

The other trump card of the pessimists, erotic desire, is notoriously resilient and insecure, and apt to deliver only partial fulfillments. Perhaps we never quite possess another person as much as we really desire to. Art has had little difficulty connecting erotic desire with the yearning for death and annihilation. Love itself is a kind of death – the lover is penetrated or stricken. In this tradition, the languors of love, and especially the orgasm (in French, *un petite mort*, 'a little death'), are symbols for a real death. It is argued that the deaths in works such as *Tristan and Isolde* or *Romeo and Juliet* indicate the concealed desire of lovers for joint extinction. In art it is extraordinarily dangerous to be a female in love, as the endless procession of Ophelias, Violetas, Toscas, and Mimis reminds us.

It is very depressing to suppose that even *eros* (desire) is infected by *thanatos* (death). But perhaps the vice of abstraction is at work again. Concentrating on some works of art, we conclude that 'erotic desire has death at its centre'. We do not pause to reflect that it was the artist who needed the theme of the doomed lovers, suppressing reference to any ordinary, everyday pleasures and contentments. The artist has good reason to dress Jack and Jill up as Romeo and Juliet. But by themselves Jack and Jill are probably a good deal more cheerful. Doom is neither inevitable, nor, usually, desired.

We similarly abstract when we ask whether life, en bloc as a single lump, 'has a meaning', imagining, perhaps, some external witness to it, which may even be ourselves from beyond the grave, looking back. We may worry that the witness has the whole of time and space in its gaze, and our life shrinks to nothingness, just an insignificant, infinitesimal fragment of the whole. 'The silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me,' said Blaise Pascal (1623–62).

But the Cambridge philosopher Frank Ramsey (1903–30) replied:

*Where I seem to differ from some of my friends is in attaching little importance to physical size. I don't feel the least humble before the vastness of the heavens. The stars may be large, but they cannot think or love; and these are qualities which impress me far more than size does. I take no credit for weighing nearly seventeen stone.*

*My picture of the world is drawn in perspective, and not like a model to scale. The foreground is occupied by human beings, and the stars are all as small as threepenny bits.*

When we ask if life has meaning, the first question has to be, to whom? To a witness with the whole of space and time in its view, nothing on a human scale will have meaning (it is hard to imagine how it could be visible at all – there is an awful lot of space and time out there). But why should our insignificance within that perspective weigh on us? Suppose instead we have in mind a more down-to-earth audience. Someone spending his life on some goal, such as the cure for cancer, may worry whether his life has meaning, and the worry will be whether it has meaning to those for whom he is working. This will be so if his work is successful, or if the generation coming up will remember it. For some people, the thought that their work may eventually fail, and give them no memorial, is extremely painful. Others manage to be quite cheerful about it: after all, very, very, few of the world's people leave behind achievements that excite the continuing admiration of the next generation, let alone generations beyond. This is sadly true even in philosophy departments.

Perhaps we put ourselves in the position of the judge: each of us can ask whether life has meaning to *me*, here and now. The answer then depends. Life is a stream of lived events within which there is often plenty of meaning – for ourselves, and those around us. The architect Le Corbusier said that God lies in the details, and the same is true of meaning in life to us, here, now. The smile of her child means the earth to her mother, the touch means bliss for the lover,