**Thomas Hylland Eriksen: Seven Meanings in Life (extract)**

**Preface**

On a Friday night in the final decade of the last millennium, I had a few beers with an older colleague. As is so often the case when social anthropologists get together for drinks and idle chat, most of the evening was spent on detours. At its worst, anthropology is manically digressive and succeeds only in bringing confusion to a higher level. At its best, it frees the imagination in ways that makes your mind perform happy somersaults. It is not always easy to tell the difference.

Following a sprawling, but far from uninteresting, walk through Central African sacrificial rites via Amazonian cosmologies to Japanese divorce rates and life satisfaction in Manhattan, my colleague suddenly seemed to experience an epiphany and murmured, out of the blue, staring into his half-full pint: ‘The meaning of life, you know, Thomas, consists in three things: To believe in God, to have children, and ... I seem to have forgotten the third thing.’

The remark came from a childless agnostic, and was scarcely meant to be taken at face value. But my friend was clearly on to something. For what exactly is this third factor?

The pessimists have a different approach than those who are looking for this titillating third factor, and they haven’t even bothered to forget what it was. To them, it is a premise that life is meaningless. In his major work *Om det tragiske* (On the Tragic), published at a genuinely tragic moment in European history, namely in 1941, the unsung, but profound and original philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe, the son of a pharmacist in Tromsø, explained why: Humans are over-equipped. Like other animal species, we have mammalian needs for food, sleep, reproduction and so on, but we are also equipped with a need for a full meaning of life, which can only be satisfied through self-deception, typically expressed through beliefs in one or several gods which do not exist, as in ‘Someone has a meaning with my life’. When this illusion is seen for what it is, the poor human being realises that life is in fact meaningless. Thus the title of Zapffe's major work, which might have been translated into German and English, had it been published at a different time.

Forty years later, Zapffe published a slim volume of dialogue with his philosopher colleague Herman Tennessen titled *I choose the truth*. Tennessen was no newcomer to life's fundamental meaninglessness. In the 1960s, he caused a minor stir with the academic article ‘Happiness is for the Pigs’, more than two decades before Douglas Adams proposed the number 42 in his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* trilogy (a trilogy in five parts, by the way). The disagreement between the two pessimists might seem hairsplitting from the outside: Whereas Zapffe insisted that life was meaningless, Tennessen maintained that life was *not even* meaningless, since the mere act of asking the question presupposed that the concept ‘the meaning of life’ made sense.

In a comment to the dialogue, the ecological philosopher Arne Naess argues that his colleagues are asking the wrong question. The meaning of life, he says, cannot be found at a metaphysical level, and it is a mistake to search for an overarching meaning with human life as such. As the linguist Noam Chomsky says, there are problems and mysteries, and this kind of question belongs to the latter category and cannot be answered unequivocally. On the contrary, Naess claims, life's many meanings are modest and attainable, and consist in many small, meaningful things, such as the beauty of the autumn leaves covering the ground in late October, the smell of coffee or a smile from a distant friend.

The topic is not exactly new. Humans have been looking for wholeness in the cosmos and direction for their existence at least since the origin of language. In fact, asking about life's meaning is what makes us human. Advanced Artificial Intelligence (AI) bots and algorithms may easily beat you at chess and tell you about the economy of Bhutan or the visitor attractions of Lisbon. The best among them have even been known to pass undergraduate exams in law and medicine with more than acceptable results. Yet they are unable to reflect on the meanings in life, simply because they don't have one. They have no body, no childhood memories, no emotions or moral obligations towards their neighbour, and no awareness of their mortality.

A similar boundary can be drawn between humans and other animals, and here, Zapffe was onto something true and significant. Even the most intelligent chimpanzee, dog or pig is unlikely to sit down with their fellows, humbled by the enormity of the skies above them, and murmur dreamily to their friends that ‘it is true that my father was poor, but at least he was honest’. Yet we humans utter this kind of sentence all the time, and it means something important to us.

I have personal reasons for taking an above-average interest in the subject. I fell in love with social anthropology more than forty years ago, and have not yet fallen out of love with it. This means that I have taken part in a long conversation with people from other cultural worlds all my adult life. People everywhere are passionate about the meaning of life whenever given the chance to think about it, but they provide quite different answers. To some, life becomes meaningful when you perform pious or charitable actions that send you to a better place when your time is up. To others, the highest goal consists in being a good child or parent, to yet others, meaning lies in the ability to enjoy and be grateful for what you have, whether it is an electric car, a loving partner or proximity to the rainforest's sheer exuberance and tantalising scents. It has never occurred to me that any of these answers are wrong, or even that they contradict each other, since meaning depends on context.

It needs to be added that the question has presented itself with particular gravity to me since I have been struggling with cancer since 2016, and has been forced to rediscover my weakness and mortality in new and sometimes surprising ways. The recurrent periods of serious illness have also gifted me generous helpings of slow time to be filled at my leisure, and slowness is a prerequisite for getting to know yourself and thereby your connections to everything else.

We humans have made great progress in science and technology since antiquity. Average life expectancy is doubled since the Napoleonic wars. Our knowledge of the cosmos, the human body and the environment is far superior to that of the ancients. We have reached a level of control of nature which is now turning us into our own worst enemy, since we now destroy more than we create. Yet, when it comes to the meaning or meanings of or in life, we cannot mobilise science and technology in search for answers. In fact, it is unlikely that we will ever get closer to ultimate answers in this domain, although this is an unfamiliar thought to people who have been taught to believe in progress and development. In a sense, we are still just outside the cave opening, or in Socrates' Agora, or in the shade of the banyan tree at Gautama Buddha's feet. The messages from American Indigenous peoples that no one can own nature, or from West African folktales teaching that pride spells disaster, are timeless and no less valuable than ideas about meaning or the lack thereof based in Western philosophy. Perhaps the 1927 Nobel Laureate Sigrid Undset was right when she wrote that ‘people's beliefs change, and they think differently about many things. But people's hearts change absolutely nothing through time.’ Peel away the cultural coat of varnish, external rules and norms, technology and societal form, and you may discover that however different we may appear to be, we are ultimately driven by the same motivations and can understand each other quite well across time and space. It is perfectly possible to understand people who are quite different from yourself. The only thing required is patience, common sense and the ability to listen.

When we reflect on the meaning of life and what is a good life, it is as though we were contemporaries of everybody who has ever lived. Shakespeare, Montaigne, Marcus Aurelius and Aristotle come across as equal conversation partners, even if we have to struggle a bit to hear their distant voices clearly. This would not have been the case if we had interrogated them about the mechanisms of evolution or the causes of cancer.

The answers provided by Native American sages, West African griots, ancient philosophers and early modern playwrights have commonalities. None of them preach consumerism or hedonism as solutions to the problem of life satisfaction. None argues that the endless pursuit of achievement on the hamster wheel is the only way, although ambition can lead to meaningful results. Yet, one essential meaning of life could consist in precisely those activities that are their own reward, what Zapffe refers to as *autotelic* actions, as opposed to *heterotelic* ones, which have a goal outside themselves. To some of us, nothing beats the feeling of lying in the hammock while reading an epic novel, or fishing with no concern for the catch. The objection is obvious: What good can come out of a purposeless activity? In Trinidad, the art of doing as little as possible in a stylish and elegant way has been elevated to an advanced art of living. This activity is called *liming*. This particular Caribbean brand of creative inactivity has produced some great satire, world-class calypso music, creative ideas and the occasional good poem. It is only when nothing in particular happens that anything could happen.

So what, at the end of the day, is the point? Is it about fulfilling God's plan, or doing good deeds for the benefit of strangers, or giving and receiving unconditional love, or living in the moment – or, on the contrary, thinking in the long term and acting accordingly? The answer is yes to all these questions. It depends on who you ask, when you ask them and not least how you ask.

Certain authors, some of them with leathery, suntanned skin and conspicuously white teeth, write self-help books as though they have made sensational discoveries which are inaccessible to us mere laypeople. Until now, that is. They may conclude that the meaning of life consists in self-improvement, or they might even make a list of twelve points to be followed if you are to achieve your goals. My teeth are yellow and uneven, I have limited patience with authoritarian rules and simple answers, and I consider my readers as equals and grown-ups. I may know more about cultural diversity and progressive rock than them, but some of them know more than me about Buddhism, sustainbable forestry, East Asian cooking and cross-country skiing. Yet – and that is one of the miracles of human communication – we can understand each other and benefit from an exchange of ideas. At the same time, nothing is suitable for everybody. As my friend the author and composer Øivind Hånes once remarked: What some people are willing to pay for, others are willing to pay to avoid. Fair enough.

No matter your focus, the gaze has to be turned both outwards and inwards. The small mirrors the large; no man is an island, and the only thing that can make life meaningful are differences. There is no recipe, and it would be irresponsible to pretend otherwise. An ethic that values harmony, such as Buddhism or Confucianism, sounds alluring in a conflict-ridden, testosterone-driven world, but the risks are obvious since this kind of philosophy seems to imply a general meekness justifying oppression and compromises, failing to address real contradictions. Perhaps the brightest star of the Scottish Enlightenment, the philosopher David Hume believed that people were governed by emotions, and to avoid the unruly passions taking over, he recommended prioritising the gentle, weak emotions. The Stoic philosopher Seneca developed a similar view a millennium and a half earlier: ‘All passions that allow themselves to be enjoyed and digested are mediocre. Light feelings can speak, but heavy ones are mute.’

But then again, suppose what is needed to wake up are precisely those strong passions, such as a fervent belief in a god or a burning commitment to fighting everyday racism? A Christian woman I know in the Seychelles says that she has a perfectly relaxed relationship with the few Muslims in the archipelago, since they are God-fearing. But, one might object, what about those of us who do not believe in a personal god? Having children, ensuring a tangible legacy, is considered one of the most meaningful things almost everywhere in the world, and in this respect, my slightly drunken friend was not off the mark. Yet, not everyone has children. Some even choose not to. And if the meaning of life consists in the small things – the autumn leaves on the ground, the cat purring on your lap, a cup of hot Sidamo coffee – can we relinquish responsibility for the big things, such as global justice and the climate? Surely, even if charity begins at home, that is not where it ends.

These are some of the questions I take on in the seven meanings to follow. I had my own epiphany while working with this book. Eventually, I became convinced that all good and useful meanings in life have something important in common, whether they are expressed in academic philosophy, the distilled wisdom from centuries of silent meditation in an isolated monastery, agony aunt columns or everyday life in a dilapidated South African township. The meanings in life are sustainable, climate-neutral and often free. They consist in relationships. After finishing the first draft of this book, I realised that what I had written amounted to a long essay about the threads that connect us humans to each other, and also to everything around us. Together, these filaments create an immense tapestry, a meshwork that enables each of us to be a tiny voice in a great planetary choir that stretches back in time and forth in space. These threads are what makes life meaningful.

**First meaning: Relationships**

Before the beginning of time, everything was dark and silent. Nothing stood in a relation to anything, there was not as much as a whisper or a breeze to be heard. It was only 13.8 billion years ago, when the Big Bang created a universe which is still expanding after all those years, that something began to exist, and it could only exist in relation to something else. That event, in an important sense, marked the beginning of time.

Our planet has existed for about 5.4 billion years. The first signs of life appeared a couple of billion years later, but the first organisms that exchanged signals and chemicals had little to say to each other apart from essential messages about propatation and nourishment. Slowly, plants and animals became more complex, and evolution continues to produce ever more diverse life forms up until now. We *homo sapiens,* who have been anatomically modern for a couple of hundred thousand years, are not the end point of anything, but in the middle of a long history of the struggle for existence, cooperation and communication. We are our fickle relationships, and there are many of them.

A surprising number of people, not least in the North Atlantic part of the world, seem to believe that the person ends at the skin, in spite of our experiences tellinbg us, every hour of the day, that this is not true since there is far more of us *between* than *within*. In a just world, *both* would have been one of the most common words, *neither* as rare as a blizzard in July. When you hold up a hand, you may imagine that you see five fingers, but if you look closely, you discover that you're also looking at ten relationships between fingers. The thumb would be of little use without the index finger. Nothing exists until it is different from something else. We organisms are only what we are between and together with everyone and everything else that gives life fullness and places us in a larger ecology of metabolism, niches, systems and ideas.

Nothing could have existed if there had not been differences, and everything changes over time. This means that humans, like all other organisms, are mainly relational. In a village in the New Guinea highlands, you are not considered dead when you stop breathing, but only after all debts have been settled and all your relationships with others have been brought to an end. The funeral is the most significant event in the village. The multitude of ties connecting relatives and other villagers to the deceased person have been severed, and they must be sutured to stop bleeding.

A similar point can be made about plants. Most of them do poorly on their own. Plants thrive near other plants that can enrich them, whether of their own or a different species, and if neighbours are remote, at least they may hope to thrive in a soil teeming with subterranean life.

Watching a stunning sunset alone feels like a missed opportunity. Posting the photo on Instagram is a poor substitute for experiencing it with someone. *Alone together* is the telling title of a book by the sociologist Sherry Turkle. For many years, Turkle has issued warnings about the human consequences of living in an information society. She was among the first to show that onscreen communities can be empty shells, and she is now explaining why we risk being contaminated by artificial intelligences – from Siri to care robots – and, as a result, may end up communicating with each other in the same way as we relate to Siri, GPT-4 or for that matter Paro, a cuddly cybernetic robo-seal used to comfort residents in some care homes.

Objects are just pretexts for creating relationships between people. The value of things lies in their potential to build bridges between people, but sometimes ­– think of smartphones or robots – they may obfuscate as much as they connect. The idea that everybody should ‘own’ their things is unnecessary and destructive. Cars in the affluent North stand still more than ninety per cent of the time, and the cabins where Norwegians spend some of their holidays and weekends are usually empty. In a not too distant past, sharing freezers was common in the global north, and as a faint echo from a previous time, shared laundry cellars, where you have to sign up on a list, still exist in some older apartment buildings in my hometown. The suit maketh the man, they say, but that must be due to a misunderstanding. Rather, clothes make relationships between people, and this is why people make clothes.

Researchers has documented that the average Norwegian has 359 items of clothing in their wardrobe. Perhaps a quarter of them are used occasionally, but most of the clothes just hang around, in a literal sense, as silent witnesses to your existential insecurity. Some of our things nevertheless have real value. It could be withered heirlooms, the warped clay candlesticks your kids gave you for Christmas when they were very young, a fifteen-year-old leather jacket which has accompanied you to innumerable concerts, trips and forest walks. They evoke memories about other people or places, not about the things themselves.

Man does not live by bread alone, yet some material resources will always be essential to life. Such as food. Or an poncho made of alpaca wool, if you happen to live in El Alto, Bolivia, at an altitude of four thousand meters. When two Quechua-speaking small farmers meet on the trail in the morning, they may start the conversation by asking each other if they have eaten yet, a common courtesy question in many societies. If one of them answers no, the questioner is immediately charged with the task of finding something for the poor person to eat. Food is made for sharing, and when you ask if someone has eaten, the question is not about metabolism and digestion, but social connections. There is no greater insult than turning down an offer of a meal. One of the saddest songs in the world is Carla Bley's ‘Dining Alone’, which reminds the listener that an foolproof source of meaning in life consists in breaking bread, sharing food and eating together.

The first economic transaction consisted of gift exchange, which created the first instance of debt, if only a debt of gratitude, in world history. The receiver had a moral obligation to return the gift to avoid lifelong dependency, if they should. The economy is no less reciprocal than acts of love, no less moral than friendship.

Drinking together should not be forgotten in this respect. In a research project tentatively titled ‘Battles and Bottles’, the brilliant maverick historian Bjørn Qviller from my home university studied the importance of alcohol in the history of diplomacy. Alas, Qviller died before the project was finished, but luckily, he sent out a few missiles as he went along, enabling aficionados to connect the dots. Qviller's main hypothesis was that drinking alcohol was an essential lubricant for friendship and mutual understanding; indeed, he believed moderate drunkenness to be a necessary condition for successful diplomacy. This idea does come across as credible, but only up to a point. When a handful of people get intoxicated together, a situation often arises, typically late in the evening, where one or more of the participants becomes indiscreet andallow the primal instincts of the reptilian brain to override the decency dictated by the ego, which is inclined to follow Hume's advice about allowing the less powerful emotions to run the show.

Such problems do not arise when people eat together. There are places in the world where you become an adopted relative by sharing food. This fictive kinship does not extent to inheritance, or an obligation to go through ice and fire to save each other from mountain shelves or quicksand, yet lasting commitment does result from sharing food. I have been hospitable to you, and you owe me a return gift. Food is a slick lubricant and a sticky glue that connects people. Hospitality is rarely wrong, only when you receive it from people you would rather have nothing to do with. If you receive an invitation or are offered a gift from the wrong person, you may come up with an excuse and say no thanks; you could put on a brave face and pretend it's trivial, or you can accept the gift because you see the possibility of using the relationship strategically later.

Hospitality provides one of the basic meanings in human lives almost everywhere. It is not mainly about giving, but just as much about receiving. The latter can prove to be the greater challenge because it requires the ability to be humble and grateful. In the Protestant north, we are generally poor recipients of other people's hospitality. In Norway, we regularly describe ourselves as world champions in altruism, organise annual charity competitions and have a large development aid budget, but we are not particularly good at receiving return gifts. In a sane world, the obligation to receive other people's gifts would have been a hallowed human duty for the sake of balance and mutual respect. Being the one who always receives but is never allowed to give – the refugee or the African villager – does not exactly offer a recipe for self-esteem or an equitable relationship.

The insolent guest is a familiar figure. They are the slouch who belches at the table after gulping deown the expensive wine, has little but banalities and obscenities to offer to the conversation, and who leaves just after the pudding. Or it could be the guest who outstays their welcome. In English, we may say, quoting a quip attributed to Benjamin Franklin, that ‘guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days’, but similar sayings or proverbs can be found around the world. The authors Hans Christian Andersen and Charles Dickens were friends, but their relationship soured after Andersen's visit to London, when he stayed in Dickens's house for weeks without understanding that he had long outstayed his welcome. Dickens would later avoid Andersen, seeing him mainly as a bothersome nuisance.

In an analysis of food consumption and exchange in the everyday life of a village on the south-eastern seaboard of Norway, the anthropologist Runar Døving develops subtle insights into the dynamics of hospitality. Describing the conventions of social visits in the community, he asks what the reactions would be if a guest insisted on not being served anything but a glass of water. Convention dictates that coffee is served on these visits, usually along with a slice of cake, a cinnamon bun or a plate of sweet biscuits.

In Norway, ‘a glass of water’ usually refers to tap water, which is, in effect, tantamount to nothing since it can be obtained any time for free. ‘Water,’ Døving notes, ‘is something one tends to think of as free. It is categorised as an unlimited good.’ Referring to the Biblical myth in which Jesus transformed water into wine, Døving notes that water was not seen as fit for wedding guests in ancient Galilee either. Bjørn Qviller would have nodded in appreciation.

By refusing to accept anything but water, the guest refuses to acknowledge the host's offer of reciprocity. In effect, they reject an offer of engaging in a relationship of mutual moral commitment. This is why the host has a right to feel offended.

The late Eduardo Archetti, an Argentine anthropologist settled in Norway from the early 1970s until his death in 2005, occasionally commented on the inclination towards what anthropologists call balanced reciprocity, and which is typical of market economies everywhere, including civil society in Norway. If he bought a colleague a cup of coffee in the faculty cafeteria, he said, the colleague would immediately pay him for the coffee. Rather than entering into a long-term relationship of small gift exchanges, the colleague would ‘settle his debt’ here and now. This fear of intimacy prevented the glue of civil society from setting and the threads from thickening.

In a seminal treatment of gift exchange from the 1920s, Marcel Mauss argues that gifting entails a moral relationship of mutual obligations extending far beyond the mere transaction, which may in fact be understood as a foil for the matters that matter, peaceful or even friendly social relations.

By refusing to accept a gift, one effectively rejects the other person's offer of potential friendship. In Mauss's analysis, the institution of gift exchange (which can be material or immaterial) consists of three elements: The obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to offer a return gift. The fulfilment of these three elements ensures that respect is confirmed and trust can develop.

So one can be a disgraceful guest by demanding too much or too little of the host, as in the case of the guest who refuses any gift beyond a glass of water. One can also be a disgraceful host by not showing any interest in one's guests. A host can serve the most sumptuous dishes, but little is gained if they fail to listen to the guest’s conversation or accept an offer of a return visit. In such a situation, the guest is left humiliated.

Many refugees settled in rich countries feel this way about their relationship to the host society. They have been offered shelter and food, for which they are grateful, and they now wish to reciprocate. They are often denied the right to do so, a problem which was exacerbated during the coronavirus pandemic, which limited mobility and interpersonal contact to a minimum. Right-wing populists from nearly every political party sometimes argue the need to ‘place demands on immigrants’. This kind of formulation turns the problem on its head and reveals a poor understanding of the relational nature of human lives. The truth is that there is nothing immigrants want more than being ‘placed demands upon’, which would indicate that they are needed, that someone out there covets their contribution to society, which would give them the filaments they need to contribute to the societal tapestry. I have met asylum seekers at detention centres who have spent months waiting for a decision on their application. They are grateful to Norwegian society for having given them protection, but they have one big, unfulfilled wish: to be allowed to do something useful in return.

The conventions of mutual invitations, reciprocal gifts and favours make life more meaningful, but they are not decisive in a society which is not governed solely by kinship and interpersonal relations. In small, stateless societies, by contrast, it is the many small gifts and return gifts that weave people together and ensure social cohesion in the absence of those recent innovations, formal legislation and state institutions. Everyone owes a diffuse debt of gratitude to everyone else.

Many are blessed with the privilege of having an older family member, frequently a woman, who finds it profoundly meaningful to cook meals for others. In these cases, there is no obligation to invite her back. The invitees offer their time and attention, which is sufficient for a balanced relationship. When I was a student, my brother and I had a great-aunt who often invited us to dinner. She had no children of her own, and Ketil and I were important to her. We were busy. Our young lives were filled with relationships and activities, but we went out of our way to visit Aunt Elly once a month. When our father was still alive, he had been a regular guest during the years when he commuted to Oslo and spent the nights in a frugal studio flat there. Ketil and I accepted Elly's hospitality mainly to please her, and she cooked to please us. The food was exciting for us – fried herring with cucumber salad and sour cream, meatloaf with cranberry jam, boiled mutton with cabbage, peppercorns and potatoes – in other words, traditional Norwegian dishes that we rarely or never cooked ourselves. Aunt Elly was in her late seventies and occasionally forgot that we had mutated into grown men with beards, girlfriends and bank accounts, and handed us goody-bags containing a selection of winegums and toffees when we left. We felt blessed and relieved on the way home because we knew we had pleased another person, and she was pleased to have pleased us.

Everything we do is relational. The networks connecting humans can be envisioned through competition or solidarity, individualism or ecological connections. Competition exists in all cultures, but it is by necessity built on a foundation of mutuality. The absurdity of a private language has often been commented upon by philosophers. If there are no threads connecting people, they have nothing to tell each other. Without security, there is no freedom. Could this be a lesson gleaned from the pandemic? Until March 2020, people living in the North Atlantic region and its satellites had been told, mercilessly and confidently, about the merits of competition for forty years. In a book titled *Things Can Only Get Better*, John O'Farrell observed that the Labour Party that won the 1997 elections was not the same party that he had joined in 1979, on the eve of Margaret Thatcher’s reign. The subtitle of the book is ‘Eighteen miserable years in the life of a Labour supporter’. Even the highly respected Labour prime minister of Norway solemnly came out on Saturday entertainment on television some time in the 1980s and officially abolished the Law of Jante, the principle that one should not stand out as an individual, but be obedient and conform. Mrs. Brundtland admittedly forgot to mention that the Law of Jante is not only a recipe for conformity and envy, but that it also creates solidarity and reciprocal relationships. The one person in modern Norwegian mythology who more than anyone else broke the Law of Jante was Peer Gynt of Ibsen's eponymous play. Peer liberated himself from the village's zombie mentality and routine drudgery, despised social equality and set out to conquer the world. It does not end well for Peer. True, he made a few fleeting fortunes in slave trade and speculation, but in the fifth act, he crawls back to the faithful and patient Solveig, after rinsing wild onions in a forest clearing and realising that like the onions, he has no core. This, Ibsen seems to say, is a likely destiny for those who only see the negative side of the Law of Jante.

For the record, the Law was formulated a couple of decades after Ibsen's death by the author Aksel Sandemose. It consists of ten commandments, all of them sarcastically formulating small-minded village prejudices against individuals ‘who think they are better than us’.

The Law is a double-edged sword. After forty years of celebrating growth, competition and personal ambitions, the pandemic came and intimations of solidarity and equality with it. Many discovered that while it may be fun and stimulating to live as an unencumbered individual with all rights but no duties, this only works when you have a tailwind. When crisis sets in, the acute question is whether you have someone to share your fear and insecurity with; somebody who respects and understands your weakness and vulnerability. Market thinking had little to offer during the pandemic since it had been adamant that the weak must succumb, for such is the law of the market. So it was up to the boring old state to clean up the mess along with the oh so constraining social norms,the grey bureaucrats and the pathetic civil society organisations. Even the most enthusiastic prophets of the inviolable freedom of the individual seemed to accept that collective solutions were needed to deal with the pandemic. Suddenly, state politics became the most important framework of life. The message conveyed was exactly the opposite of the neoliberal one: Do as little as possible, stay at home if you can, be considerate to other people, do not produce and consume more than necessary, make sure that you are safe, avoid sex with strangers, only take buses and trains if you absolutely have to, don't go out, and the shops and restaurants are closed anyway: and place your personal ambitions in brackets. One may still hope that the pandemic experience has taught us something about what ultimately matters in life. During the pandemic, there were good reasons to be grateful for having a state that wishes the best for its citizens, even if it could be criticised for inefficiency and general clumsiness. Up in Norway, the politicians did not come across as threatening, authoritarian leaders, but as concerned family members. Kudos to them for that. (They have other matters to answer for, but that's another story.)

My aformentioned colleague said, in his cups and tongue in cheek, that the meaning of life is not just to believe in God, but also having children. This view deserves to be taken seriously. Having one's own biological offspring is not necessary, but the unconditional love and care that many experience through a lasting relationship with children, at the same time self-effacing and self-affirming, is something to cherish. It stirs up a wide range of emotions. The connection with children makes the present visible as a creaky hinge that connects the past with the future, but most of all, your children make it possible to participate in the long conversation about who we are and what kind of story we enact. Children are dependent on adults, but the dependency is mutual since they help adults to understand the fragility and potentials of life, and the need to be together. Children are being looked after, but the day comes, decades ahead, when it is their turn to be the ones looking after their elders.

When I met the Dalai Lama some years back, he told me that his life as a spiritual leader ‘would of course have been impossible if I had a wife and children’. This attitude is reminiscent of celibacy among Catholic priests. The lama unwittingly revealed a weakness of the philosophical life of solitude, which has often been romanticised and praised by stressed and sleep-deprived parents or by overworked academics yearning for a month or a year alone in a remote cabin. Yet, it is mainly by having close relationships saturated with rights and obligations that we become complete human beings. When you live with someone else – a partner, a spouse, children, parents – you cannot always have your way. You have to give in and make compromises. Perhaps you have to cancel work trips and lower your ambitions for career development because the people you care most for come first. It is not always possible to have it both ways. Those who do not have to renounce their ego for the sake of others become less whole persons, with underdeveloped capacities for forgiveness, humility and gratitude. This sounds brutal, but it is true. A general problem in the philosophical canon is that a majority of the famous philosophers – from Plato to Nietzsche – were unmarried men. Beyond theoretical speculation, they knew little about the thin threads of love connecting most people to others, the deep abyss opening up when those threads are cut, the many rewards, the irrational rage released when one has been betrayed, and the equally irrational attraction pulling people back together after the storm. This is true of couples, but also of siblings and parent–child relations – or their equivalents.

It may be that the unexamined life is not worth living, as Socrates had it, but it is equally true that the lonely life is unsatisfactory. The pinnacle of human achievement is neither the pyramids of Giza nor the latest advances in artificial intelligence, but our ability to give and receive love unconditionally. Why else would the philosopher Susan Wolf spend a whole night making a butterfly costume for her daughter? And why did this task leave her with a fulfilling sense of achievement? In a book exploring the philosophy of meaning, Wolf finds that common accounts of human motivation are inadequate: ‘I act neither out of self-interest nor out of duty or any other sort of impersonal or impartial reason. Rather, I act out of love. As the egoistic and dualist models of practical reason leave out what we might call these “reasons of love,” so they seem to me also to leave out many of the reasons that move us to pursue nonpersonal interests about which we are especially passionate.’

This, in a nutshell, is what makes society possible. And companionship. And security, freedom and individuality. Without society, there can be no individual.

In many parts of the world, you are not considered a fully adult person until you have children, which could be adopted children or siblings' children for which you have enduring responsibility. The philosopher Tanu Biswas has conducted participant observation among pre-schoolers in Trondheim, and wrote a doctoral thesis in educational philosophy on ‘childism’, a philosophical orientation where children's outlook give the adults guidelines and inspiration, and not the other way around. Their play and imagination turn the world into a wondrous and magical place brimming with potential, and adults often underestimate the extent of children's intuive awareness of that which matters. It is possible that Jesus Christ had an embryonic form of childism in mind when he said that we should all become like children again, or perhaps he meant that we should recognise our vulnerability and dependence to enable gratitude for being here. Both interpretations make sense.

Which relationships are the dominant ones in a given cultural universe depends on the surrounding world, the ‘semiotic scaffolding’ enabling us to connect in particular ways. Some Indigenous peoples experience themselves as being so intertwined with their *Umwelt* that they consider the jaguar, or the walrus, as equally important as the people they are close to. But one shouldn't exaggerate. You can never relate to a walrus in the same way as you relate to your cousin or daughter. After all, they hunt walruses and not humans in the Arctic, and in the Amazon, they don't sit down with the jaguar to speculate on the afterlife. The threads connecting us to other people are more numerous and colourful than those enabling us to sense commonality with a seal. They range from sharing a joke or a coffee to emphatising when our fellow human has argued with their partner or parent. More often than not, other people provide the most meaningful framework for human life. Erotic passion, glorified in our kind of society, is human, all too human and certainly not unimportant, but it has its limitations. Some would even venture to claim that erotic attraction is to blame for failed relationships between adults and children. In many parts of the world, from Indonesia to Senegal, the typical North Atlantic person is criticised for being fundamentally selfish since they continue to fall in love long after marrying and starting a family, and not only that: Many even leave their spouse and children to satisfy their selfish desires. The less intense love can be more lasting, they say, echoing Hume's admonition. Indians and Pakistanis may speak critically of the hallowed love marriage as a fleeting blip of magnetic attraction and mutual fascination, which inevitably sours with time. Their arranged marriages, on the other hand, start out at a low temperature, between partners who may not know each other in advance, but which gradually develops and grows to a hot pot of warm affection. Mexican women of a certain age have been known to suggest, to recently married girls, that in the first year of marriage, they should put a coin in a jar every time they have sex with their husband. After the first year, they must remove a coin from the jar each time they perform the same act. Their cynical conclusion is that the jar will never be empty.

How meaningful is it to seek self-realisation as an ultimate goal, aiming to be ‘the best version of myself’, when you have already reached the deeper insight that you are created and continuously re-created by a network of relationships? Many divorcees are surprised and disappointed to discover that large parts of their personal history are obliterated. They can no longer hang old family photos on the wall or reminisce about funny episodes and heartening birthday celebrations when the children were young. If they have a new partner, the mere mention of memories and experiences in one's previous life may be perceived as a provocation and a threat. In social settings where some kind of arranged marriage is practised, people may point out that a person does not just marry another person, but two families are joined. Similarly, when an individual leaves a long and eventful relationship, they sever innumerable threads that once created a tapestry of memories and fed their imagination and emotional life, until they were cut off brutally and meaning started to bleed out. I am not saying that divorces are evil, and they are necessary if the threads between the spouses are poisoned, but they come at a higher price than many are aware, a cost which is proportional to the length and intensity of the ruptured relationship. They discover that they are not primarily individuals, but dividuals.

In the north-western corner of Europe, the strongest emotional bond is assumed to exist between equal partners living together, often sharing property, children and/or pets. In other parts of the world, the father–son relationship may be the basic building block of society. This is to a great extent the case in the Mediterranean region. If a man dies in Sicily or Tunisia, he is typically buried next to his father. If a man dies in the Netherlands or Norway, he is buried next to his wife – or, more precisely, she will be buried next to him, since women usually live a bit longer than men.

There are also places, such as Caribbean islands and other post-slavery societies, where the strongest social and emotional tie is the one that connects mother and son. The nuclear family could not flourish during slavery, and after emancipation, it was rarely established in a way directly comparable to the bourgeois European family. According to a widespread post-slavery female perspective, men can rarely be trusted. They come and go. Daughters disappear when they get boyfriends. Sons, by contrast, will always be loyal, partly for the same reason that male partners cannot be trusted. They will always prioritise their obligations towards their mother above everything and everybody else. Men who have moved to London or Toronto are expected to send remittances regularly to their mother in Dominica or Antigua. If they don't pick up the phone whenever she calls, they are badly behaved children, regardless of their age.

Whether the strongest tie applies to children, spouses, fathers, sons, mothers or daughters, every society contains a social relationship on which all other relationships are modelled. These bonds of unconditional love and mutual obligation give rise to emotions such as gratitude, sacrifice, forgiveness and vulnerability, which are far removed from neoliberalism’s routine celebration of individual self-realisation. Your life is incomplete if you have not experienced this intense feeling of togetherness and mutual support when you needed it most.

Relationships with non-humans are different, although deep ecological engagement with the land may give a sense of profound belonging and a sense of profound loss and sadness when a mining company or plantation replaces a cherished habitat. Yet, the sadness is not mutual; when a human dies, the forest doesn't care. I admire the big chestnut tree on the small hill behind my house, but it does not admire me back. I am not ashamed to admit that I frequently talk to my cat, and he answers in his own way, but he never asks if I'm happy. You can easily talk to a mountain, but if it answers, it is because you take on, in a flash of natural religious mysticism, the role of the mountain's ventriloquist.

It should not be ruled out that we can tune in to a frequency where the animals and we can communicate with each other. In the doctoral thesis with the priceless title *What is a Cow?*, the interdisciplinary academic Lars Risan speaks about a farmer in south-western Norway who has made the shift from the traditional barn to a free-ranging one. This entails that the cows roam freely on a largish floor, since they are fed from a machine that responds to a microchip in their ear. As a result, farmers have to get to know each individual cow, whereas previously they only needed to know the animals by their stall location. One farmer in particular caught Risan’s interest. This man seemed to have unusual skills in communication with cattle. He was a salt of the earth and no new age cow whisperer who imagined that the placid bovine could moo timeless wisdom if you just placed your ear near its mouth, yet he moved around the barn veeery slowly in a bid to get into cow rhythm. He might pet their large heads while speaking slowly to them in a deep voice. They seemed to relax in his company. When he entered the barn, the farmer became part of a network of signs and communication connecting him with the cows, and there was doubtless some mutuality involved.

My thoughts have sometimes brought me to Risan and this farmer when trying to tease a response out of my cat, but I have also thought of Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), a master of associative thinking and the inventor of the literary essay. On several occasions, Montaigne confesses that he plays with his dog even though he really ought to be doing other things. He muses that animals probably talk with each other, in their own way, and that we humans, as a matter of fact, talk to dogs in a different way than we do to pigs, chickens and horses. Only a few decades after Montaigne, René Descartes would state brashly, with no empirical evidence, that animals were just ‘advanced automata’, a point of view that would do great harm for several hundred years since it deprived animals of their dignity. Descartes understood many things, but the animal world was not one of them.

The human gaze recognises differences between kinds of animals, but in a distorted and misleading way. Pigs are treated as machines and are being produced industrially, as if they were sweaters or pieces of machinery, in order for us to enjoy our ham and bacon, while in certain societies, dogs are invited to lie on people's furniture. This contrast cannot be put down to a belief that pigs are less complex than dogs, but dogs have personal names and are not eaten by humans west of China. Pigs are curious and smart animals who like to be scratched behind the ear, and they are closer to humans than we tend to think. Following a cancer operation, I have myself become dependent on enzymes extracted from the pancreas of pigs in order to be able to digest food. Whenever I eat a rasher of bacon bought from an animal-friendly farm, part of me feels like a cannibal. At the same time, pigs may also eat pigs, given the opportunity. They are even more omnivorous than humans.

The question remains how far we humans are able to communicate with other species. There are good reasons to approach the question with caution. Regardless of our deeper persuasions, a sensible first step will consist in leaving Descartes’ world behind: Animals are not mere automata, but have desires and feelings. A second step, the fact-finding part of the quest, could be to scour the global knowledge bank for stories and documentation about cultural worlds where animals are respected as fellow creatures and where people either refrain from killing animals or express gratitude for being allowed to kill them and eat parts of their carcasses. There are lessons to be learned here for people addicted to industrial meat production.

We may then, as a more demanding third step, turn the floodlights onto ourselves and ask whether it is conceivable, in our kind of society, that relationships with animals could be just as meaningful, if not more so, than relationships with other people? To some, this seems to be the case. Animals are generally easier to deal with. They don't complain that you forgot the wedding anniversary or turned down the indoor temperature to save electricity. Dogs are obedient and loyal, goldfish are silent, horses are excellent servants as long as they are being looked after properly – but what about cats? The total number of cats in the world is estimated at 600 million, about two thirds of which are pets, the rest feral. Cats are the second most common pet in the world, after dogs, yet our understanding of them seems limited. They are often said to be unfathomable and mystical since they come across as too independent to be taught tricks, but I have a nagging suspicion that they are mainly just stupid. Take the old tomcat I live with.

Dewey was in his eighteenth year. His eyes had gradually grown duller, and his fur was unkempt. He hadn’t left a dead mouse on the Persian rug in the dining room for years. He miaowed in a complaining, accusing tone as he waddled aimlessly around the house, vegetating on the couch for much of the day, and had developed a skin problem which resulted in furious scratching and furballs everywhere. He had an erratic appetite and was no longer able to chew food. One day, I contacted our vet at the clinic where we had been customers for over seventeen years, to get an overall assessment of his condition.

I suppose I ought to confess that part of me was hoping that the vet would conclude that Dewey's quality of life had now reached such a low point that the most humane thing would be to offer him an overdose of morphine. We then starterd to talk. While the vet was expertly squeezing Dewey's stomach and tentatively pulling his limbs, I asked if it wasn't the case that this animal clinic could take care of both euthanasia and cremation. Yes, they could. If we were interested, this would come down to such and such a sum, and we would be able to choose whether we wanted a cheaper, collective cremation or an individual cremation. I quickly interjected that we would choose an individual cremation. After all, he was a family member. ‘And then you get an urn with the ashes?’ I asked, as I noticed that the situation was becoming tangible. The vet nodded. ‘You would then have the choice between a small metal urn and a biodegradable cardboard urn shaped like a heart.’

At this point, Dewey was entering a drugged condition following the injection, and our eyes met. Even in this alien setting, he felt safe when I was nearby. I stupidly held his left front paw, and bt now, I understood that there would never be any question of hastening his departure from this world. Granted, in the past year Dewey had had to be carried to his food bowl, and he was now only capable of slurping soft pâtés of the most expensive brands, mashed with a fork. When we got home, he jumped out of the cage and immediately started howling, and he only found inner peace when he could sit on our lap while drooling on the keyboard or book in front of him. Lying in such a position, he could easily, with a distracted air, claw my sweater apart in a surprisingly determined and efficient way. Most of the time, he would lie lethargically on the sofa, unless he was waddling around the house to scatter bits of fur in inaccessible places. Dewey was rheumatic, toothless, restless, smelly and cognitively impaired, but he was still, in a strange way, the same being that I had brought home on 1 March, 2003, as a surprise to the children, a beautiful three-month-old kitten who settled down and felt safe with us from the beginning. At the time, I told the children that with a bit of luck we would have him with us until they moved away from home.

The children left the nest years ago. Unlike them, Dewey is not a person, but he is an individual who has no intention to move out in order to begin a new life, and he is a family member. If I had only been able to show the same concern for the dead chicken presently sizzling in the oven at 180 degrees, coated with herbs and stuffed with garlic and citrus peel, or the pig of which the bacon in the fridge was originally an integral part, then I would have eaten meat either never or in new ways. Maybe like Greenlandic Inuits, who have a tradition for thanking the walrus and Sedna, the goddess of marine life, when the bloody carcass lies ready for dismemberment on the ice. Nowadays, most Greenlandic Inuits get their walrus equivalent from supermarket-bought, frozen Danish pork chops. The threads between man and animal are severed, there is no reciprocity, and Danish factory pork, wrapped in clingfilm in the supermarket, has nothing visibly to do with life, it is just protein.

It is true that animals generally do not get enough respect from people, but the opposite is no less disturbing. There are times when smaller cetaceans, such as porpoises or killer whales, get into serious trouble because their breathing holes are about to freeze. The eyes of the global media will then be focused on the drama in the Arctic, activists demanding that governments or an unspecified ‘somebody’ does something to help. When a few dozen people drown in the Mediterranean, it hardly leads to more than a fleeting notice in the news. This view may be defended by lamely claiming that animals are innocent, while humans are wretched sinners. Yet, it is pretty obvious that animals are just amoral, not morally superior or in any other way more valuable than humans. Had animals been treated in the same way as refugees in Middle Eastern detention camps, a popular movement would immediately have formed to demand dignity and respect on their behalf. There is a need for a drop of common sense in this debate. Our relationships with other species are rewarding and mutually meaningful, but if all speciesism is abandoned, human rights and duties become an anthropocentric affront. It is our moral duty to treat pigs and rats with respect and care, but we cannot ask them to promote a universal declaration of rat rights.

The invisible threads that connect us to each other and to all other life are innumerable, but some are thicker than others. How strong the threads become depends on how much and how deeply we intertwine with them and how much nourishment we allow to seep through.

The fewer relationships you manage to keep alive, and the thinner the threads to the outside world become, the less integrated you are in your *Umwelt*, to use the untranslateable term (surroundings? environment?) of the early 20th century ecological thinker Jakob von Uexcüll. It is the thickest threads that make us most vulnerable. Being disowned or mistreated by your closest others – your significant others, in the words of the sociologist G. H. Mead – is a serious blow to your personal integrity, while being lampooned and spat on by people you don't know personally, or being chased up a tree by a lion, matters less at the end of the day. When the threads that connect become invisible to you, you are completely alone. That is when life becomes meaningless. That is when you wonder if it might not be a good idea to end it since no other creature seems to need you.

This all sounds obvious, but why is it then so difficult to practice this insight? It has to do with characteristics of the larger ecology in which we are enmeshed, which of our natural inclinations are stimulated and which are allowed to wither. The sociologist Émile Durkheim saw human beings as *homo duplex*: The human (or Man, as they would say at the time) is simultaneously a biological being governed by primitive instincts and a moral being who lives according to societal norms and values. This view is an improvement on the vulgar Darwinism of ‘nature red in tooth and claw’, but it has its limitations. Social norms do not necessarily make us unselfish and caring, but may just as well well encourage suspicion and hostility, while our inborn animal nature makes us as mutually supportive as we are selfish. Both animals, plants and fungi work together. Yet Durkheim's contrast is at least a beginning. He concedes that human nature exists, but it is complex and intertwined with the social environment.

Let me put it another way. Towards the end of the third Harry Potter book, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry is harassed by existential doubt. It is perfectly normal for a boy whose voice is changing from soprano to baritone to ask the mirror probing questions. Harry wants to do good deeds, yet he is aware that that he has something evil in him, visible in the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. He received it as an infant when Voldemort (Escape-from-Death) murdered his parents and unsuccessfully tried to kill Harry.

During the initiation ceremony at Hogwarts, the sorting hat hesitated to assign Harry to a house. It wavered between Slytherin and Gryffindor. This difference is not without significance. Slytherin has a long-standing reputation for flirting with black magic and dark forces, while Gryffindor is a house for the brave and incorruptible. Harry ended up in the latter, but doubts set in already then. So in the end, Harry goes to the headmaster Albus Dumbledore for advice. ‘Sir’, he says, ‘I don't know if I'm good or evil, I feel as if different forces are pulling me in different directions. How can I find out who I am?’ The headmaster looks at him through his bottomless eyes, thoughtfully caresses his long white beard and finally says: ‘It is up to you, Harry.’

This memorable scene may have been inspired by the North American myth of the two wolves. I know it from the Cherokee, a tribe that has its historical territory in the forested areas of the southeastern United States, north of Florida, south of Tennessee. Watching the sunset together, the grizzled grandfather says to his young grandson: ‘I have two wolves inside me fighting for dominance. One is evil. He is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, grudge, inferiority complex, lies, false pride, arrogance and selfishness. The second is positive emotions. He is joy, peace, love, hope, harmony, humility, goodness, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and trust. They fight to the death. The same battle is going on inside you too.’

The boy asks: ‘But grandpa, who wins?’ The old man replies: ‘It depends on which of them I feed.’

When the outbreak of the pandemic led to an immediate increase in the sale of weapons and ammunition in the United States, this was not because because Americans are by nature more suspicious and brutal than other people, but because they live in an environment where the wolf which is being fed is not always the one that stimulates trust.

In the summer of 2021, it looked as if the pandemic was almost over. Many social scientists in European countries and elsewhere made themselves busy at the time conducting polls and sometimes more detailed studies about what people had missed the most. In Europe, the answers were noticeably tilted towards relationships to other people, and a large proportion answered that the deepest loss consisted in not being able to socialise in an effortless, carefree, informal way.

It is only when something is no longer present that its significance becomes clear, and here lies a lesson from the pandemic that shows the possibility of a society where the quality of life matters more than material standards of living. Perhaps surprisingly, the human hand offers an entry-point into this possibility. Consider a world where humans no longer have hands, but less versatile claws or paws. We humans depend on our hands for our humanity, and claws would not have enabled us to excel in calligraphy or write the score for Beethoven's ninth. We diabetics are told that we should avoid piercing the middle of the fingers, but instead insert the needle sideways into the fingertips when we squeeze out a drop to measure the blood sugar. Diabetics may become blind, and should we be so unlucky, we would need full sensitivity in our fingertips to be able to orient ourselves in the world. Without sensitive fingertips, we would be illiterate. The fingertips contain thousands of nerves that enable us to distinguish between many forms of touch, but it now turns out that their nerves can also perform tasks previously thought to take place in the brain. You can ‘see’ more with your fingertips than you were aware of, including quickly recognising shapes and forms such as punched letters, if you have learned the shape of the letters in advance.

One of the most typical human characteristics is our possession of extremities that come without clear instructions. ‘Look here,’ evolution tells us, ‘here you have a pair of hands, but it's really up to you what you are going to use them for.’ Dogs, dolphins and eagles have easier, but less eventful lives in this respect. None of them have organs they can use to write poems or bake muffins. The handshake is not the least important of the affordances offered by our extremeties.

During the pandemic, the loss of the handshake was probably more serious than most were aware of. A common story about the origin of the handshake traces it back to Europe's Middle Ages, signifying peaceful intentions by extending the sword hand with an open palm. This sounds immediately credible, but the story is not correct. In *The Handshake: A Gripping History*, the neuroscientist and stand-up comedian Ella Al-Shamahi claims that even chimpanzees touch each other's hands in ways reminiscent of handshakes. She was disappointed when the pandemic made shaking hands illegitimate. Brought up as a pious Muslim, she had until recently avoided shaking hands. When she finally got started, she was relieved to leave behind those innumerable embarrassing situations where she might hold her hand to her heart or perform some kind of silly military salute. But how long was Eve in Paradise? Not long after Al-Shamahi had started shaking hands, March 2020 came along with its strict rules of disinfectant and social distancing.

A handshake is not the only available method for greeting people. In India, namaste is common (it was my preferred alternative during the pandemic), and among the Inuit, and in some Melanesian societies, people may still greet each other by rubbing their noses together. There are other variants as well, such as Nordic hugs and French air kisses, but these practices usually exist side by side with the handshake. The handshake, like many other things – from the nutmeg to the coke can – has spread with colonialism and imperialism, but a few outliers still hold their ground. The custom nevertheless appears to have originated independently in lots of places. The ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeld describes two peoples in New Guinea, the Kukukuku and Woitapmin tribes, who routinely shook hands when he visited them in the 1970s. They had been contacted by the outside world just seven months earlier, and insisted that this was something they had always been doing.

Shaking hands is a simple, friendly act. It signals equality and a personal relationship that is neither intimate nor intrusive. To some of us, kisses on the cheek and hugs are more demanding, but clutching someone's right hand for a few seconds is unproblematic to most. It is also democratic in that it signals equality. If you shake hands with someone who is above you in the social hierarchy, you feel honoured; if you do it with someone below you, you signal magnamity. In the moment when your hands are locked, you are on an equal footing. Not everyone understands this, and former President Trump, known to his acquaintances as an incorrigible schoolyard bully, routinely squeezed the other's hand in a kind of stranglehold. But he was an exception, and most people turn away in disgust when confronted with this kind of behaviour. They know what is at stake, namely one of the meanings in life. Those who have misunderstood believe that life is a zero-sum game, a battle where the goal is to win over your fellow humans and your surroundings.

Handshakes do not come without a certain risk. Your hands are effective switchboards for spreading anything you touch, however fleetingly. The craze for cleanliness which has swept the human world in the last century, caused by a real but often exaggerated anxiety about bacteria and viruses, was not exactly reduced after March 2020. Some speculated that as a result of the pandemic, taking strangers by the hand would subsequently be perceived as an unhygienic form of behaviour, comparable to receiving a wet kiss on the cheek by a stranger. During previous pandemics, there have also been bans on social proximity, and during the Spanish flu almost exactly a century before Covid-19, handshakes were discouraged in the USA. Although the handshake was abolished then, it reappeared as soon as the danger was over. According to Al-Shamahi, the popularity of the handshake is not only a result of its overt benefits, but in addition, it transmits chemical signals and stimulates dopamine production owing to smell and physical touch. This sounds about right. A handshake is a springboard to something more, and gives an experience of togetherness.

There is something inherently civilising about relationships. In our kind of society, talking about rights is a commonplace, and rights are hallowed, defended and fought for, but we talk much less about duties. It is only when you recognise your own weakness and vulnerability that you learn to value the extent of your debt to others. They have nurtured you, supported you, offered small favours and long friendships, saved you from despair or even death, and just as you could teach them the meaning of words like gratitude and humility, you are in an excellent position to learn the implications of the same concepts. There needs to be a balance between rights and duties, and both spread fan-like into the past and the future. Other animals are unlikely to feel the same way. Their task is to obtain food, possibly in competition with others, to avoid being eaten, to reproduce and to look after their offspring. Thinking along these lines, I have often wondered what kind of life Dewey has had. He was castrated before reaching puberty and therefore has never felt the urge to mate. He was thrown into the world as a eunuch, like an Indian *hijra* or a harem guard from Arabian Nights. For years, Dewey has been picking fights with neighbouring cats, including his own mother, to defend his territory. I have patiently tried to explain that he should make friends and not just enemies, but he never listens to me. He has killed dozens of mice and sparrows, so the hunting instinct was clearly not weakened by the castration. But what is it that can arouse a cat with this particular adaptation – who is fed by his people every day, who has a warm and welcoming house to sleep in, who does not have to fight for survival, and who isn't even bothered by sexual frustrations and entanglements? Perhaps it comes down to a need for excitement, a tried and tested means of combating boredom. Even as an arthritic old geezer, Dewey regularly climbs onto the window sill with a certain effort, where he sits motionless and studies the outdoor world for long periods, before suddenly jumping down, surprisingly purposeful, the next moment darting through the catflap. It could be that he has spotted a bird or a neighbour's cat infringing on his territory. They remain unfathomable. Or just stupid.

With us humans it is a different matter. Other creatures, from amoeba to chimpanzees, build and rely on their threads to the surroundings just as we hominids do, but they do not ask the questions we do. Nor do they build cathedrals and reminisce about their happy childhood.

Individuality continues to exist in significant ways; this is not an either–or argument. It is visible through ambitions in the external world, but it is also expressed through the private, the inner, the in-divisible; that which is only mine and I alone can understand fully – my subjective experience of a remarkable meal, a piece of music, a poem, puns that are so cryptic that no one but me understands them, the experience of being a self which is fully expressed in the mirror. ‘Everyone should keep a back room behind their business,’ says Montaigne. Even those who share one room with their family of eight (the wealthy nobleman Montaigne is likely to have heard rumours that they existed) needed a mental backstage where they could be alone with their own thoughts. In many places in the world, there are existing backrooms that fill such a need. In Chinese cities, it is not unusual for respectable shops, perhaps specialising in phone chargers, razor blades and instant noodles, to be equipped with a back room which is not visible from the shop premises. In this windowless and smokefilled room, a handful of men regularly gather during their lunch break to gamble, smoke and drink tea, without the authorities, their supervisor or their spouse knowing what they are up to. I once visited one of these informal gambling dens in a Chinese city, noticing that the players belonged to different classes. A couple wore white shirts and had hung their blazers across their chairs, while others were wearing workman's clothes. What they had in common was the back room, a refuge from the outside world, but in order to enter their own minds, they would have had to choose another lunch hour activity, perhaps meditation. Many Norwegians, who are scaffolded by a nature-worshipping society, can step into this back room when they are alone in nature. For my own part, I can enter this intimate, private space when improvising on an instrument, or listening to music without doing anything else, or just looking distractedly and aimlessly into the air with a scratching, drooling, purring cat on my lap.

None of the relationships I have explored would have been possible without yearning, longing, scarcity. Keep in mind that everything in the world is made up of differences, but they fade from sight if they can be taken for granted. The blood rises only when something is missing, making the relationship incomplete. This is why scarcity is the second meaning in life.