

wondering if you posted a letter. Philosophers who are aware of these problems are inclined to take the view that human life is brutal and meaningless. It is hard for a logical mind to disagree.

This explains why most intelligent people are suspicious of the idea of reincarnation, or of life after death. They see such ideas as another symptom of the human inability to face up to reality. We are hopelessly drugged by the biological sense of security—as sheep and cows are until they get to the slaughterhouse and smell blood. We like to soothe ourselves with the tacit assumption that things will always go on as they are now. And so most religions promise their followers an afterlife that bears all the signs of wishful thinking—from the Elysian Fields of the Greeks to the Happy Hunting Ground of the American Indians. Philosophers can see through the daydream, but they have no convincing alternative to suggest.

If we can drag our mind away from everyday trivialities and think honestly about these problems, we have to admit that the pessimists inspire no more confidence than the 'true believers'. Most of them use their pessimism as an excuse for not thinking. At first sight, this seems a reasonable attitude, since they believe that thinking only leads back to the conviction that life is meaningless. But then, some deep instinct tells us that when a man ceases thinking, he has thrown away his greatest advantage. There is an odd-feeling of arrested development about most of the total pessimists, as if they had ceased to evolve as human beings.

Besides which, none of the pessimists—Schopenhauer, Andreyev, Artsybashev, Beckett, Sartre—has really come to grips with the central question about human existence. All right, I have no idea where I came from or where I am going to, and most of the meanings that I see around me are mere conventions. I am little more than a blinkered horse, plodding along patiently, doing more or less what I did yesterday and the day before, and I see all the human beings around me behaving in the same way. Yet there *does* seem to be a certain logic about human existence, particularly when I am gripped by a sense of purpose. When I experience a feeling of intensity, I catch a glimpse of meanings that seem far greater than the 'me' I know. But then, I get the feeling that the 'me' I know is some kind of temporary half-measure. On top of all this, I begin to believe that the pessimists are making a fundamental mistake about the rules of the game. 'Meaning' is revealed by a kind of inner-searchlight. (This is just another way of

stating Husserl's insight: Perception is intentional.) The greater the intensity of the beam, the more meaning it reveals. So a man who stares at the world with a gloomy conviction of defeat is going to see as little meaning as he expects to see.

There is something absurd about human existence. You find yourself surrounded by apparently 'solid' meanings—which are all com-
fortingly trivial. But when you try to raise your eyes beyond them, all certainties dissolve. It is as disconcerting as walking through the front door of a magnificent building and finding that it is just a façade, with nothing behind it. The odd thing is that the façade seems solid enough. This world around us certainly looks consistent and logical. It is hard to believe it is part of a bad joke or a nightmare.

Which brings us back to this most fundamental of all questions. Is it possible that the ladder-of-selves theory is the key not only to 'psychic powers', but also to the basic question of human existence, the riddle that has always tormented philosophers and theologians and 'existentialist' thinkers? Mystics have declared that in flashes of revelation the answer to the mystery of the universe suddenly becomes obvious. And again and again, they have expressed the essence of this revelation in words like 'All is well' or 'Everything is good'. This is hard—in fact, impossible—to conceive. But that is not necessarily an ultimate objection. We cannot conceive infinity, yet Georg Cantor created a mathematics of infinity which has proved to be a valuable tool. We cannot conceive the notion that future events have somehow already taken place; yet cases of precognition seem to demonstrate that, in some baffling sense, this is true.

The ladder-of-selves theory certainly throws light on some other basic problems of human existence: for example, the problem of absurdity or meaninglessness. The world around us seethes with endless activity, and this normally strikes us as quite reasonable. But there are certain moments of fatigue or depression when this meaning seems to crack under us, like thin ice. Camus compares it to watching a man gesticulating in a telephone booth, but being unable to hear a word he is saying. We suddenly wonder if our whole relationship with the world is based on a misunderstanding. Man likes to think he has a symbiotic relation with the universe, but perhaps the universe has never heard of him? Sartre calls this same feeling 'nausea'; it comes if you stare at something until your sense of 'knowing' it dissolves, and