This is an essay about the meaning of life. It is hence about our hermeneutical self-understanding. The word meaning notoriously has many meanings, and indeed in at least two senses of that term in its primary occurrence in the preceding sentence. And it might be thought that when we seek the meaning of a text and the meaning of our life we are seeking not simply different meanings, but different kinds of things entirely—that the first inquiry is properly hermeneutical and that the second is perhaps religious, or at least phenomenological. Among Gadamer's great achievements, he demonstrated that this is not so—that in coming to understand our lives as meaningful, we apply the same hermeneutical considerations to ourselves that we apply to understanding texts. That insight might seem to resolve the notoriously difficult problem of understanding the meaning of life into the prima facie easier problem of textual semantics. Unfortunately, however, it goes the other way around: the apparently unproblematic encounter with ink on the page or sound waves in the air turns out to be fraught with all of human being.

This essay is also about a curious hermeneutical and political phenomenon in the contemporary academy, one I will approach from personal experience, and experience I only came to understand through reflection on Gadamer's hermeneutic theory: I was brought up in the Western philosophical tradition, and more narrowly, primarily on what is called somewhat polemically and misleadingly "Anglo-American" philosophical literature. Throughout my education and early professional career, I never questioned nor was encouraged to question the presupposition that philosophy is a European phenomenon. (Nor, I might add, did I consciously assert that it is—the issue simply never arose.) Never did a Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Tibetan, or African philosopher or text enter my philosophical horizon until I began my teaching career and was led in that direction by the interests of my students. As it happens, my research interests have drifted Eastward, and now I spend a considerable portion of my professional time working on Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, and in collaboration with Tibetan philosophers.
The fact that I often work in this area has occasioned a number of interactions in which my Western colleagues say things like, "When you were still doing philosophy..." or "Now that you are working in religious studies...." Now the questions I address when I work on texts and with scholars in this tradition are often pretty much those I address when I work on Western texts and with Western colleagues, give or take a bit—problems concerning the nature of causation, the nature of mind and intentionality, moral psychology, logic and the theory of justification, and so forth. Given this scenario, which is no secret, these encounters with Western colleagues suggest a peculiar attitude toward this work—more peculiar still given the fact that without exception those who preface their remarks in this way never read either my work in this area or the literature it addresses. But they know that it is not philosophy. And despite their epistemological sophistication, the juxtaposition of this knowledge claim with the manifest lack of evidence for it does not trouble them. Nor, I hasten to add, is this attitude somehow peculiar to my immediate acquaintances. One sees it reflected in philosophical curricula throughout the West, and in the fact that the vast majority of Western scholars of Asian philosophy are located not in departments of philosophy but in departments of religious studies, Asian studies, and so on.

I find that it does not trouble most Western philosophers that they have never so much as glanced at a text written in Asia, nor entered into dialogue with an Asian philosopher (mutatis mutandis for Africa, the Islamic world, and so on). Nor does it trouble many in our profession that academic departments in the West are often called "philosophy departments" when their academic coverage is limited to the Western philosophical tradition. Why not?

There are two comfortable answers that I hear most often when I raise this challenge. The first is this: "There is a world of difference between philosophy and religion, and what passes for 'Eastern philosophy' is in fact religion misnamed. Western philosophy is independent of religion, and is a rational, religiously disinterested inquiry into fundamental questions about the nature of reality, human life, and so on." But this distinction is supposed to deliver the result that St Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, Descartes's *Meditations*, including the proofs of the existence of God, and Leibniz's discussion of theodicy are philosophical, while Dharmakīrti's investigations of the structure of induction and of the ontological status of universals, Tsong khapa's account of reference and meaning, and Nāgārjuna's critique of essence and analysis of the causal relation are religious. Anyone who has a passing familiarity with all of the relevant texts will agree that something has gone seriously wrong if this distinction is taken seriously.

The second reply is this: Western philosophers simply plead their lack of familiarity with the Asian texts, and inability to approach them, let alone to teach them or to use them in research. Those who offer this reply sometimes piously lament the presumably irremediable lacunae in their own philosophical training
or their lack of competence in the relevant canonical languages. Better for the shoemaker to stick to his last, they say, then to lapse into charlatanism. This argument—however noble the scholarly sentiments to which it appeals—of course must rely on at least one of the following suppressed premises: (1) Asian philosophy is unreadable by anyone with European ancestry; (2) One should never read anything one has not already read or teach anything one has not been taught in graduate school; (3) One must never rely on a translation in teaching and research, and Asian languages are impossible to learn. I am not sure which of these options is more implausible, but many seem unembarrassed by reliance on at least one.

I find this second reply hard to take seriously as a theoretical position, though to be sure it demands political and rhetorical attention as a late moment in postcolonial racism. My real concern is with the first reply—that Asian philosophy, so-called, is really in some deep sense different in kind from Western philosophy—that it is religious in a sense that Western philosophy is not, and so with the relation between philosophy and religion and the connection of that relation with our understanding of the intellectual and geographical bounds of philosophy.

The Meaning of Life

Human self-understanding is always hermeneutical. It is by now a commonplace, thanks to the work of Professor Gadamer and of Heidegger before him, that for ink on a page to be more than an interruption in an expanse of white, for vocalizations to be more than "sound and fury, signifying nothing" and that for a work of art to be more than so much matter distributed in some physically describable way, crucial meaning-determining context is required, as well as interpretative commitment on the part of a reader or interlocutor. Just so for our human lives. From the standpoint of disinterested physical science, we are nothing but ephemeral, biologically driven organizations of matter: local, temporary, counter-entropic eddies in a vast indifferent universal flow to cold, homogenous darkness.

Our lives derive meaning, just as do our inscriptions, not from their intrinsic physical or biological properties, nor from any properties reducible to these, but from their context; not as solitary embodied texts but as moments in living traditions; and finally, not by virtue of anything available to the disinterested gaze, but only through the engagement made possible by interpretive commitment. The meaningfulness of any human life is hence always the collective achievement of the community in which that life is lived and of the tradition in terms of which that community understands itself and its members can understand themselves and each other. In this context we must remind ourselves that the relevant interpretive commitment—the willingness and determination to find meaning and to take that meaning as important—including the commitment to
take one's own life seriously as well as the reciprocal commitment to take others' seriously. *Dasein* is only possible in the context of *Mitsein.*

For many cultures, including both the cultures descending from classical Greece and those descending from classical India and China, central to the traditions constituting the interpretive background against which their participants' lives gain meaning are textual traditions: extended sequences of written texts, written and oral replies to and commentaries on those texts; identifications of part of those traditions as canonical, and characterizations of what is excluded. More specifically, in all of these cultures, specific textual traditions take as their explicit problematic sorting out the canons of interpretation, accounts of the good, and so on in their respective cultures, and hence, we might say, working out the meaning of life. Among these textual traditions are those we identify as religious and philosophical traditions.

We must acknowledge that philosophy and religion as pretheoretically individuated share this hermeneutical role if we are to understand the curious ambivalence toward religion and religious traditions in contemporary Western philosophy. The antipathy that allows the use of *religious* as a dismissive epithet (again, bracketing for now its descriptive adequacy) for Asian philosophy is not in the first instance the antagonism toward that which is alien, but more an instance of the special vitriol that is reserved for members of the family or erupts in civil war but in this case is accidentally directed outward. The most significant difficulty with the dismissal of Asian philosophy as religion is not the fact that in the relevant sense (to which we shall shortly come) that charge is false, but that in that very sense, as well as in the deeper sense at which I am driving at here, Western philosophy is also profoundly religious.

**Philosophy and Religion after the Enlightenment**

Contemporary Western philosophy, despite its roots as old as classical Greece, derives much of its contemporary problematic and professional profile from the European Enlightenment. Even the most contemporary postmodern philosophical developments can only be understood as reactions and sequels to the upheavals of early modernity. European philosophy's professional self-understanding as, inter alia, an opposition to religion and its identification of its own canon and organon in contrast to those of religion also originates at that moment. It is easy to make too much of individual figures or events salient in retrospect, and it is not good history to do so. But so long as we are careful not to take ourselves to be doing intellectual history but rather collective professional phenomenology, sketching the outlines of the self-understanding common to our tradition, it is not too much of a distortion to say that the Galileo affair forced philosophy to make a choice: science had at that moment thrown down the gauntlet at the church door, and there was never again to be a genuine coincidence or recon-
The reconciliation between Western science and Semitic religion, as opposed to an uneasy and forced coexistence, abetted either by platitude or lame apology. Philosophy had to choose sides, and philosophy, of course, backed science.

The choice was indeed forced, and philosophy, to be sure, made the right decision. But the forced character of the choice and the correctness of the decision derives crucially from the specific character of the Semitic religions (principally, of course, Christianity) against which science was rebelling. First and foremost, these are revealed religions whose central tenets require that kind of faith Mark Twain characterized with his typical acidity as “believing what you know ain’t so.” Second, they are theistic religions, and hence religions which propose an account of reality according to which there is a terminus to explanation, and hence according to which there is a final horizon to all self-understanding. Given its own epistemic commitments, and given the success these commitments demonstrated and promised, science could never accommodate itself methodologically to revelation. And given the endless frontier of discovery it anticipated, a creator would be not only superfluous but also obstructive.

The progressive, empirical character of science, with its emphasis on the autonomy of reason and the consequent power to transform the natural world, gave rise to its image in a progressive humanism envisioning the possibility of endless reconceptualization of what it is to be human, progressively deeper self-understanding, and through this autonomous, empirical, and rational practice, the transformation and improvement of humanity itself. Modernity, so conceived, was a very good idea indeed, especially when contrasted with the available alternative. Academic philosophy could not but choose the side of science, and the great philosophical texts of that period, prominently including Descartes’s Meditations, Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, as well as his essays “What Is Called Enlightenment” and “Conflict of the Faculties,” document and confirm this choice.

In choosing to side with science, philosophy was hence emphatically choosing against religion and in doing so it was defining itself explicitly in contrast to religion. This emerges most clearly, of course, in Kant’s critical philosophy in which the domains of reason and faith are so carefully circumscribed. In defining itself against religion, though, academic Western philosophy was also defining religion as its antithesis: philosophy is rational; religion dogmatic; philosophy progressive and humanistic; religion static and transcendental in its epistemic authority; philosophy atheistic, at least methodologically; religion theistic, particularly epistemologically.

Philosophy and religion so conceived are indeed as different as night and day. But the conception is misleading on two levels: first, we have to face squarely the fact that academic philosophy in the West never fully repudiates its Semitic religious background. The respects in which this is true are too numerous for complete enumeration, but here are some examples: Descartes finds it necessary
to *prove* the existence of God, and Kant needs at least the *idea* of God; divine commands remain the model of morality in deontological ethics; liberal democratic theory happily adopts a conception of human beings *self-evidently* "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights"; the professional specialization "philosophy of religion" invariably means "philosophical discussion of Christianity." I emphasize that these are only examples. For a more extended treatment, I advise reading Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, each eloquent on this point.³

So the divorce was never complete, and the religious roots of Western philosophy ensure that even its most recent fruits are Christian in character however determined the effort to occlude that fact. That this is so is partly to be explained by the deeper respect in which Western philosophy is religious: its purpose, after all, has been soteriological from its classical period (and though this was more explicitly articulated by Aristotle, the skeptics, and stoics than by modern and postmodern successors, it remains at the heart of the enterprise)—the articulation of the context in which we can give meaning to our lives. *Articulation* is here used in both senses of that term: through philosophy, as through religious thought, we both constitute and come to understand the ground of that meaning, and we do so through a hermeneutically self-conscious textual tradition. Paraphrasing Clausewicz, we can say that philosophy is the continuation of religion by other means, just as long as we also realize that those means are only ever so slightly "other."

**Philosophy and Religion on the Path to Enlightenment**

The history of philosophy and its relation to religion is of course not uniform in the world’s cultures. A comparison with Buddhist culture is instructive here (though it is important to bear in mind that we cannot simply generalize from the Buddhist context to any other Asian, let alone African or other non-Western context). The European enlightenment has no historical counterpart in India or China. There was never a cataclysmic rift between religion and science, and so philosophy never had to take sides. Buddhism is atheistic, rejects revelation as epistemically authoritative, and is committed to infinite human perfectibility through empirical inquiry and rational analysis, culminating in full awakening, or buddhahood. And most Buddhists follow Siddhartha Gautama in regarding this perfectibility as the individual responsibility of each person. Buddhism as a religion, of course, has the trappings and social functions we expect to find in a religion: prayer, spiritual practices, rituals, temples, festivals, and so on. Their efficacy or propriety can be questioned, and there could be good reason to reject any part or all of Buddhist religion as a rational or efficacious practice, just as there could be with respect to Christian religious practices.
Buddhist philosophy, like Western philosophy, aims to understand the fundamental nature of reality, the nature of human life, and so provides a hermeneutical context in which those in Buddhist cultures constitute and understand the meaning of their lives. Buddhist religious practice, like Christian religious practice, aims at similar goals. But in the Buddhist context, religious and philosophical practice have never been prised apart as distinct and independent cultural practices, as opposed to connected parts of a seamless cultural artefact. And this is true not simply because Western science was late to come to the Buddhist world or because when it did it had little impact. Its impact has indeed been marked. It is asked because the particular features of Semitic religions just adumbrated that generate the rift between philosophical and religious traditions in the West are simply not present in Buddhism.

This is, of course, neither a brief for Buddhism as a religion (many of its tenets and practices are every bit as scientifically problematic as any of those of Christianity, and its particular vision of human perfection may be no more plausible than Christian theism) nor a brief for Buddhist philosophy as in any sense superior to Western philosophy. Rather, it is an argument for the cultural specificity of the truth of the claim—even to the limited degree that it is true—that the categories of religious and philosophical discourse determine a dichotomy, which is in turn determined not by the respective characters of religious thought and philosophical thought per se, but rather by the particular methodological and substantive commitments of specific religious and philosophical traditions at particular historical junctures. Seen from the standpoint of their role in the project of human self-understanding, the continuity between religious and philosophical discourse—and indeed between them both and literary and historical discourse—is more dramatic than any differences.

We can now return to the facile dismissal of Buddhist or other Asian philosophy as “just religion.” In doing so we can reconstruct a slightly more plausible, but still fallacious argument and can thereby diagnose the deeper errors committed by those who would be so dismissive: philosophy and religion represent distinct and incompatible hermeneutical and epistemic enterprises. Buddhism is manifestly a religion. Therefore any thought bound up with it is not properly philosophical. We can now see that it is the first premise that must go—falsified not only by the very case under consideration but also by the Western tradition itself, which is supposed to provide the best evidence. Our vision of philosophy as handmaiden to the sciences must be replaced with one of philosophy as a synoptic discipline providing the interpretive context for our full range of epistemic, artistic, and moral activities. Understanding philosophy in this way forces us to see that it also has a central role in constituting the narrative in the context of which we become persons and not mere physical objects. We then find that it joins a host of other allied hermeneutical activities in that position, and that it cannot help but be interpenetrated by them.
Philosophy must hence be seen as intimately bound to other humanistic, hermeneutic activities such as religion and history. It follows that the fact that in some Asian cultures philosophical and specifically religious practice remain more closely bound than they are in contemporary Western culture can in no way stand as a reason for disparaging the philosophical character or merit of those traditions.

**Hermeneutic Practice, Humanism, and Human Life**

I said at the outset that this chapter is about the meaning of life. That, of course, does not mean that it is an attempt to articulate that meaning. (Philosophers, after all, notoriously retreat from real, first-order questions to the safer ground of metatheory!) Instead I am concerned with the sense in which life can be found meaningful and the intellectual activity through which that meaning can be discovered. The crucial insight is provided by Gadamer’s hermeneutical theories: the discovery of meaning is always a circular movement embracing the reciprocal relation between parts of texts and the whole that comprises them at the level of text and the larger image of this reciprocity in the relation between texts and the traditions that comprise them. Only the horizon of a text can determine the meaning of any part thereof; only the totality of the meanings of the parts can constitute the semantic horizon that text provides. Only the horizon of a tradition can determine the interpretation of any text; only the totality of texts a tradition comprises can constitute that larger semantic horizon. (See chapter 13 of this volume for a slightly more extended discussion of hermeneutic circles.)

We can conjoin this first insight with a second—that human beings, qua persons constitutively, though not of course exhaustively, are both bearers of meaning and creative participants in the set of meaning-bearing and meaning-determining practices that constitute the cultures and traditions in the context of which they live their lives. These cultures hence constitute the rich semantic horizon against which our lives come into relief as significant, and through that significance construct that very horizon. No sequence of words, however intelligently constructed and carefully printed and bound, absent a tradition in which it can be read and understood, can be interpreted as an eminent text and rise to real cultural significance. For exactly the same reasons, absent the hermeneutic context provided by a culture, no human life, whatever its internal structure, can be more than a “walking shadow . . . full of sound and fury and signifying nothing.” Every bit as much as our literary and philosophical works depend for their meaning on their intertextuality, our lives each depend for their meaning on our interdependence with our fellows.

The hermeneutical counterpart of the collapse of the duality between conceptual scheme and empirical content is the collapse of anything pretending to be a duality of truth and method. Every tradition carries within it not only a set of
texts demanding interpretation but a canon of interpretive practices that are themselves textually encoded and subject to interpretation. We encounter here yet another significant hermeneutic circle. This interweaving of object and method of interpretation is also, of course, present in the relation between human life and human culture. Our cultures do not only comprise sequences of interdependent lives calling for understanding, but also sets of practices encoded in those lives themselves through which lives are understood and in terms of which meaning is assigned and constituted. The variety of the interpretive practices involved in the assigning of meaning to lives in their cultural contexts is every bit as great as the variety of practices used in the assigning of meanings to texts in their traditional contexts. This variety is neither surprising, nor is it any insurmountable bar to cross-cultural understanding. In fact, such difference facilitates the kind of cross-cultural dialogue that ultimately leads to greater self-understanding. We recognize an initially alien form of interpretation not by finding it to be in all respects like our own (after all, it would then not be alien), but in virtue of recognizing a homology of function. It does for its users what ours does for us. This homology of function can then provide a fulcrum for understanding difference, for dialogue, and eventually, perhaps, for the fusion of horizons that can permit genuine collegiality and eventually the appreciation of those features of our own life invisible to us precisely because of their proximity.

In the modern and postmodern West, as in the textually articulated Hindu, Buddhist, T'aoist, and Confucian cultures of Asia, the practices centrally concerned with the interpretation of life are those of the humanities, including at least in the West philosophical, religious, historical, and text-critical practice. Again, any claim to universality of these precise disciplines, or especially the distinctions marked between them in twenty-first-century European, American, and Australasian universities and those patterned on them, would have to be tempered by the preceding reflections: we look for homologies of function, not mirror reflections of our own practices and commitments. But the homologies are real, reflecting a common purpose. Humanism, here understood as a commitment to that purpose common to these disciplines, is unavoidable, because human beings, qua persons, are committed to self-understanding; because all understanding presupposes meaning-constituting practices; because self-understanding requires practices constituting lives as meaningful; because only cultures comprising sets of interpretive practices that take as their object human life can do that. Rejection of the hermeneutic imperative is thus rejection of one's own humanity.

Now seen from this perspective, it is clear that this commitment—this humanism—binds philosophical and religious practice so tightly that they cannot be separated by any culturally contingent rift such as that caused by the particular interpretative practices espoused by the Christian church on the one hand, and the nascent natural sciences on the other, in the sixteenth and seventeenth cen-
This is not to deny the real difference between the modes of interpretation encoded by Semitic religious traditions and the Western project of modernity and its aftermath in which Western academic philosophy is appropriately involved. It is instead to urge both that that distinction is in a larger context not so deep after all, and more important, that to expect that distinction to appear universally would be both ill motivated and a serious barrier to intercultural understanding, particularly in encounters with cultures in which no such distinction can be drawn. At its worst it permits us to ignore deep and important philosophical traditions, an ignorance that in the present postcolonial historical context has significant moral and political implications as well as more obvious intellectual problems.

Ignoring the philosophical traditions of other cultures in fact, whether we like it or not, continues the colonial project of subordinating those cultures to our own. That project was "justified" by the white man's burden of bringing civilization to the benighted heathen, a burden of which we can only make sense if we deny their manifestly existent intellectual traditions the epistemic status we grant ours. Giving the Western philosophical tradition pride of place as "philosophy" while marginalizing in our departments or in our individual life all other traditions, if the arguments I have offered are cogent, hence implicates us directly in institutional racism. Recognizing that we are so implicated and refraining from changing our individual practice and from working to change our institutional practice hence constitutes, however passive it may be, individual racism. It also constitutes a profound epistemic vice, that of willfully ignoring sources of knowledge we know to be relevant to our own activities. It is a measure of the importance of Professor Gadamer's hermeneutic theory that it allows us to come to see these failings in ourselves and to see our way to remedying them.

I further note that a fixation on this superficial distinction can also lead to a mis-taking of the role of philosophical activity itself, a mislocation of philosophy in the Naturwissenschaften and a failure to appreciate the essentially soteriological character of philosophical activity. For philosophy always begins in aporia, always aims at nous, and always for the sake of eudaimonia. Or to put it another way, philosophy always begins in avidya and samsāra, always aims at prajñā, and always for the sake of nirvāna. This quest turns out to be built into Dasein itself.