

# On the Meaning and Value of Life I

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TO SPEAK ABOUT THE MEANING AND value of life may seem more necessary today (1946) than ever; the question is only whether and how this is 'possible'. In some respects it is easier today: we can now speak freely again about so many things – things that are inherently connected with the problem of the meaningfulness of human existence and its value, and with human dignity. However, in other respects, it has become more difficult to speak of meaning, value and dignity. We must ask ourselves: can we still use these words so easily today? Has not the very meaning of these words somehow been called into question? Have we not seen, in recent years, too much negative propaganda railing against everything they mean, or once meant?

The propaganda of these last years was practically a propaganda against any kind of meaning and against the value of existence itself, which had been called into question! In fact, these years have sought to demonstrate the worthlessness of human life.

Since Kant, European thought has succeeded in making clear statements about the true dignity of human beings: Kant himself, in the second

formulation of his categorical imperative, said that everything has its value, but man has his dignity – a human being should never become a means to an end. But already in the *economic system* of the last few decades, most *working people* had been turned into mere means, degraded to become mere tools for economic life. It was no longer work that was the means to an end, a means for life or indeed a food for life – rather it was a man and his life, his vital energy, his ‘man-power’, that became this means to an end.

And then came the war – the war in which the man and his life were now even made a means for death. And then there were the concentration camps. In the camps, even the life that was considered worthy only of death was fully exploited to its absolute limit. What a devaluation of life, what a debasement and degradation of humankind! Let us try to imagine – so that we can make a judgement – that a state intends somehow to make use of all the people it has condemned to death, to exploit their capacity for labour right up to the very last moment of their lives – perhaps considering that this would be more sensible than simply killing such people immediately, or even feeding them for the rest of their lives. And were we not told often enough in the concentration camps that we were ‘not worth the soup’, this soup that was doled out to us as the sole meal of the day, and the price of

which we had to pay with the toil of digging through the earth? We unworthy wretches even had to accept this undeserved gift of grace in the required manner: as the soup was handed to him, each prisoner had to doff his cap. So, just as our lives were not worth a bowl of soup, our deaths were also of minimal value, not even worth a lead bullet, just some Zyklon B.<sup>i</sup>

Finally, it came to the *mass murders* in mental institutions. Here, it became obvious that any person whose life was no longer 'productive', even if only in the most wretched manner, was literally declared to be 'unworthy of life'.

But, as we said earlier, even 'Non-Sense' was propagated at that time. What do we mean by this?

Today, our attitude to life hardly has any room for belief in meaning. We are living in a typical post-war period. Although I am using a somewhat journalistic phrase here, the state of mind and the spiritual condition of the average person today are most accurately described as 'spiritually bombed out'. This alone would be bad enough, but it is made even worse by the fact that we are overwhelmingly dominated, at the same time, by the feeling that we are yet again living in a kind of pre-war period.

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<sup>i</sup> Zyklon B (originally a pesticide) was the brand name of the highly poisonous gas, based on hydrogen cyanide, used by the Nazis for mass murder at Auschwitz and other death camps.