CHAPTER 19

The Constitution of Purpose

Does the universe care that you exist? The chapter answers no. Does that settle whether your life has meaning? Also no. The step from cosmic indifference to a meaningless life is, the chapter says, “one of the most persistent non sequiturs in the history of philosophy”. What matters is that you care.

A map of a city is a representation. A desire to visit the city is a purpose. The difference is a felt pull toward the place. The chapter calls the target of a purpose its object, and the pull its sense. Both parts are needed. A target with no pull is a representation. A pull with no target is a mood, the restlessness of someone who cannot say what she should be doing.

Chapter 19 argues that purpose is this pairing, and nothing more. It then uses the pairing to split a familiar deadlock about the meaning of life in two.

Two parts to every purpose

The same two-part shape turns up elsewhere in the book. A sunset is the object of an aesthetic experience, and your response to it is the sense. The chapter says such parallels illustrate the pattern without proving it. They come from a division it inherits from Chapter 13: every feature of a mental state is a content or the orientation of one. The object is the content and the sense is the orientation. There is no third part for a purpose to have, because there is no third kind of mental feature.

The derivation runs through four earlier claims. All content requires distinction, from Chapter 2. Consciousness depends on detected difference, from Chapter 13. Emotion, which the book calls the evaluative modality, makes evaluative differences by responding to ordinary input, from Chapter 14. And the field of differences it works on arrives involuntarily, from Chapter 18. Put these together and things matter to any conscious system with a working modality among real differences.

Where one condition fails, purpose is absent, as it is in any system whose modality has stopped.

What sits at the top of your hierarchy

Purpose is anchored in what Chapter 15 called the hierarchy of value: your objects ranked by how strongly, and in which direction, you respond to them. A passing desire fades with the situation that caused it. A purpose holds a stable place in the ranking, held there by associations that survive changing circumstances.

Whatever sits at the top becomes the dominant purpose, the apex of the ranking. Paul Kalanithi was a neurosurgeon in his mid-thirties when lung cancer spread through him. His memoir records two orientations. One was

directed at his own suffering, toward survival and then the time that was left. The other faced outward, toward a daughter he knew he would not raise.

The memoir is cited for the shape of the mechanism and not as evidence of it. One life cannot supply the repeated, insulated choices that Chapter 15 demands before a forced choice counts as disclosing an order.

The ranking behind all this is involuntary. Kalanithi did not choose the force of his survival drive. So purpose is real and his, and still not self-authored in the deepest sense. Chapter 18 called that bounded authorship.

Two kinds of pull

Chapter 14 found three forms of goodness. Two are forms of emotional response, and the third, conformity to a standard, is a checking operation that needs no feeling. Purpose shows the same three, with one asymmetry. Aesthetic purpose responds to what you perceive or picture. A painter works toward a beautiful image. Empathic purpose responds to feelings, whether another person’s or your own. A parent walks to the nursery at three in the morning and warms a bottle. The pull there is the child’s distress, since the task holds little beauty. The self-directed version covers the wish to escape suffering.

Purpose aimed at a standard is the asymmetry, because it turns out to be derivative. A student works toward passing an examination, and something purposive is indeed there. The purposive part is the feeling: she dreads failure and welcomes success, and both are responses to her own coming states. Strip the feeling away and the checking carries on, but the purpose vanishes. This is Chapter 16’s argument in another key: a standard engages the emotions or moves nothing.

When purpose goes missing

The absence of purpose is not one condition. The chapter gives three cases, and only the first lacks purpose.

In the first the modality falls silent. This is true numbness, with no positive or negative feeling. The person does not announce that nothing matters. She simply does not engage. The chapter calls this the structural zero of purpose.

In the second the modality still runs and produces only pain and despair. Purpose is present here, and unwanted. A person overwhelmed by grief is oriented toward the end of her pain. She has meaning in the formal sense, and it is not the meaning she would choose. Severe depression, the chapter says, frequently involves negative response dominating, and not falling away. The sufferer’s words describe the first case while her condition is the second. Silence needs the modality restored, and negative engagement needs its direction rebalanced.

The third case is the act of ending one's own life to escape unbearable suffering. That act is purposive, oriented toward the end of the pain. Its field is the second case narrowed, until only the suffering and its ending remain. That narrowing can change, often through another person. Calling the act purposive settles nothing about whether the orientation should be honoured.

Lived nihilism, on this account, is dimmed feeling. A person who loses her sight has not discovered that colour does not exist. The report that nothing matters is accurate about how things feel inside and wrong as a claim about the world. The philosopher who argues that nothing matters independently of anyone's attitudes must not be diagnosed this way. The blindness comparison would beg the question against him, so he is met on the merits in Chapter 14.

The objections the chapter answers

The first objection is that the result is trivial, since creatures with emotions obviously care about things. The chapter grants that the conclusion is obvious as psychology. It answers that the objection confuses a conclusion with its derivation, and names what the derivation buys: Chapter 20's argument that endless time may wear purpose out, a test for criticising a purpose, and a mechanism for goals that achievement uses up. Writers before it stated each of those results, and the chapter claims the mechanism only.

The second objection is mortality. If purpose needs a working modality, and the modality stops at death, then every purpose is temporary. William Lane Craig's case that death makes life absurd would then go unanswered. The reply is that permanence was never part of the requirement. A sunset is beautiful while it is seen, and its ending takes nothing back. Duration belongs to the object, and the sense imposes no such condition. The reply only separates duration from significance, and leaves the argument against Craig's premise to Chapter 20.

The third objection, from John Cottingham, is that purpose without God may be possible and still poorer. Here the chapter is partly sympathetic. If religious practice sharpens feeling and turns attention toward differences a person might overlook, it may indeed provide resources for purpose. The work is done by that engagement, and intense secular practices do the same.

What the chapter claims

All three results are graded *constructed*, the third rung of the book's ladder and two below its top mark. The grade means each is the best positive account on offer, coherent and well motivated, and not forced. Live rivals remain.

The first result is the two-part structure of purpose. The second is its two constitutive forms, the aesthetic and the empathic, with purpose aimed at a standard derivative. The third divides the meaning-of-life deadlock. Those who put meaning in caring describe the sense. Those who put it in worthwhile activity describe the object. Those who want both are right, and the structure explains why both are needed.

All three rest on Chapters 13, 14, 15 and 18, and the second also on Chapter 16. A failure there reaches them, though unevenly. From Chapter 14, the structure of purpose needs only the weaker claim about emotion, that feeling registers value, accurately or not. So it survives even if the stronger claim, that feeling makes value, is refused.

Only the structural question is answered here. Whether a purpose is worth having is a moral question for Chapter 16. That is why a life organised around cruelty can have deep purpose here and still lack goodness. The test of fit asks whether your pull would survive your own accurate and complete look at the object’s plain features, the ones any observer can check. Plain means non-evaluative. Asking after the object’s worth would smuggle back the standard the chapter refuses. The look takes in the rest of what you value too. The man who lives for counting blades of grass fails that test. Blades do differ, so the trouble is not emptiness. His orientation lives on inattention. The chapter then concedes a residue: a grass-counter whose pull did survive the full look would keep a purpose the account will not condemn. Susan Wolf, who ties meaning to projects of worth, forbids that outcome, and the chapter calls the cost a concession and no victory.

Chapter 20 takes the account to the theological claims: that purpose needs God, cosmic endorsement or endless duration. It also takes up the failure of divine retribution’s basis in desert.