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**Renouncement
and
the Meaning of Life**

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Introduction

This book is for people who consider the subject of the meaning of life extraordinarily important. As a discussion, it is written not only from an intellectual perspective; it is inspired by the vital need for an answer to the question, “What is the meaning of life?”

When we ask this question, we are not directing it to the past, nor to philosophical or religious doctrines, or to books. We are asking it of people who are living this life; people who, for that very reason, *must* find an answer to it.

Asking ourselves this question shakes up our mental structure, a structure which has helped us develop values that protect us from meaninglessness, absurdity, and life’s injustice. We have built it up with splendid effort, using materials that were developed in previous generations. We have built it up with the unspoken norms of our times and have dressed it in trendy theories. For many people, this is synonymous with living, and that’s okay.

But is it really okay? What is the meaning of life?

The question shocks us. And so we change the subject: we redirect the question into familiar channels, invoking classical models, the sharp taste of words with obscure meanings, enigmatic phrases, and theoretical abstractions. It’s easy to pull out the piles of dust-covered books we have read and to wave our academic credentials.

But the question remains. It’s alive. It eludes our thoughts and penetrates our flesh and bones.

Is there a vocation of meaning? Is it possible to avoid the only certain reality, which is our basic ignorance? Is it

possible to prevent this quest from becoming desperate, making us unbalanced and marring the simple joy of living?

What happens when the need for meaning is felt as a vocation? Everything changes. Reality informs me in a different way—events have another language, they speak differently. I myself am different. The outer shell of what is established and conventional falls away. Quick answers, trite explanations and the easy road are no longer possible. I see everything in depth and relief. Time becomes intense and vital. Nothing changes outwardly but I change, even to the roots of the awareness of who I am.

So then I ask myself if, perhaps, what's really important here is not a new explanation but the question itself, as a point of focus that won't be resolved by purely theoretical answers or solutions that are really evasions. Because asking a substantial question doesn't mean questioning life itself. Asking in this way is a way of living, an attitude toward life that always leads to a deep way of searching, sincerity in our values and honesty in our fundamental responses.

It's not easy to reduce our train of thought to simple words and easy self-evident reasoning. It's even harder not to get trapped in abstraction and unreality, entangling ourselves in a subjective and partial point of view; deceiving ourselves with the apparent certainty of pure reasoning that, though it may be developed correctly, is no more than conjecture if given as evidence. It is, however, a fascinating adventure, in which we discover that freedom as an idea transcends the constrained concepts to which we usually reduce human freedoms. Freedom, we find, is more than the ability to work, think or feel without obstacles. *It becomes our point of departure*, after which we rediscover reality. For it allows us to let go of the instinct

of self-defense and justification and be able to ask continuously, up to the ultimate consequences of that question, "What is the meaning of *my* life?"

J. W.

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The need for meaning

The problem of existence goes beyond intellectual curiosity. We are living in very difficult times. It's not easy to live, even for those of us who have everything we need—food, a home, help, and people who care about us.

We live in a wonderful age. We have achieved undreamed-of levels of knowledge and technological advancement, and yet this has not led to freedom. Our lives are spent defending ourselves from our situation, from people who, like us, struggle to survive. Our lives are spent defending the ideas that have cost us so much to achieve, and material objects we are unsure we'll be able to keep. Our lives are spent justifying ourselves not only to others but also to ourselves—why we think and feel the way we do, why we are the way we are.

Perhaps many of us live happily, to a certain extent, and maybe we don't have serious privations or insoluble problems. However we share in the anguish of our time. We can't isolate ourselves from society, or ignore the problems that shake the world, confine our lives or isolate them. Our lives are more and more part of a whole that envelops, pressures, and makes demands on us. We are part of an organism whose nature we can't really understand. And although present-day conflicts are many and diverse, they all lead to the same point, to a question that we rarely dare to formulate. And when we do ask it, we seem strange and maladjusted. If we persist asking we create a vacuum around ourselves and our friends no longer like being around us.

Simply asked, "Does life have meaning at all? What does reality mean?" We no longer care only about what happens but about why it happens.

When we think about this problem, asking questions can become a seductive mental game. All other things can come into question and every mystery that is revealed paves the way for an advance in knowledge. Every question is possible and will eventually find an answer. But raising the problem of meaning is different; it's like daring to think about a forbidden subject. And if that isn't so, then why don't people talk about it? As with all basic problems, it is not a common topic of conversation or the subject of popular literature.

Maybe many of us don't ask ourselves this question, but we can't live without it. And for that reason, we will try to tackle the question of the meaning of life as follows.

It's not easy to think freely so we need to lower our guard, stop defending ourselves, our viewpoints or our opinions. Let's forget for a minute what we are, what we wanted, and what we have been pursuing. Let's allow sincerity with ourselves to give us a better understanding of what we are and what we really yearn for.

Every group of people, in their time and place, have given their own answers to the question of life, whether explicitly through philosophical ideas and religious doctrines, or implicitly through the values on which they rested their achievements and lived out their history. However, not all philosophers have asked, clearly and specifically, that question about existence. Such answers as there are tend to be so long or intricate that it's very difficult to really understand what they are trying to tell us.

So should we even try to ask this question? Can't we just live without thinking about its implications? It is possible, and we do. But this doesn't invalidate the question; it just

makes it deeper and more alive. Even if we aren't actively trying to solve this mystery, we are, ourselves, the question.

For some of us, at least, this lack of an ultimate answer—that would give meaning not only to life but also to human suffering—translates into a vital need for meaning. This need becomes increasingly more urgent the more absurd reality seems to become. I find myself asking how it's possible that I spend hours drifting along, making trivial conversation, while I could be asking this simple, direct question, "What is the meaning of life?"

Maybe as children we didn't ask ourselves what our life was about because it was understood that our family, our parents, their friends, and our community knew what life meant and were sure about the goals they were leading us toward. When we were invited on a trip we assumed it was to go somewhere. By the same token, we *assumed* that the life for which we had been prepared had a clear and objective meaning. But the moment came when, apart from this assumption, we asked ourselves about the meaning of life *in ourselves*. Yet we didn't ask it out loud. We didn't always dare to ask the people around us about the meaning of life. Wouldn't that have meant, in many cases, to force them to acknowledge failure, a certain blindness about their whole lives—even force us to accept that what we had done up till then had no real, final, definitive meaning?

The objectives that are currently being pursued in our society take it for granted that we understand the meaning of life according, of course, to our own way of thinking. However, in practice those objectives openly conflict with the basic postulates of our spiritual or religious ideas and are likewise opposed to our ethical statements.

This contradiction prompts us to ask about meaning, because it expresses the underlying question mark inside us, a question mark that we don't verbalize and yet live with as our most essential reality.

When our life is distorted and divided into multiple facets, with each one telling us its own truth, and when these facets aren't in agreement with or are actually opposed to each other, it's even harder to know what we're looking for. Because we're also aware of the contradiction between what we say we're looking for and what we really want. When we now ask ourselves about meaning, it's not so important to justify our existence to others. The fundamental need we are now feeling is to justify *ourselves* to ourselves. It's no longer a question of justifying what we do or try to accomplish but of *justifying our very existence*.

The accelerated pace of change in today's world leaves us no other alternative. By the time we become aware of a change it's already history. When we try to catch a glimpse of the future we know it's practically impossible to be informed of what's happening right now. The pace keeps accelerating to the point where we feel marginalized from our own history. The effort to be energized subjects us to new stresses. We are the architects of change and yet we don't know what we are doing or what these efforts are for.

In other ages, a few individuals—Julius Caesar, Leonardo da Vinci, for example—represented an entire era. In our day and age, each of us feels that we are carving our own present, and that we can, to some extent, affect the course of history. This is also the reason we feel we have the right to assume the philosopher's privilege of asking life what its meaning is.

We are experiencing an unknown reality. We no longer ask ourselves what's going to happen, we ask what's happening. This existential anguish makes demands on us, it puts pressure on us. We weren't used to this. The world of our grandparents was linear. Everything was foreseeable; now it's not. So a question that formerly belonged to the realm of philosophers and books is now asked by our neighbor, by the person on the street. It is now everybody's problem, and the more caught up we are in the whirlwind of our times, the more real it becomes.

Everything is shaped by the clash with what is new and unexpected. The news is important: one has to be informed, be aware of the media, up to date, up to the minute, not to miss anything. What happened? What's going to happen? What's the diagnosis and prognosis? Every moment brings not only something new but the unknown factor—what's coming next? And that element of the new, what we're looking forward to, puts an energizing pressure on us. We feel the *need* to be informed and every piece of news, every change, causes anxiety, uncertainty and distress.

Yet, even so, we don't question. We don't ask *the question* even though we feel the pressure from all sides. We don't ask because it takes courage to ask, and it also means being prepared for a lot of things. Everyone has his or her ideals, goals, a circle of people he or she is fond of. Why get oneself into trouble? But the fact is that we *are less and less able to avoid getting into trouble*, the trouble of asking questions without being sure of getting answers.

We would like to be sure first, to start from a basis that could withstand the onslaught of this question. If we could be sure *before* asking the question we could dare to ask it. Otherwise, to ask would be in bad taste and feel un-

comfortable. It would create a difficult situation, running the risk of not knowing how to get ourselves out of it.

If I can accept a ready-made answer I don't need to ask because there's no longer a problem. It would feel so good if I could dust off a theory that satisfied my intellectual curiosity and consoled me for my pains! I would have eliminated that knot of anguish of *not knowing*. So I accept answers that are not mine but which act as a screen to cover up reality with systems and structures, explanations that don't explain anything but make existence more comfortable because they don't demand anything of me or move me to action. I choose the most common paradigm. If I give an answer before asking the question, what's the point of asking later?

However, even if we don't ask ourselves about the meaning of life, even if this is not a common subject of conversation, even if we don't ask our friends "Have you found the meaning of your life?" we feel a vital need for self-justification.

This day and age opens up new paths for humanity. The world of knowledge and technology are constantly pushing the boundaries of human possibilities. There is a greater diversity in fields of study, trades, areas of research, and in ways to express our creativity. We have even pushed cosmic boundaries by exploring, even if only initially, outer space. However, shouldn't we become familiar with, or at least explore, our inner space, that inner space that has been totally forgotten in our eagerness to work outside ourselves? If not, how will we achieve balance and total awareness? How will we stop turning our material progress into a sad human shell that is empty of meaning?

All changes, all new possibilities, are another source of uncertainty and fear. We are faced with an unfamiliar panorama, and fear is the result of facing the unknown.

We are not secure because we feel on the edge of something, at the point of jumping into a void which we are not sure will lead to anything.

We feel vertigo in the face of what we don't know and also because of the new intensity of the pace we're subjected to. The more we know, the greater the horizon is, and so is the challenge of the unknown, which isn't another world. It's *the* world.

As long as history was unfolding slowly and in linear way, we found it much easier to contemplate the whole scene because we had a handle on what we could know. What we couldn't understand was simply "*the way it is.*" The whole panorama was familiar to us because we felt sure of our knowledge about it or because we accepted disprovable postulates that explained, without explaining, the human being, the world and their fate. Everything was stable and definitive. You couldn't touch anything or move it from its assigned place. To do that would be to seek martyrdom. People's lives, their past and future, were an already written book that played out in a scene of clear and well-defined limits. Changing the scene, pushing back its boundaries, turning on different lights, meant spoiling the play and losing the meaning—which was already certain and established—of reality. Everyone kept his or her place and knew the script.

We no longer have ownership of events. We are no longer able to accommodate reality to our wishes and, even less able to control the pace of change that surpasses our schemas and definitions. The stage that served as our framework and determined the stability of our values has disappeared. We are no longer familiar with our own role or the play we're in. Maybe we can avoid getting to the bottom of the problem and we can declare ourselves satisfied with our script, but can we avoid the suffering that

comes from knowingly ignoring what we need to know? This existential anguish is our way of asking the question.

My fears, insecurities and doubts about the points of support that I always thought were sure and definite *turn my life into the explicit* question, which can't be spoken out loud: What's the meaning of all this? What's the meaning of life itself?

What is the meaning of life? This worn-out question is deeply meaningful and essential for us right now. It doesn't come from intellectual curiosity; it's not a critique of systems and theories. It's not a rejection of the suffering of life. It comes out of a new need to understand, to know what we are, what we want, and what we should make of life at this very moment. Why am I doing this? What's the purpose of it? We're no longer satisfied with answers that can be found in the ideological trends of the moment. We need an answer.

Are we creating a problem that doesn't exist? How can we be sure that we're not intellectualizing reality by asking a question nobody asks? Otherwise, why isn't this the usual topic of our thoughts, studies and conversations? How can a topic be relevant if no one overtly seems to care about it? Millions of written words and even more spoken ones saturate and deafen us with superficial analyses, trivial news and stimulation of the instincts. Who shouts this simple basic question as an expression of his or her vital need for meaning, rather than as a declaration of an intellectuality that is fashionable because it doesn't require a commitment to life?

The fact is, in today's world, to live does not mean simply living. Living means living with anguish. We're not talking about the anguish and suffering that come from being unable to satisfy essential needs, but anguish and suffering that arise from a change in our awareness. People whose

needs are met, who eat, sleep and are healthy, also live in anguish.

Hunger, affliction, and ignorance exist—seen in all possible states of degradation. We seek solutions without finding them. We say: “It’s impossible that people live and suffer like this; these problems must be solved.” Which is true: material problems have to be solved. But we who have the time and opportunity to read essays, listen to talks, and spend time thinking about human needs, reduce our world to a circle where those problems don’t exist or are out of sight. In our own sphere of unfolding, the people who we work and live with might be well-nourished, educated, well-spoken and thinking people. Yet for most of them, just as for us, personal problems subjectively supersede all other human problems.

Our world is very small. Healthy, young, well-balanced individuals bring up their problems as intensely as if all other human sufferings were unimportant compared with theirs; as if hunger, poverty, illness, ignorance, were an intellectual abstraction. We ask ourselves, what problems could they have—they are not hungry, naked or sick. They’re not facing any threats. “They’re okay.” When we have a personal problem that feels fundamental, everything else loses importance in our minds. We don’t realize that the way we look at what happens to us takes it out of context. Our desperation about the immediate problems that monopolize our attention is fed by the anguish of not understanding the meaning of our suffering. Our awareness that we don’t understand that meaning is stronger than the illusion that our lives are meaningful while we’re paying attention only to ourselves. It also makes this illusion increasingly disconnected from reality.

As humanity and as individuals, we must solve the problems of the world, but in order to do that we have to

take all problems into account. The problem of meaning expresses our need to expand our field of awareness, to know that others exist around me; that the world is bigger than my world and that society doesn't exist merely to keep me informed about it through friends and the media. I need to be totally aware of reality and the need for meaning is not the least important of human problems. If we approach the material problems of humankind from an angle that includes the need for awareness, that focus will probably allow us to find solutions that we are not yet quite able to glimpse.

We are used to dividing reality into two columns: material problems as opposed to spiritual needs; food vs. inner unfolding, our personal problem and others' problems. We are not yet able to achieve an integral vision of reality, society and its needs, or ourselves.

Food, education and the help we need can all be within our reach; we can work and develop our possibilities. Yet the immutable question awaits us, shaking the foundations of our security and placing us squarely before our fundamental problem.

The vocation for *being* transcends the need for *doing*.

The struggle to secure conditions that will allow us to live and unfold hides or supersedes our need for ultimate answers. But while we are struggling to subsist, we are proving that that need is inherent in us. For it always persists in us, with an intensity that is directly related to the spiritual unfolding we have achieved up to now.

It is commonly believed that there's no point in asking questions we aren't yet able to answer—that until humanity's material problems are solved, discussions about the meaning of life are useless; that once exterior conflicts disappear, anxieties will also be at an end, including the need for meaning. However, problems don't organize

themselves chronologically; a person doesn't have a material need first and an intellectual or spiritual one afterward.

We realize that the need for meaning doesn't spring up after eating. Our problems don't disappear when our paycheck arrives. The search for the meaning of life doesn't make us forget other human problems. But we can only correctly pinpoint those problems from the perspective of an integral attitude that takes into account not only human needs but human possibilities as well. The search for answers to questions that transcend us is what gives meaning to our unfolding, and not vice versa.

Limiting ourselves to living at subsistence level doesn't satisfy us; it doesn't give us plenitude. Eating, sleeping, working, enjoying leisure time, developing some capacities, doesn't mean we find an answer because simply living is a question in itself. In fact, the fewer subsistence problems we have, the weaker are our points of support.

When we struggle with a material problem, we have an objective; in a certain way it justifies us. Any problem we face is a challenge that defines a goal, an action, and an accomplishment. This effort to overcome a conflict establishes values that rule our behavior and establishes, for our own selves, at least, the measure of our progress and success. The problems we overcome are then replaced by others; we establish new objectives, and remain in a struggle that makes us feel we're living with a meaning, that we're progressing toward some sort of accomplishment.

But a great many people who have solved their economic, educational, and development problems are becoming more and more the best clients of therapists or the best customers of fashionable trends, because living, in itself, is simply not a solution.

If we were "sensible", we probably wouldn't be asking ourselves about meaning. Why ask questions that deepen our distress and make it evident? Is it possible that people who have asked the question before us have found a solution? Or is there a tacit agreement that no answer exists that is within our reach? Even if so, a tacit agreement is not a solution. "There is no answer" is no answer. Realization of this state of affairs leads to fear, because expressing the question means revealing what mustn't be touched, weakening the foundations upon which the values and objectives of our lives are resting. We are so secure, so firmly settled on those foundations, that we avoid with all our strength a question that alters the balance of what's established, what's conventional. We're scared.

People ask questions only when there is no way out of their problems, when their foundations have given way and their supports are gone. They feel so unhappy that they end up thinking, "When all is said and done, what meaning is there in anything?" But they're not really asking; they're reacting. This is how we usually justify our impotence: "Who can show me the meaning of life?" But to say that we haven't found a meaning is not the same as asking about meaning. In the former case, we're only saying we don't understand. This ignorance then gives us permission to develop ideas that rationalize any attitude toward life. You can find arguments to back up any position. However, the logical perfection of a line of reasoning doesn't make its conclusions any more valid. An indisputable line of argument may very well be based on partial premises. Lines of reasoning lose validity when they come face to face with the mystery of life.

It doesn't matter how solid and sure I seem on the outside. I know that I have no honest inner justification for my attitudes and goals, and I also know that the strong personalities and self-assured opinions of people around

me—even those who lead and guide others—tend to be, all too often, only a fragile shell masking their ignorance and weakness.

Asking about meaning is the same as destroying with a single blow the scaffold of the conventional; it's showing the weak points in the structures, it's finding out the nature of the foundations our values are sitting on. It is to pierce to the quick our whole attitude toward life and other human beings, with their needs and problems. That's why we don't ask the question—we're afraid of being left without support, of revealing ourselves to ourselves, seeing ourselves as we really are, as individuals and as a society. To ask would be to acknowledge the rules of the game of life, which we have turned into tragedy and despair but which we don't dare to change or probe too deeply. We're no longer concerned with finding an answer; what's important is *not asking the question*. Because to ask the question means standing on one's own two feet and then walking by oneself.

We haven't learned to be free. We have only learned to argue, write songs or poetry, repeat slogans and, perhaps in some cases, kill and die in the name of a freedom that we really don't know the nature of. But if we don't check back with ourselves, we live without knowing what we're basing ourselves on. If our foundations remain firm they show that they're real. But if they aren't firm, it's a sign that we *must* ask the question.

Are we prepared to find a meaning in existence? Can we ever know what role we play in the reality which is our lot in life? Could there be another alternative besides accepting life as it is and living it? Right now we have the right to formulate any question except the fundamental ones, those that shake the whole structure—these are taboo. It's in bad taste to admit there are taboos in this civiliza-

tion of knowledge and technology. However, the taboo is not in science but ourselves, embedded in the rules of the game. We say, in effect, analyze the musician but not the music.

However we're at the point where we can't avoid this commitment. Being aware that I don't know who I am or what I'm really doing by living the way I do is a way of asking outside the question-answer duality. Maybe by this time it has become more important for us to simply ask the question. For that would point to a freedom that makes us independent of the molds that cement and limit our mental frameworks.

When someone asks a fundamental question they leave the mold, while the person who answers it may not. Their answer may be an automatic response, conditioned by the system. It's not a vital response; it's the response of the person's framework. For this reason, it's more important to become free enough to ask a fundamental question than to receive an immediate answer to it.

What do we mean by "leaving the mold"? When we become aware of the mystery of our existence and that awareness translates into a change in our essential attitudes, we become true individuals; we gain a new vision of life and a new inner dimension.

Are we asking for too much? Isn't it pleasant to sink into unconsciousness and irresponsibility? "I'm alive; I have enough resources for myself and my loved ones and even enough for a few pleasures. Why create problems for myself with the meaning of life; what good could that do?" But if I believe that deepening into life would create problems for me, it means that I'm aware that the problem exists. No matter how hard we try to avoid the commitment, we can't rid ourselves inwardly of the restlessness that moves us to ask the question, spurred on by fear and

uncertainty. Maybe this fear and uncertainty—the pressure that we are constantly subjected to—are actually positive elements, since they make us face ourselves.

Who is free of fear and uncertainty today? Some people say they are secure, that they know what they're doing and where they're headed. But behind the shell you can see the conflict in the background, which is much more spiritual in nature than a fear of sin or divine retribution, or a fear of the unknown. It is a vital fear, which is very different. Fear of punishment is not a problem; it belongs to the established duality of good and evil. But fear of facing a fundamental question has its roots in the depths of the being, and even as fear it keeps alive a mystery that we incorporate into a greater reality: it breaks down barriers.

For the most part, we focus on common problems, even human conflicts, from the outside, as if we were only spectators of a universe that requires us to apply solutions. But when we ask ourselves about meaning, we place ourselves inside a problem that contains and transcends all the others. We even question our concept of what a problem and a solution are. And most of all we question our own life, goals and values.

To be able to arrive at the question of meaning, we have had to detach ourselves from our dualistic conception of the world and life, to detach ourselves from absolute opposites, and from what is established, correct, and prudent. We are no longer fundamentally concerned about defining reality, saying whether it is good or bad or whether our life is justified or not. We seek the reality that includes and gives meaning to good and evil. We question life as a whole and become witnesses of ourselves and the world. We have understood that ready-made answers, dogmatic reasons, the explanations that come from out-

side ourselves, are only defenses we wield when we are not brave enough to leave the mold that not only protects us but also thinks and works for us.

People often think of dogmas as belonging exclusively to organized religions, but dogma is actually a human limitation we have inside us and which we project onto our systems of ideas and values.

A dogma gives us a solution to the problem of life and the world. By defining reality it gives us firm ground to stand upon and to develop ourselves. This makes us believe that the values arising from the dogma are the truth. We hang onto the dogma out of an instinct of self-preservation and the need for a sense of security. To think for ourselves, to dare to examine the basic positions with which we face life is to feel we are in a void, lost in the desert.

A person either adopts established dogmas or creates them, be they religious, social, or political. But we can't avoid the fact that, at some point, our own life will appear to us just as it is, stripped of the pretense with which we have covered it, free of our concepts and preconceptions. Face to face with our life, we lose our supports and security. Unreal values reveal their inconsistency. We *know* we will have to face ourselves and the mystery of life alone and directly, regardless of the dogmas we currently uphold.

We get stuck from a dogma, isolating ourselves from a reality that flows dynamically. It doesn't matter if that dogma is materialistic or spiritual, religious or scientific; it always creates stereotypes within limits that prevent our view of life from flowing toward a broader and more complete vision.

We're afraid of leaving our safe house of prefabricated ideas. But we have to ask ourselves whether the reality of today's world permits us to ignore this problem. Without

entering into a consideration of the absurdities of our times, without appealing to sentimentality—which is moving but not motivating—let us look at what we are and what we are after.

Asking what life means requires courage; it means being ready to thoroughly examine the supports upon which we build all that we are and all that we have to work with: our values, ideas, and life. Because of that courage, we can see that we have enough inner freedom to examine our goals and aspirations.

We find ourselves running. We don't know why or where-to. So let's stop long enough to observe ourselves and ask ourselves some questions. Today every human being is committed to humankind and the world. In other eras, only prophets and philosophers were witnesses for their times. We no longer feel justified by others' testimonials. Our need for meaning is satisfied only by an inner reality, not an intellectual reason.

I am alive, and the simple fact of living establishes the question about life. To ignore it, to remain heedless of it, is to turn my back on the fundamental reality of living. It is to run away from the awareness of being, even if that awareness is still dark and mystifying.

I'm alive and I live in society. I am a witness of my existence, and also a witness of the reality around me. By witnessing my inner need for meaning, I'm witnessing need in every human being, in all human beings.

Every answer that comes from outside me is not an answer; it's information. I no longer find satisfactory the solutions that I have studied or learned. They are voices of a reality that is foreign to me and which I am unable to effectively incorporate into my life. Answers that hark back to the past and structuralized theories do not answer my question. Nor do they guide my search or show me the

road to follow. Everyone continues holding on to the values and structures that our age still holds onto, but no one is quite sure what to do with them, or where to take them. And when there is no clear way, no unquestionable goals, then systems are in crisis.

But a crisis is always a symptom of transformation, of an advance in awareness. Someone asks about the meaning of life after he suffers a crisis in his life; a crisis that brings him face-to-face with himself and doesn't allow him to escape.

This is the moment when the abstract question, "What's the meaning of life?" becomes concrete and urgent: "What's the meaning of *my* life?"

This question has a different scope because I can't separate my life from life itself. Individuality—which is not the same as individualism—can no longer be understood as a personal reality, separated from the social whole. My personal problem is always inextricably tied to all other human problems; it doesn't make sense to seek personal happiness. My basic concern is centered on the human being, in society, as humanity, within the universe.

All this tells us about a different quality of men and women who have an awareness of being that transcends the limits of their person and expands to embrace a realm presently beyond our reach.

Contingent answers

When we search for a meaning to life, we tend to look at human history. Sometimes history helps us understand something about life. It is evident that throughout history there has been an uninterrupted development of knowledge. With this knowledge we now have better means within our reach for developing our possibilities. Humankind knows more, has more, and can do more, and this is our present-day definition of progress. But this conception of progress brings us to the following considerations:

First: Is having more, being able to do more, the same as being more? Second: What about the discontinuity seen in the great cycles in history? Third: What about the continuity within a single historical period seen by the continual change—i.e., the births and deaths—of the generations that make it up?

We won't go into a historical analysis of the first point because that type of study isn't the goal of this book.

It is evident that human history goes farther back than the few thousand years that have been revealed by archeology. The remnants of lost civilizations speak a language that we are unable to understand and deepen the mystery. What was the meaning of those civilizations? Only their remains are left behind; we have no memories of them. This makes our present day situation appear even more dramatic: we live on a razor's edge. The slightest mistake in the use of our power could mean the end of a fantastic edifice of material progress that stands today as the biggest testimony to our lack of balance and cohesion. The remarkable civilization we see today needed

very few centuries to develop. How many such cycles could have existed in the tens of thousands of years we have been on earth, and *to what purpose?*

If the whole point of experience is uninterrupted progress, then the decline and end of progress will nullify that meaning, unless the end of progress turns out to be a more advanced point of departure. But we still have no data linking our history with the previous civilizations that we only know about through a few archeological remains and myths that persist today. These cultures rose and died as we human beings do, leaving a mysterious wake behind.

We usually associate the meaning of life with the idea of obtaining something substantial, of achieving a desirable goal, of being successful. We associate life with the idea of triumph; death with punishment and failure. Even in this day and age we consider death the worst punishment. The loss of freedom, which is a way of dying while still alive, is death's best substitute within our justice system. This shows how deeply rooted is the way we link death with the idea of an unfavorable end.

Is death a failure, then? When we think of our lifespan as life-and-death, then we automatically include decline in our definition of life—decline to the point of ruin. If all becoming ends in decline, then its meaning ends, too.

If we observe our present-day civilization, there's an obvious ever-accelerating rhythm in the acquisition of knowledge, which becomes translated into a growing power. Although we are not yet able to distinguish where this development is leading us, can we assume that in the end it will clear up all the unknowns that overwhelm us today? What really stands out in this march toward progress is discontinuity between the generations that succeed one other.

In the continuum that is history, we all die. Each individual fails, apparently, so that humankind can triumph. When human society is considered as a unit, there is an implicit supposition that it is heading in a certain direction. However, society is made up of "individuals-particles", which we can also think of as "temporal finite destinies", which don't seem to have individual continuity. I can't justify my life if my death means I am subtracted from the historical-social continuum, if I disappear from the scene of action of humanity and its history.

We're not here to consider the various theories and doctrines that explain death as a stage in the continuum of existence, but to stick to the fact that death, in its objective consequences, removes us from the historical-social continuum, the sphere that conditions and sparks our questions about meaning.

Even if we assume that a historical justification exists for the individual, how does each individual acquire meaning as a unity, and in herself, *along with her life in particular as a unique and essentially nontransferable experience*, within a society that is foreign from the moment it replaces her with another individual that succeeds her? Is it valid to think that each individual dies so that society may live?

We can call upon theories that try to explain these contradictions, but if we stick closely to the evidence, history doesn't answer our question about meaning. Each person is *a history within history as a whole*. The drama takes place in *his or her history*, not in *history itself*. The study of this problem is an analysis of anguish. Because when one asks about the meaning of life, one is not asking in terms of life in general, one is asking what one's own life means.

A person becomes conscious of life only through *her* life. Although we intuit that life has a meaning and we work tirelessly to achieve meaning, we are unable to demonstrate that our life has an evident meaning. We die too soon, before all the experience we have gathered can bear fruit. We disappear precisely at the moment we have learned how to live, like a flower that withers before it has fully opened.

History, therefore, does not give an evident answer; we perceive it as an experience in which we do not have a place unless our name appears in its pages. And even if we do figure in some of those pages, once we die we are no longer around to read them. Every civilization is an organic unity, with its laws, periods, guiding ideas and rhythm of growth and decline. It reflects the life of the individual in another dimension. *It has its own time and rhythm, different from an individual's time, and this difference separates the vital processes of the former from those of the latter, while simultaneously integrating all individual experiences into a single movement, like a wave that holds all the drops that make it up.* But human drops are aware of their existence; they have an individual life and undergo a personal experience.

It's hard to imagine the incredible number of individual experiences of billions of human beings throughout generations in successive cultures and civilizations. We can also see that, apart from how developed a civilization was, the human experiences—love, dreams, effort, pain—don't differ much over time, because they are inherent to being human. We therefore can't help but ask ourselves: could the life experience of one individual serve to help another individual?

When we acknowledge that our inner state of violence (as well as violence itself as the predominant attitude toward

solving human problems), far from being overcome as the humanists and romantic-era thinkers dreamed it would be, becomes more and more the distinguishing characteristic of our times, we ask ourselves: What difference has progress made in us compared our ancestors? To what extent does the experience of a society get transmitted to the individual? Are we today, *interiorly*, the same primitive creatures but who find ourselves in a more efficient environment, in which our greatness and misery are merely more evident?

We have changed the face of the earth; the wealth of possibilities and material knowledge are steadily growing. However, these things haven't given us meaning and they have not always helped us to transmute our impulses. Are we gathering a teaching from history? And, if so, where is the vital evidence?

If an individual—and we are really referring to a prototype, because a hypothetical individual is always someone other than myself, someone different from myself, an ideal construct—experiences a personal evolution, what is its aim? Death? What is death from the point of view of the evolution and development of possibilities of *one* human being? Although human history seems to show us that we are moving in the direction of the development of our possibilities, in no way does it give us the ingredients to justify a personal life, the life of an individual, within the short span in which the individual appears in the context of a society. It doesn't justify *that person's* life, the only life that matters to that person at that moment. It only shows infinite solutions for continuity, or the irremediable death of each of us, which will thus keep alive an impersonal and absent history.

Neither *history in itself* nor *our own personal histories* give an answer capable of filling the void left by a fundamental question.

And yet another question remains. Human life isn't the only possibility of intelligent life in the universe; it's probably only one among many. We don't have any historical evidence there has been any contact between us and the universe; we don't relate with the cosmos, only with each other. Can we discover any meaning if our field of observation is so restricted? If human life were to acquire meaning only by placing itself within a broader scope of existence, would current values still be valid? In fact, what are the universal values that govern human unfolding? *How would today's values be justified within a larger framework than the present one, when our mental frontiers transcend our present-day limits and allow us to find our place within a cosmic context?*

History does not give an answer, nor is it an answer, to that question.

Let's move on to faith.

Here there is no intention of criticizing the object of faith but to analyze our way of believing.

History teaches us that all faith, simple in origin, becomes beliefs over time. Those beliefs then give rise to organized religions and various spiritual groups, and every belief is determined by the limitations of the individuals who profess it.

Beliefs tell us that the ultimate truths of life, which are currently beyond our understanding, may be reached by the soul who fulfills her highest spiritual possibilities. What's left for those of us who have not yet achieved that grace?

Beliefs have always tried to justify reality; to believe is an inner human need. Faith is our life support. Everybody believes in something—God, success, money, ideals—and that faith is the impetus of their existence.

From beliefs, then, simple faith is transformed into systems of ideas; those systems become more or less rigid structures that then become the object of faith. Faith becomes belief; belief then explains reality.

To explain reality does not only mean placing the existence of human beings theoretically within their life events, problems and sufferings, within the sphere of reality. It also means making judgments about what we don't yet know: the unknown. When someone assumes the right to define what he *knows he doesn't know*, he runs the risk of being resoundingly wrong. So then he counterweights that risk, which is public, by hardening his preconceptions, rigidifying his principles, ending up in conflicts that we all must expiate. This is evident throughout our entire history.

In order to explain the mysteries of their own times, the individuals of other ages started out from the partial knowledge they had attained—just as we do nowadays—and explained in their way, as well as they could, according to the limitations of their ideas, what the mentality of those days was not able to grasp. But when we dogmatize about things we don't know, we mistake a natural truth for a universal and divine revelation; we call "revelation" something which tomorrow will be understood through reason. We have drawn the borderline between the divine and the natural very close to ourselves; we have materialized and humanized the divine. Thus the development of our knowledge forces us to move this borderline farther and farther back, at the cost of great conflicts and pain.

Throughout our history we have been mixing the divine with the human, either divinizing what is human or humanizing what's divine. We have also confused supernatural with divine, assigning a divine nature to perceptions which are only a step beyond our senses. When our vanity inclines us to dogmatize, we are always mistaken, because to dogmatize about what is unknown is to dogmatize about the future, and the future brings the unknown into the sphere of the known. Moreover, by attempting to crystallize the future, we predetermine our potential possibilities, thereby denying ourselves the ability to direct our future. Between this moment and tomorrow there is a span of life that acts upon that tomorrow. To make a dogma of our future is to deny ourselves the possibility of transforming ourselves and the freedom to act upon life through time.

There is no point in defining, at this point in time, whether our destiny is subject to determinism or whether we really have free will; that would be to start dogmatizing. What is certain is that experience teaches us that the course of life is always beyond the vision we have of the future. In other words, the real possibilities of any given moment always transcended the flight of imagination of that moment. We haven't learned to imagine a different reality; we have gotten used to projecting our present reality onto the future, adding on to it the advances we believe possible. We haven't been able to conceive of another reality. And our present, in relation to previous times, is *different* reality, unimaginable a few centuries ago. When the future became the present, it never fit the previous dogmas; it transcended them.

As beliefs became rigid and replaced simple faith by dogmas that were objects of faith, they left the road of life and followed different paths.

The more time passes, the deeper is the conflict between reality and truth-made-dogma. Homogeneous evolution of a dogma is not a way out of this conflict. If a dogma has to change because an advance in knowledge forces that change, that dogma is an idea that is always chasing after life; it's a force that puts the brakes on instead of continuing to move things forward. Even when reality doesn't fit the dogma's preconceptions, thereby forcing a reform, the subsequent adaptation does not close the abyss between life, which is dynamic, and static concepts about that life.

Systems of beliefs are continuously suffering the clash between their dogmas and the natural revelation of reality through our direct knowledge and experiences. And in order to persist, they always have to sacrifice belief.

The conflict between religion and science isn't important in itself. What is necessary to consider is that the religion vs. science conflict becomes an inner struggle in the believer.

For the individual who believes and thinks, a theoretical, abstract conflict is a dynamic problem.

We don't have beliefs just because. We have them because we are alive. Living is an act of faith.

It's not important right now to discuss what each of us believes in. Our faith is our support, whether we have chosen it consciously or were born into it. And when our deep-seated faith is shaken, we have a deep conflict. Homogeneous evolution of a dogma can't be a solution when the root of doubt is already inside us. Exchanging one creed for another isn't a way out either; that would only mean placing the content of the old belief into a different context.

Moreover, we may fill in an unknown with an explanation that doesn't clear up the unknown. A logical explanation is not an answer to a question that doesn't need to fit within

conventional logic. For example, if we ask ourselves what is the meaning of suffering, we're not seeking reasons, we're asking because we really, really want to get rid of the suffering. At that moment it's our suffering, not logic, that we care about.

Dogma doesn't always seek logical explanations, either. It tells people what to believe. It gives answers but does not respond.

Let's move on to science.

Science does not currently try to give an answer. Science arose, so to speak, behind dogma's back; it was a secret from beliefs, and it follows its own path. It comes in humility, recognizing its limitations. It knows that it doesn't know, and it also knows that it has no resources that allow it to pontificate on human destiny. What does it do, then? It limits itself to investigate what happens.

When one inquires freely, without preconceived ideas, one always discovers new paths of unfolding. The possibility for learning is in the knowledge of objective reality. Science renounces beforehand the finding of a why. The investigator doesn't ask about the meaning of reality, only about how reality is.

By replacing "why" with "how", a method of knowledge is devised. By not being categorized in previous concepts, it admits—theoretically—that everything is possible. Dogma says, "This is what's possible." By crystallizing a statement as a definitive truth, it confines itself inside a circle it can't leave. By admitting that everything is possible, science develops quickly, to the point that we have already lost our capacity for wonder. However, science is not yet able to free itself from the complex with which it was born. It was born in opposition to dogma, in reaction to it. This mark of origin is visible in the existing prejudice against subjective experiences, without our realizing that

any reaction due to prejudice is a denial of the scientific attitude, which is that everything is within the realm of the possible. Not finding an explanation for the moment indicates that judgment must be held in suspense while the investigation moves forward. Admitting any possibility is not the same as accepting no possibility until evidence reveals it.

It's not really science but the attitude we assume toward our inner possibilities that accentuates that contradiction. Of course in actuality all prejudices are rated ignorance; however, few of us are free of preconceived ideas about what we don't know. Science has given us—and continues to give—many noteworthy answers, but it doesn't yet have an answer for our question. In fact, the greater knowledge we have today about the world and ourselves has not given us a better spiritual life. On the contrary, the anguish of living is greater.

Of course, science doesn't ignore the question about meaning; it takes it on, although secretly. From the scientific point of view, not asking a fundamental question reveals its, as yet, profound limitations. This situation is made bearable by the supposition that the development of knowledge and its means of investigation will lead, in the end, by itself, to the understanding of the mystery of life and its ultimate meaning.

The fact that the validity of the question about meaning is hidden reveals a dogma of our time; we know our weakness when face to face with the fundamental questions.

To explain the bomb doesn't make meaningful the destruction for which it was thought up. The scientific advancement of today, juxtaposed with a society that lacks truly spiritual resources, generates monstrous results. When development is one-sided, the results are tragic distortions of the human condition.

If science doesn't provide an answer, where can we look, then?

Let's look outward, to the world. But let's not fix our attention on the city, on movement, or on people's everyday problems. Let's go beyond, let's observe the universe and its evident immensity, which can manage quite well without human beings and their questions and problems.

We can predict planetary movements with extraordinary precision. But we can't provide data about humankind or its behavior and destiny. The world we live in is so immense and ungraspable that it can do without us, unpredictable creatures who don't follow reasonable laws. Whether or not we find an answer to our question doesn't seem to alter the reality of the cosmos or the laws of a universe that ignore our anguish and have no answer for us. Faced with the magnitude of the universe, my existential problem, my question about meaning, is reduced to an insignificant dimension, but it also becomes deeply painful. To ask a question of the cosmos is to know that only response will be the echo of my own anguish.

The universe doesn't give an answer. Beliefs give their dogmas for an answer. Science doesn't touch the problem. Society deforms the question, distorting it with superficial values and immediate interests.

What remains, then?

We are reduced to asking the question of life itself.

But what life do we ask? *Life* today is an abstraction to me. My self becomes a border that divides life from my life, that differentiates the reality I perceive within from that which is manifested outside me. I am not yet able to live life as an inner-outer phenomenon, one and indivisible. I either feel and experience things inwardly, or observe and experience things outwardly. Of course there is

always a link between an outer experience and my inner reactions, but while that relationship establishes a connection, it also establishes a profound difference. My ability to direct my perception reveals the two sides by which reality reveals itself to me and which in the end distinguish themselves into two realities: the outer and the inner; the world and the being; the objective and the subjective. And within that duality of world and being, of objective existence and subjective life, answers are very difficult to find.

Moreover, this dualism in the notion of being causes a struggle, because it is not uncommon for a person's inner reality to be inadequately grafted onto the outer world. Some of us adapt relatively easily to circumstances and events without profoundly altering what we are, but some of us don't easily achieve this.

Our concept of normality these days requires a rapid and spontaneous adaptation; to be maladjusted is almost synonymous with mental imbalance. We can't help but ask ourselves, though, if it wouldn't make more sense to base our definition of balance on inner-outer harmony rather than measuring it by the current standard; i.e., adjustment to an external milieu that, more often than not, seems like an absurd, contradictory and dramatic distortion of the concept of balance and harmony. The fact is, the two ways of being of our reality—inner and outer—cause a struggle for balance, indicating a dichotomy that add more questions to our question about meaning.

And still I ask; I can't stop asking. Even if my search leaves me in total darkness I have to stop running away, I have to cut off all exits and the possibility for escape. To recognize that I am in darkness is already a good point of departure. And I feel I'm in darkness in spite of all I've heard and read; in spite of all the advancements in studying people and their behavior; the countless books on

psychology, education and philosophy. None of these taught me to search freely within myself; I only learned to seek from the outside. If I want to learn about a motor, I use tools to take the motor apart, and I make it work. But, inside me, I find myself without tools; without a method or manual to guide me.

I can go out and teach the great wealth of knowledge and experience accumulated by the social and human sciences; but at this moment, for me, psychology, philosophy and the other branches of knowledge belong to the outer world, a world that informs me about a reality that is foreign to my reality.

To an academic, a patient is an object, just as a rock is an object to a geologist. It is evident that the individual, as an object, gives answers. But what is the answer she gives as a subject? In spite of the different conceptions of modern sciences, rational theories and alien experiences don't help us gain deep knowledge of our inner world.

The few people who have said they reached inner realization of the mystery of existence were not able to explain their essential knowledge to us; they left us alone with ourselves.

Modern techniques in psychological and neurological studies have not yet helped reveal the reason for our existence. Knowing how mental mechanisms, the subconscious, reflexes, complexes, and motivations work does not convert us per se into realized beings, regardless of how much we have specialized in the subject. We have advanced very little in knowledge of the origin and end of the human being as such. We describe inner problems according to the postulates of the different schools, but we don't have answers for each person's questions. Explanations and theories help us try to understand how our inner processes work, but they are not the answer each of us

awaits to fulfill our inner need for plenitude and meaning. An explanation of a problem doesn't cause us to understand it in all its depth. Explanations can only refer to contingent aspects of reality, and what we need is a knowledge that goes beyond that. Even if we know how our defense mechanisms operate and where our complexes come from, we still don't know who we are or where we're going.

Renouncement and the meaning of life

Asking about the meaning of life is to introduce a problem of a different nature from those we are used to solving. Here we are not facing a challenge of nature, a difficulty that we can address directly, study, knowing that after enough time and effort we will obtain a firm result. We can't approach nature as an object that we ask the meaning of, and we know that we won't find what we're looking for by asking others, either. We then find ourselves with nothing to do, nothing to cut into, take apart, study, seek out: nothing. There is no object upon which we can project our question and extract an answer.

We aren't asking about some *thing*; we are asking about the meaning of our whole reality. We have no points of support upon which to base an investigation. The reality is each of us, our surroundings, and also our questions and quests. Since we don't have supports to give security to our quest, our awareness is shaken when we encounter a reality we can't grasp. The result of this inner convulsion is a change in our inner orientation to reality. It is an opening that involves a breakdown of the limits of our previous ideas—dogmatic structures that distort our vision of the world and life and cut off the way to a deeper awareness of being and knowing. By daring to question all the answers we have, we discard the framework of a static conception of life and access a broader, less contingent state of consciousness; our question is not the product of a rational concern but arises as a consequence of the totality of our perception.

We are already taking a step forward when we understand that the question we're formulating is on a different level

from our usual ones. "What is the meaning of life?" is not on the same level as, "What's for lunch?" The answer to that question—"Chicken salad"—is not on a level that will get us to the answer: "Life has such-and-such a meaning."

Yet more often than not, when we ask what life means, we are seeking an answer on the level of "We're having chicken salad for lunch."

Our awareness of the question of existence is not deep and vital, so we verbalize a fundamental question in a contingent way. We're not asking out of an existential need for meaning, but as a reaction to problems and pain we don't think we can bear. We want to find an explanation to satisfy and console us, to get rid of our personal anguish and suffering. We're seeking an answer-cork; something—anything—that will stop up our momentary void, until we're able to again take up a rhythm that so enwraps us that our question becomes diluted into a vague memory of a moment we want to erase. We may repeat, like children memorizing a jingle, "Say it with me: What's the meaning of life?" but, like those children, we're not really asking the question.

Every essential question is a new awareness or, at least, a development in the awareness we already have. This transformation is expressed as a different focus toward life and, consequently, as a concrete change in the way we live life. Because when we ask about the meaning of life we are not looking for an answer; we're looking for a non-verbal, permanent response. We don't yet know how to express it, but we do know that it will take place *in ourselves*. We are seeking an answer-awareness. When we ask the question in an essential way, we are newly aware of our inner need and then that need becomes vital. We

are fully aware, perhaps for the first time, of our lack of a sense of fulfillment and plenitude.

How many times have we said to ourselves, "I need to go out, find some distraction and have fun"? Not because we're feeling a lack of plenitude—we're only aware of our boredom, tedium, monotony. But when we dare to question our own existence, we become newly aware of the plenitude we don't have and that we need as the very essence of our life. The answer will be different because we're asking in a different way. Our question expresses the fundamental need of our soul, in words. And the person who asks that question, *in that way*, is already different.

When I'm not seeking a compromise solution but am asking the question in the same spirit we are asking it now, I relinquish supports that allowed me to live quite easily.

When a person stops looking for a compromise but instead asks in the same spirit we are asking now, she relinquishes supports that let her live with quite a bit of slackness. For example, she gives up her preconceived ideas and the different ways she fails to assume responsibility for her own problems or the problems she causes others. She stops justifying herself and, especially, defending herself.

The question about meaning makes us feel attacked, not by the person asking it but by the question itself, which is like a dart that penetrates our certainty that our life is fulfilling something.

By giving up the supports that made us feel that our life was justified, by being able to see ourselves from the outside, we stop thinking of our personal problems as the first and foremost of life. We give up being the center of the existential problem. We stop being *the* subject in an existence that has more than one subject.

So here we are, dear reader.

What have we been doing?

I suppose we have been thinking together.

We have been questioning together.

We've understood that the question we were asking is of a different nature.

By analyzing the sources that could give us answers we have been sinking, deeper and deeper, within ourselves.

We have understood that there is no response outside ourselves.

This means we have become aware.

It also means we have changed our attitude because we have let go our points of support.

We have renounced the values that gave us a comfortable position in life.

When we renounce values, we don't do it to reject them but to get to know them.

We have renounced defending ourselves.

We have renounced thinking our personal problems are the first and foremost problems.

We have renounced being the center of the existential problem.

By renouncing the security that our position before life gives us, by renouncing the security of taking refuge in ideologies and beliefs that allow us to avoid facing the reality of our existence, we break inner barriers and extend

our awareness of being beyond the limits of our personhood.

This is the first step of renouncement. It sets us on our own two feet and teaches us to live without outer supports: success, brilliance, things, everything that is external to us.

It also reveals a *vocation of meaning*, a vocation that puts the need to develop consciousness above all other objectives.

The vocation of meaning is the quality of response to the question "What is the meaning of life?"

We can't find meaning in our lives if we are not ready to give up something to obtain that meaning.

You can't go anywhere if you don't get up out of your armchair.

We already know beforehand that no one can *tell us* what the meaning of life is. We need to give up the attitude of expecting that what we need will come to us from outside. The answer can only come from us, not as a dialectical explanation but as a state of consciousness. This means being ready for an inner revolution; being ready to work inside ourselves.

To do this, we will need to renounce.

But what does it mean to renounce? Are we frightened by that word? Perhaps we think that we will be asked to give up something that belongs to us and that doors will be closed and locked behind us.

If we think of renouncing as giving up something, we will continue moving within the pairs of opposites of giving and receiving; we will turn renouncement into a better business deal, because we will use it to pay for the meaning of life.

Renouncement means turning ourselves inside out.

We are generous; we like to give and we know how to do it. We feel we are doing good as well as good works. But, within that attitude, giving has a possessive meaning.

We are who we are, masters of our life and destiny; masters of our convictions and material things. *And that total identification with things turns our life into a thing.* We can't be fully aware we are alive, or what we are doing and seeking.

We have seen that we are not masters of time, the world, or history.

When we renounce the illusions we live with, life has a different language for us. We discover humankind, society and the world inside ourselves.

Up to now we informed ourselves about the world; now *we are* the world.

Obviously we don't need this book to ask the questions we have asked. These are not questions from this or any other book; they are questions that life itself asks of us.

To which we can only respond with our life.

Just as we ask the meaning of life, life asks us the question, "What are you going to do with your life?"

We can begin, therefore, by:

Dropping our preconceived ideas, our prejudices, and the divisions by which we make parts out of the unity that is life.

Changing the way we focus our problems.

Renouncing thinking of myself as the center of the universe

Living with the reality that surrounds us; participating.

Renouncing the mental prison where we hide so as not to see what's happening.

Becoming aware, through renouncement.

The prison we're in can only be opened from inside. Life can't be meaningful if we slice out the part we think is ours to live in our own way, separated from and opposed to life.

Life changes substantially when we accept its challenge, and our destiny becomes unimaginable.

Through renouncement, we share in being human, in the world, in life.

Through renouncement we reach the peace that is not absent from the world but that lives in the world; we are inwardly and outwardly committed to life.

Through renouncement we change the phrase, "I establish contact with life through my life" to "I establish contact with my life through life itself."

Renouncement shows us that the greed to possess is an instinct that immerses us in things and turns us into just another thing.

How many times have we heard ourselves saying, "If only I could get away from my problems; if only I could stop thinking so much about myself!"

We will be able to achieve this depending on how well we are able to understand that our problem is humankind's problem and that it is expressed in each of us as a human problem.

We will be able to achieve this depending on how well we are able to learn to think of our conflicts only as a point of contact and support to understand humankind itself.

Renouncement gives us the necessary distance to be able to understand ourselves and to understand generally.

Let us expand, therefore, our notion of being.

To be able to voyage across the universe, the astronaut leaves the security of his house.

This is the image of the course we must follow.

A better understanding of ourselves and our place in the world is born from that renouncement.

Renouncement teaches us that true love is not revealed only by giving, but by *giving ourselves*; that the world's problem is our problem, it is in us.

If we prefer to hide ourselves away, isolate ourselves from the world, live our life and experience our own problems, *then let's not ask about the meaning of life.*

If we run away from the world and life, life has no answer for us.

But if we renounce that mental cowardice, if we renounce isolating ourselves as being separate from and opposed to the world, life and the world will reveal themselves to us in our consciousness.

That inner awakening opens up new possibilities.

Renouncement gives rise to the inner world. Above all, it teaches us that the realization we seek is a more expansive state than personal happiness or plenitude.

And it makes us understand very deeply that we will need to learn a new language to express it.