "lives for the soul. He remembers God" (Tolstoy, PSS, 19:376). These two sentences inspire the ambiguous revelation that leads to the conclusion of the novel. "And I was amazed," Levin thinks to himself, "that, despite the greatest exertion of thought along this path, the meaning of life, the meaning of my motives and aspirations, did not reveal itself to me. But the meaning of my motives [now] is so clear to me that I live constantly according to it, and I was amazed and overjoyed when the peasant expressed it: to live for God, for the soul" (Tolstoy, PSS, 19:378). And, of course, the final sentence of the novel is about the meaning of life, but understood in a rather peculiar way: "But my life now, my entire life, independently of what might happen to me, every minute of it not only is not meaningless, as it used to be, but has the indubitable meaning of good, with which I have the power to invest it" (Tolstoy, PSS, 19:399). What does "meaning of good" [*smysl dobra*] mean? The meaning that the word "good" carries? A *purpose* that is "the good"?

The work by Tolstoy that likely carries the highest concentration of instances of the phrase "meaning of life" (or *meaning* in this meaning) is

Confession, written from 1879 to 1882 and published illegally, in Geneva, in 1884 (it was initially banned by Russian censors). It's every bit as difficult to determine the meaning of *meaning* in this work as it was in the passages from *Anna Karenina*. In an early chapter, the phrase arises in connection with the question, posed by a dying brother, "Why [*zachem*, "for what"] did he live ... and why was he dying?" (Tolstoy, PSS, 23:8). Tolstoy actually asks the question, "In what does the meaning of my life consist?" Science, he says, answers the question incorrectly by telling him *what he is* (in the world of physics)—"a temporal, accidental cohesion of particles" (Tolstoy, PSS, 23:21). Subsequent, more accurate answers to the question don't really say what the meaning is; instead they tell us where it is to be found, what things *give* meaning, or what things meaning is associated with. We can find meaning among common people, he discovered. Faith is knowledge of the meaning of life. In order to understand the meaning of life, one must live not parasitically but genuinely.

Then in 1902, Vladimir Chertkov, Tolstoy's editor and most famous hanger-on, published a little book (in Russian) "by" the master, under the title *On the Meaning of Life: Thoughts of Leo Tolstoy*, consisting of diary entries, notebook scribbles, and other unpublished material.¹² Within two years, the book appeared in English, French, and German translation. Many of its gems of wisdom appear without context, but at least here we find numerous instances of sentences beginning "The meaning of life is . . ." Not that these sentences necessarily clarify just what the word *meaning* means to Tolstoy, but they do show that, unlike so many other writers who never *said* what the meaning of life was, Tolstoy did not hesitate to do so. In most instances, the meaning of life is either a purpose (so that one could substitute the word *tseľ* for the word *smysl* without seriously altering the meaning) or some very prized feature of life. Either way, we can read many of the sentences as urging us to *do* something that Tolstoy believes good people should do, rather than helping us to *understand* something about life (discover a meaning in it as we do in a word).

It's also safe to say that, in the majority of instances, the question of "the meaning of life" is posed in a context where conventional religious faith is under challenge. And this seems to be the case for occurrences of the phrase over Tolstoy's career. Through the period of *Confession*, it almost never occurs

12 Leo Tolstoy, *O smysle zhizni: Mysli L. N. Tolstogo* (Berlin: G. Shteinitz, 1901).

except in connection with the absence of faith, as if the unbeliever, from outside, had no better phrase for what a believer, from inside, would possess. When Tolstoy begins to write pithy statements about what the meaning of life is, it's largely in response to the possibility of *not* knowing what it is.

Dostoevsky Discovers It—or Its Absence

The notion of the meaning of life—and the phrase *smysl zhizni*—surfaced in Dostoevsky's writing a couple of years before he composed what we have *Brothers Karamazov*. It happened in the *Diary of a Writer*, always in connection with three interrelated themes: what Dostoevsky clearly believed to be a veritable epidemic of suicide in Russia, the loss of religious faith that was responsible for that epidemic, and the scientific-materialist worldview that was responsible for the loss of religious faith.¹³ The story begins in June 1876, when the author received a letter from a total stranger, who signed himself “N. N.” The correspondent details the process by which he lost all religious faith and came to embrace a purely scientific, materialist view of the world. He gives the list of writers who helped inspire the process: Ernest Renan, author of *La Vie de Jésus* (1863); positivist historian Henry Thomas Buckle, who taught him “the meaning of history” (*smysl istorii*); John Stuart Mill; Darwin, thanks to whom he became “a different man”; and Feuerbach. But, as “N. N.” writes, the starting point lay in his childhood: “An abominable upbringing and school discipline bore their fruit: flippancy, absence of principles, tasks, incomprehension both of myself and generally of the meaning of life!” (Dostoevsky, *PSS*, 24:472). At the end of the intellectual process, “N. N.” wrote, stood *atheism*, which he proclaimed “*the Great Mystery*”: “But the mystery remains a mystery, and it is in just this that the entire meaning of our existence consists, the entire cycle of conditions in which the world stands. You see, it is atheism.”¹⁴ At the end of the *entire* process, presumably (we don't know for certain), was the writer's own death, for this letter to Dostoevsky was a suicide note.

13 Irina Paperno has told the story of this episode in Dostoevsky's career in her excellent study of suicide in late nineteenth-century Russia; see Paperno, *Suicide as Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 162–84.

14 Partly quoted in Dostoevsky, *PSS*, 24:472; quoted at greater length, in the original Russian, in Paperno, *Suicide as Cultural Institution*, 294–95.

From October through December of the same year, Dostoevsky returned obsessively in his journal to the theme of suicide, as if it were a true epidemic in Russia. In October, in an article titled "Sentence" (*Prigovor*), he printed what appeared to be a letter to himself from someone identified as "N. N.," just like the author of the extended suicide note, except that this "N. N." and his letter were entirely fictional. In December, in an article titled "Empty Assertions" (*Golosovnye utverzheniia*), he commented on the article "Sentence" (as if in response to "N. N.") and reflected generally on suicide in his era: "Those," he wrote, "who, having taken away from man his faith in his own immortality, want to replace this faith, in the sense of the highest purpose of life [*vysshei tseli zhizni*], 'love for mankind,' those, I say, are the ones who raise their hand against themselves; for, instead of love for mankind they merely plant in the heart of one who has lost his faith the seed of hatred for mankind. . . . And there emerges precisely the opposite, for only with faith in his own immortality can man grasp his entire reasonable purpose on earth. Without conviction in his own immortality, man's ties to the earth are severed, become thinner and rotten, and the loss of the highest meaning of life [*vysshego smysla zhizni*] . . . without doubt brings in its wake suicide." (Dostoevsky, PSS, 24:49)

The connection to one of the most quoted sentiments in *Brothers Karamazov* should be obvious, namely, that (according to Ivan) without belief in immortality the moral law disappears and "all is permitted."

Dostoevsky returned repeatedly that December to "the highest meaning of life" (or equivalent phrases) and its connection with scientific materialism and suicide. "The highest meaning of life" is here firmly equated with belief in the immortality of the soul, and the ills of the younger generation—ills that lead even to suicide—are all owing either to a loss of "the highest meaning of life" or to a perversion of it. In an article about today's youth, he laments the number of people who pray from time to time and even go to church but give no thought to—let alone believe in—the immortality of their souls. "And meanwhile," he writes, "it is only from this faith, as I was saying above, that the highest meaning and significance of life [*vysshii smysl i znachenie zhizni*] emerges, that the desire and urge to live emerges. Oh, I repeat, there are many who are avid to live, lacking all ideas and the entire highest meaning of life, to live simply the life of an animal." Many of these even yearn for "the highest purposes and significance of life [*vysshim tseliam i zhacheniiu zhizni*]," he goes on to write, and some will

shoot themselves precisely from having yearned for and not found "the highest meaning of life" (Dostoevsky, *PSS*, 24:50).

He returns to the refrain several times in the same December number of *Diary of a Writer*. "Indifferentism" is the name he gives to the malady afflicting today's youth, or, more specifically "indifferentism to the highest purposes of life." The malady has created for the younger generation a crushing burden, namely, to *find* the highest meaning of life. "It is at least clear to the point of complete obviousness," he writes, "that our young generation are condemned to search out for themselves ideals and the highest meaning of life. But this isolation of them, this leaving of them to their own devices is terrible. This is a question that is much, much too significant at the present moment, at the present instant of our life. Our youth is situated in such a way that absolutely nowhere can it find any indication of the highest meaning of life" (Dostoevsky, *PSS*, 24:51).

What to say about a seventeen-year-old girl who committed suicide for no apparent reason? Dostoevsky had written about her in the October issue, and now in December, he responds to a critic: "I expressed the supposition that she died from melancholy [*ot toski*] (much too early melancholy) and from the purposelessness of life—but as a consequence of an upbringing, in her parents' home, perverted by a theory, an upbringing with an erroneous concept of the highest meaning and purposes of life, with the intentional extermination in her soul of its [the soul's] immortality" (Dostoevsky, *PSS*, 24:54). Having a *correct* concept of the highest meaning and purposes of life appears to be practically equivalent to believing in the immortality of the soul.

One additional episode in Dostoevsky's life brought to the fore the question of "the meaning of life." It was the author's correspondence with Arkadii Kovner, the impoverished Russian Jew who in 1875 embezzled a large sum of money from the bank where he was employed, allegedly in order both to strike a political blow against big business and to help provide for his family. It's a priceless story for many reasons having nothing to do with "the meaning of life"—Kovner, as "the Jewish Pisarev" and conscious imitator of Raskolnikov, deserves at least a minor place in nineteenth-century Russian and Russian-Jewish cultural history. After his arrest, Kovner wrote two letters to Dostoevsky from prison, the second one in response to "Empty Assertions." He truly takes a page from the playbook of his addressee in this second letter, for he is a master

at adopting and pursuing opposing sides of an argument. He quotes back at Dostoevsky this line from “Empty Assertions”: “But there is only one highest idea on earth, namely the idea of the immortality of man’s soul, for all the other ‘highest’ ideas of life by which man might be alive flow only from this one.” A Jew and a self-proclaimed atheist, Kovner decides to attack this assertion on logical grounds, correcting it to something that he himself, of course, couldn’t possibly believe (at least, if his statements about his own beliefs were sincere). “It seems to me,” he writes, “that all the ‘highest’ ideas of life must flow not from the idea of the immortality of the soul but from the idea of the existence of God, that is, of a being who consciously creates the universe, *consciously* directs and *consciously* takes an interest in *all* the actions of all living things, or at least of people” (Dostoevsky, PSS, 29[2]:280). And what could be more Dostoevskian than the following sequence of thoughts?

Does a God exist who *consciously* directs the universe and who *takes an interest in* . . . people’s actions? As for me, till now I’ve been convinced of the opposite, especially as regards the last circumstance. I fully acknowledge that there exists some “force” (call it God, if you like) that created the universe, that *eternally* creates and that can *never* be accessible to the human mind. But I cannot countenance the thought that this “force” takes an interest in the life and actions of its creatures and *consciously* directs them, whoever and whatever these creatures might be. (Dostoevsky, PSS, 29(2):280)

Kovner then, gleefully goading Dostoevsky, lists all the things that, thanks to science and a materialist worldview, he *knows* to be true, including “Darwin’s hypothesis about the origin of species.” A few paragraphs later he comes to this: “You observe with complete justice that without the idea of immortality (or, in my opinion, God) there is no meaning or logic in life . . . and yet in the very existence of the soul, immortality, a God who punishes and rewards (in whatever philosophical interpretation of this you like), there is even less meaning and logic” (Dostoevsky, PSS, 29(2):280–81; ellipsis in the original).

As Irina Paperno correctly observes, these thoughts will find their way, with relatively little modification, into *Brothers Karamazov* in book 5, “Pro and Contra” (a phrase, incidentally, that Kovner uses in this second letter).¹⁵ And this brings us back to the beginning. If the articles in *Diary of a Writer* offer any

15 Paperno, *Suicide as Cultural Institution*, 202.

clue to what Ivan has in mind when he refers, twice, to the meaning of life in his conversation with Alyosha, then what can we say about the concept? In *Diary of a Writer*, the "highest meaning of life" (or any closely related phrase) appears to be something you seek, find, lose, or misconstrue. We can see, too, that its loss (1) easily comes about through the acceptance of a scientific, materialist worldview and (2) can thereby lead to suicide. Its possession, on the other hand, allows, entails, or is accompanied by belief in the immortality of the soul. But this still leaves us without anything even close to a definition. The word *meaning* appears in connection with "purposes," but this fact tells us very little. In modern English parlance, "meaning of life," "purpose of life," and "meaning and purpose of life" are often indistinguishable. When Dostoevsky writes "concept of the highest meaning and purposes of life," we don't know if he regards "meaning" and "purposes" as synonyms or as distinguishable terms.

What we can say for certain, however, is that in the *Diary of a Writer* articles, "the highest meaning of life" is never presented as something that anyone actually has or has found. It's there as the thing whose absence, along with the absence of belief in immortality, helps explain suicide. Once again, the phrase enters the scene when conventional faith is the object of doubt. So what does "the meaning of life" mean in the conversation between Ivan and Alyosha? It appears likely that Alyosha gets it right: it's what you find after you've abandoned logic—and, presumably, the scientific, materialist worldview. Why not just say "immortality" or "God"? Because we've adopted the perspective of one who has recently denied the existence of both. From the perspective of denial, "the meaning of life" is a kind of secular placeholder for what the denier denies. And then suddenly the phrase shows up in the list of what Ivan now, for the sake of his circuitous argument, claims to believe, as it keeps company with a set of conventional metaphysical ideas: God, God's wisdom and purpose, eternal harmony, and the Word of God. Any other of these terms could easily have appeared on such a list centuries earlier. But "the meaning of life" is clearly a newcomer. Saying you believe in it is almost like announcing dramatically not "I now believe in God," but "I now believe in a transcendent, supernatural entity." It's the outsider's point of view.

Even if Dostoevsky never offered a satisfactory definition of "meaning," as in "the meaning of life," he appears to have left a legacy outside Russia in connection with the concept and phrase. I'll give just one example. Albert Camus, in *The Myth of*

Sisyphus (1942), leads off with the idea, appearing to have borrowed his thoughts directly from his favorite Russian author. "There is only one truly serious philosophical problem," Camus writes in the opening sentence. "It's suicide. To judge that life is or is not worth living is to answer the fundamental question of philosophy." How to determine the truth of this claim? By people's actions, Camus says. No one has ever *died* for any other philosophical argument, including Galileo (who formally renounced his heliocentric hypothesis to escape being burned at the stake). "On the other hand," Camus continues, "I see that many people die because they consider that life is not worth living. I see others who have paradoxically gotten themselves killed for ideas or illusions that give them a reason to live. . . . I judge, therefore, that the meaning of life is the most pressing of questions."¹⁶ Then, in a chapter on Kirillov, Camus begins by telling us that all of Dostoevsky's heroes "interrogate themselves on the meaning of life." Suicide in Dostoevsky is an "absurd theme," and Dostoevsky is an "existential novelist."¹⁷

The idea comes up again nine years later in *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*, in the published English translation). Here the philosophical problem is murder justified by logic. In the introduction, Camus defines the absurd in terms of murder but with recourse to the same terminology he had used in *Myth of Sisyphus*: "The sentiment of the absurd, when one presumes from the outset to infer a rule of action from it, renders murder at the least indifferent and, consequently, possible. If one believes in nothing, if nothing has meaning [*sens*] and if we can affirm no value, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance."¹⁸ As in the earlier work, Dostoevsky furnishes Camus with an illustrative example, in a chapter titled "Le Refus du salut" ("The Rejection of Salvation"). Because the topic is murder, this time Camus chooses Ivan Karamazov (instead of Kirillov) and the consequence of what Camus understands to be Ivan's rejection of immortality: "If he rejects immortality, then what is left for him? Life in its elementary form. The meaning of life having been suppressed, there still remains life. 'I live,' says Ivan, 'in spite of logic'" (*The Rebel*, 77).

Here is not the place to enter into a discussion of these books in their own right. The question is simply whether Camus and Dostoevsky are talking about

16 Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe: Essai sur l'absurde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), 15–16.

17 Ibid., 140, 145, 148.

18 Albert Camus, *L'Homme révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 15.

the same thing when they use the expression "meaning of life" (or a variant of it). This is difficult to say, given that neither author, to my knowledge, ever gave a definition of the expression (*smysl zhizni*; *sens de la vie*). But the contexts lead me to suspect that Camus was appropriating for his own use words that, seen in their originally setting, do not mean quite the same thing as the corresponding words in Russian. For Camus, *sens* is paired with "value" (*la valeur*) and the question whether life "is worth" (*vaut la peine*) living. If *le sens de la vie* is contrasted with suicide and murder, it's presumably because, when life has *sens*, we elect to continue to live. Like the German *Sinn*, the French *sens* includes a directional concept, thus suggesting a goal or destination.

Dostoevsky's *smysl zhizni*, by contrast, appears to denote a sort of hidden essence within life (like the meaning residing within a word), something that *inquiring* minds can discover so that they might become *believing* minds. If it's connected with suicide (and, for that matter, murder), it's certainly because someone lacking it sees no reason to live (or, in the case of murder, to let a victim live). So, one could say (though Dostoevsky doesn't use this language) that, as in Camus, for such a person life is not *worth* living. But, lacking the directional suggestion of the word *sens*, the Russian word *smysl* suggests something different. In the end, I think the difference boils down to an extra layer or two of irony in Dostoevsky. Speaking (in his own voice in the *Diary of a Writer* articles, in the voice of a character in his fiction) as a believer (which he probably was not all the time), he holds out the idea of a fixed metaphysical essence of which non-doubters are presumably in possession. For someone who started out from the position of belief and never approached belief from the outside, "the meaning of life" would have no, well, meaning. But, adopting the point of view of a doubter, Dostoevsky confers upon the essence what had already, by the 1870s, come to serve the secular mind as a general designation of such an essence: the phrase "the meaning of life."

The history of "the meaning of life," and of its equivalent phrases in various languages, is to a considerable extent the history of the appropriation of the phrase, via translation, for philosophical, religious, and ideological purposes more or less alien to those in the source (whatever the source might be). Both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, unwittingly and sometimes indirectly, gave nonetheless richly to a number of later intellectual traditions outside Russia, precisely through this phrase and its variants. Perhaps it is not surprising that subsequent

writers were just as remiss as the great Russian authors when it came to defining the phrase, let alone explaining why “meaning” is the right word for conveying whatever those writers were seeking to convey. How odd that a phrase whose meaning is almost never given and is almost always obscure should contain precisely the word for what we can’t find.