

GOD AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Erik Wielenberg

(from his *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge, 2005); footnotes omitted)

1. The Meanings of Life

It is often maintained that if God does not exist then human life is meaningless. There are a number of ways one might understand this claim, depending on how one understands what it is for a human life to have meaning. Under one interpretation, for a human life to have meaning is for it to have a purpose that is assigned to it by a supernatural being. When a life has meaning in this sense we can say that it has *supernatural meaning*. Socrates apparently believed that his life had supernatural meaning, and he speculated about what the purpose of his life might be during his famous trial:

[I]f you put me to death, you will not easily find another who. . .clings to the state as a sort of gadfly to a horse that is well--bred and sluggish because of its size, so that it needs to be aroused. It seems to me that the god has attached me like that to the state, for I am constantly alighting upon you at every point to arouse, persuade, and reproach each of you all day long.¹

According to the Christian tradition, the life of Jesus had supernatural meaning; among its purposes was to atone for the sins of humanity. Indeed, according to some versions of Christianity, every human life shares a common purpose: to glorify God and enjoy him forever.²

Under another interpretation, for a human life to have meaning is for that life to bring goodness into the universe. When a life has meaning in this sense, the universe is better than it would have been had the life in question not been lived. We can say that a life of this sort has *external meaning*. Again according to the Christian tradition, the life of Jesus, in addition to having supernatural meaning, had external meaning. According to that tradition, a universe in which Jesus lived the life that he did is far better than a universe in which no such life is ever lived.³

Under a third interpretation, for a human life to have meaning is for that life to be good for the person who lives it and for it to include activity that is worthwhile. When a life has meaning in this sense, the person who lives it is better off having lived the life in question than she would have been had she never existed at all. Moreover, the life is one in which something worthwhile is accomplished. It is a life that has a point. It is concern to live a life like this that is expressed by the expression “I want to *do* something with my life.” We can say that a life of this sort has *internal meaning*. This concept may seem similar to external meaning, but the two concepts are distinct. This may be seen from the fact that it is possible for a life to have internal meaning yet lack external meaning.

Suppose a person engages in worthwhile activity that brings him pleasure, thereby living an internally meaningful life. Suppose further that what makes the worthwhile activity in his life worthwhile is that through it he accomplishes some worthy goal. But suppose that if he had never lived, the worthy goal would have been accomplished by someone else who would have enjoyed accomplishing it just as much as he did. In this case, his life lacks external meaning because the universe would have been just as good if he had never lived. Yet his life has internal meaning. At least initially, it appears that it is also possible for a life to have external meaning but lack internal meaning. Such a life might be lived by someone who sacrifices his own happiness for the sake of others.

These, then, are three of the most natural understandings of what it is for a human life to have meaning. With these in hand, we are ready to consider the oft--made claim that without God, human life is meaningless.

2. Four Arguments That Life Lacks Internal Meaning Without God

One way of understanding the claim that the nonexistence of God renders human life meaningless is as the thesis that if God does not exist, then no human life has internal meaning. There are a wide range of arguments that might be offered in support of such a thesis. The first of these is the *final outcome argument*. To get the flavor of this argument, consider the following remarks made by William Lane Craig in a talk called “The Absurdity of Life Without God” delivered at the Academy of Christian Apologetics:⁴

Scientists tell us that everything in the universe is growing farther and farther apart. As it does so, the universe grows colder and colder, and its energy is used up. Eventually all the stars will burn out, and all matter will collapse into dead stars and black holes. There will be no light at all. There will be no heat. There will be no life, only the corpses of dead stars and galaxies, ever--expanding into the endless darkness and the cold recesses of space, a universe in ruins. The entire universe marches irreversibly toward its grave. So not only is each individual person doomed, the entire human race is doomed. The universe is plunging toward inevitable extinction. Death is written throughout its structure. There is no escape. There is no hope. If there is no God, then man, and the universe, are doomed. Like prisoners condemned to death row, we stand and simply wait for our unavoidable execution. If there is no God, and there is no immortality, then what is the consequence of this? It means that the life that we do have is ultimately absurd. It means that the life we live is without ultimate significance, ultimate value, ultimate purpose.⁵

Suppose we think of a person’s life as a series of events. Some of these events are brought about by the person while others are caused by external forces. Roughly, a person’s life may be characterized as the sum total of all the things that happen to him while he is alive. But, goes the argument, the value of a series of events depends entirely on the value of the very last state of affairs to which that series causally contributes. If that final state of affairs is valuable, then the events that contribute to it may have some value in virtue of having lead up to a significant final outcome. If that final state of affairs is devoid of value, then all the events that lead up it are similarly worthless.

But without God there is no afterlife of any sort, and consequently every human life ends with the permanent cessation of the subject's conscious experience and mental activity (at least of any interesting sort). Without God every human life culminates with the grave and the annihilation of the conscious self, and the last outcome to which any human life contributes is an utterly static, lifeless, energy--less, frozen universe. Since such an outcome is entirely devoid of value, it follows, according to this argument, that all human lives are entirely devoid of value and hence lack internal meaning. In a Godless universe that ends with a whimper, no human life is worth living.

A second line of reasoning is based on the idea that a life has internal meaning only if it has supernatural meaning. Suppose that your life lacks supernatural meaning. This makes you a man (or woman) without a mission. There is nothing you are supposed to be doing with your life, no higher cause which you have been called to serve, no divine quest to which you have been assigned. This means that there are no criteria by which to evaluate whether your life is a success or a failure -- and in this in turn implies that there are no circumstances under which your life would be a successful one. Without some assigned goal, it doesn't much matter what you do; yours is a pointless existence. A life without an externally assigned goal cannot have internal meaning. In a universe without God, without supernatural beings of any kind, there is no one suitably qualified to assign purposes to human lives. Consequently, in a universe like this, no human life can have internal meaning. We can call this the *pointless existence argument*.⁶

A third type of argument is described (and ultimately rejected) by Susan Wolf in her paper "The Meanings of Lives". Wolf writes:

[A] life can be meaningful only if it can mean something *to* someone, and not just to *someone*, but to someone other than oneself and indeed someone of more intrinsic or ultimate value than oneself. . .if there is no God, then human life, each human life, must be objectively meaningless, because if there is no God, there is no appropriate being *for whom* we could have meaning.⁷

The fundamental premise of this line of reasoning is that a life has internal meaning only if a suitably significant being cares about or takes an interest in that life. More specifically, a life has internal meaning only if an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being cares about that life. If no such being exists, then naturally no life is cared about by such a being, and hence no life has internal meaning. We may call this the *nobody of significance cares argument*.

A fourth and final argument, which I shall call the *God as the source of ethics argument*, is based on the idea that God must be the ultimate source of all good and evil and of all right and wrong in the universe. If God does not exist then nothing can be good or evil and nothing can be right or wrong. Discussion of this fourth argument will be postponed to the next chapter. The main purposes of the remainder of this chapter are to deal with the first three arguments just described and to introduce some ideas that will be helpful in the discussion of the fourth argument.

3. Richard Taylor's Way Out: Creating Your Own Meaning

There are at least three interesting ways of responding to the first three arguments outlined in the previous section. One of these is proposed by Richard Taylor in the final chapter of his book *Good and Evil*. That chapter is titled "The Meaning of Life" and in it Taylor discusses the case of Sisyphus. Sisyphus, a tragic figure who is regularly invoked in discussions of the meaning of life, betrayed the gods by revealing their secrets to humankind and was subsequently sentenced to an eternity of stone-rolling. Sisyphus was required to roll a large stone up a hill. Whenever the stone was almost at the top it would roll back down and Sisyphus would have to begin again. Over and over, up and down the hill goes Sisyphus, accomplishing nothing. The tale is supposed to provide us with a striking example of a life devoid of internal meaning.⁸

Taylor suggests that Sisyphus's life would have internal meaning if the gods gave him a potion that filled him with an overwhelming and unending desire to roll the stone up the hill. This way Sisyphus's existence would be filled with activity of a sort he desires; he would get to spend eternity doing exactly what he wanted to do. Moreover, this route to internal meaning is available (in principle at least) to anyone. To the question, how can I make my life worth living?, Taylor answers: Live in precisely the way that you most *want* to live. The chapter and the book end with these inspiring words:

You no sooner drew your first breath than you responded to the will that was in you to live. You no more ask whether it will be worthwhile, or whether anything of significance will come of it, than the worms and the birds. The point of living is simply to be living, in the manner that it is your nature to be living. . . The meaning of life is from within us, it is not bestowed from without, and it far exceeds in both its beauty and permanence any heaven of which men have ever dreamed or yearned for.⁹

Taylor's proposal, then, is that a person's life can have internal meaning in virtue of a correspondence between the person's desires and activity. The internal value of a person's life is directly proportional to the degree to which that person's life is filled with activity in which he wants to be engaged.¹⁰ To the final outcome argument, Taylor would reply that looking to the final situation to which a life causally contributes is not the proper way to assess the value of that life for the one who lives it:

If the builders of a great and flourishing civilization could somehow return now to see archaeologists unearthing the trivial remnants of what they had accomplished with such effort -- see the fragments of pots and vases, a few broken statues, and such tokens of another age and greatness -- they could indeed ask themselves what the point of it all was, if this is what it finally came to. Yet, it did not seem so for them then, for it was just the building, and not what was built, that gave their life meaning.¹¹

To the pointless existence argument, Taylor would reply that we ourselves are qualified to assign a purpose to our lives. We do not need a supernatural being to hand down such a purpose to us. A life can have internal meaning even if it lacks supernatural meaning. To the nobody of significance cares argument, Taylor would respond that *we* are

sufficiently significant to make our lives meaningful. What is important is not whether God cares about your life but rather whether *you* care about it (in the appropriate way).

Taylor's view about what gives human life internal meaning has an interesting implication about philosophy. Specifically, it implies that there is a real danger involved in reflection on the question of whether one's life has any meaning. This danger is illustrated by the case of Leo Tolstoy. In his *Confession*, Tolstoy describes how, at the height of his literary success, during a time when he "was on every side surrounded by what is considered to be complete happiness", he found himself increasingly nagged by questions about whether there was any point to his life.¹² As Tolstoy reflected more and more on these questions, he began to view them with increasing seriousness:

The questions seemed to be so foolish, simple, and childish. But the moment I touched them and tried to solve them, I became convinced, in the first place, that they were not childish and foolish, but very important and profound questions in life, and, in the second, that no matter how much I might try, I should not be able to answer them. Before attending to my Samara estate, to my son's education, or to the writing of a book, I ought to know why I should do that. So long as I did not know why, I could not do anything. I could not live.¹³

Finally, as Tolstoy describes it, he became convinced that nothing was worth doing and lost interest in everything. Tolstoy uses a parable to describe his predicament in the following powerful passage:

Long ago has been told the Eastern story about the traveler who in the steppe is overtaken by an infuriated beast. Trying to save himself from the animal, the traveler jumps into a waterless well, but at its bottom he sees a dragon who opens his jaws in order to swallow him. And the unfortunate man does not dare climb out, lest he perish from the infuriated beast, and does not dare jump to the bottom of the well, lest he be devoured by the dragon, and so clutches the twig of a wild bush growing in a cleft of the well and holds on to it. His hands grow weak and he feels that soon he shall have to surrender to the peril which awaits him at either side; but he still holds on and sees two mice, one white, the other black, in even measure making a circle around the main trunk of the bush to which he is clinging, and nibbling at it on all sides. Now, at any moment, the bush will break and tear off, and he will fall into the dragon's jaws. The traveler sees that and knows that he will inevitably perish; but while he is still clinging, he sees some drops of honey hanging on the leaves of the bush, and so reaches out for them with his tongue and licks the leaves. Just so I hold on to the branch of life, knowing that the dragon of death is waiting inevitably for me, ready to tear me to pieces, and I cannot understand why I have fallen on such suffering. And I try to lick that honey which used to give me pleasure; but now it no longer gives me joy. . .the honey is no longer sweet to me. I see only the inevitable dragon and the mice, and am unable to turn my glance away from them. That is not a fable, but a veritable, indisputable, comprehensible truth. . .The two drops of honey that have longest turned my eyes away from the cruel truth, the love of family and of authorship, which I have called an art, are no longer sweet to me.¹⁴

In Tolstoy's case, philosophical questions and reflection caused the loss of the desire to engage in the activities that had previously sustained him. If Taylor's view about what

gives life internal meaning is correct, then philosophical reflection, by taking away Tolstoy's passion for living, rendered him unable to live an internally meaningful life. If Taylor is right, then the moral of the story of Tolstoy is: Don't think too hard about whether your life has meaning, or you may find that the very pondering of the question has given the question a negative answer. In a passage quoted earlier, Taylor says, "[y]ou no more ask whether it [your life] will be worthwhile, or whether anything of significance will come of it, than the worms and the birds."¹⁵ Perhaps we should take this not as a *description* of human life but rather as a *prescription* for how to live. Socrates is famous for, among other things, his assertion that "an unexamined life is not worth living."¹⁶ Taylor might add his own dictum: An *over--examined* life is not worth living. But can this really be right? Some detractors of philosophy might claim that devoting yourself to it entirely is a good way to render your life meaningless, but could it really be true that philosophical reflection could render all of your *other* activities worthless?

I think not; for it turns out that Taylor's view about what gives life internal meaning is mistaken. This may be seen by comparing two cases. The first case comes from an excellent article on Aristotle's views on the good life by Stephen Darwall. Darwall describes a photograph that he clipped from *The New York Times*:

It shows a pianist, David Golub, accompanying two vocalists, Victoria Livengood and Erie Mills, at a tribute for Marilyn Horne. All three artists are in fine form, exercising themselves at the height of their powers. The reason I saved the photo, however, is Mr. Golub's face. He is positively grinning, as if saying to himself, "And they *pay* me to do this?"¹⁷

Compare the case of David Golub with a variant of the case of Sisyphus: The case of the grinning excrement--eater. The grinning excrement--eater, we may suppose, has been condemned to an eternity of eating excrement. As in Taylor's version of the Sisyphus scenario, however, the gods have shown mercy on the excrement--eater by instilling in him a true passion for eating excrement. He gobbles it down night and day -- he simply can't get enough! Both Golub and the grinning excrement--eater are engaged in activity for which they have a genuine passion; each is doing what he most wants to do. To simplify matters somewhat, imagine two lives, one filled with the sort of activity in which Golub is engaged in Darwall's photo, the second filled with the grinning excrement--eater's favorite pastime. If we are to accept Taylor's proposal, we must conclude that both lives have internal meaning. But this conclusion is hard to swallow. If you were offered a choice between these two lives, would you be indifferent? Would the two lives seem equally worthwhile to you? If you are like me, the answer is no, in which case you must reject Taylor's proposal. It is simply going too far to say that whether a life has internal meaning is entirely a matter of the attitude of the person who lives the life.¹⁸

Taylor's view derives some initial plausibility from the way Taylor introduces it. We are asked to compare a Sisyphus who hates stone--rolling with one who loves it. Given such a choice of Sisyphi, any rational person would prefer to be the Sisyphus who loves stone--rolling. Taylor is right when he characterizes the gods' decision to instill in Sisyphus a desire to roll stones as merciful.¹⁹ Similarly, given a choice between a life as an excrement--eater who hates eating excrement and a life as a grinning excrement--

eater, any rational person would choose the latter. Given that you have to roll stones or eat excrement for an eternity, it is better if you enjoy that sort of thing. Taylor offers a tidy explanation for these intuitions: The internal meaning of a life depends entirely on whether the agent is doing what he wants to do.

But when we make other comparisons -- as between Golub and the grinning excrement--eater -- it becomes obvious that Taylor's proposal is faulty. A grinning excrement--eater who passes up Golub's life for the sake of eating excrement is a fool, and if the gods get him to make such a choice by instilling in him a passion for eating excrement, then this is a cruel joke rather than an act of mercy. No matter how great his passion, no matter how big his grin as he spoons it down, he should be an object of pity rather than of envy. If we want to find an adequate way of dealing with the arguments from the preceding section we must look elsewhere.

4. Peter Singer's Way Out: Meaning Through Eliminating Pain

In the final two chapters of his book *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*, Peter Singer develops and defends an alternative conception of how a human life can have internal meaning. To explain Singer's view, it will be helpful to make use of the familiar distinction between *extrinsic* value on the one hand and *intrinsic* value on the other. Roughly, the intrinsic goodness (or evil) of a thing is the goodness (or evil) it has in virtue of its own intrinsic nature, or in and of itself.²⁰ In his classic work *Principia Ethica*, G.E. Moore describes a certain type of thought experiment one can use to determine the intrinsic value, if any, of a given thing. This is the so-called "isolation test", and the method is "that of considering what value we should attach to [something], if it existed in absolute isolation, stripped of all its usual accompaniments."²¹ The extrinsic value of a thing, by contrast, is the value a thing has in virtue of how it is related to other things. The most familiar type of extrinsic value is *instrumental* value -- the value a thing has in virtue of causing something else that is intrinsically valuable.²²

Singer holds the view that "[w]e can live a meaningful life by working toward goals that are objectively worthwhile".²³ Singer takes pain to be intrinsically evil and he maintains that the reduction of the total amount of avoidable pain in the universe is objectively worthwhile. So according to Singer, one feature of at least one kind of internally meaningful life is that it reduces the overall amount of avoidable pain in the universe. But this is not a sufficient condition for internal meaningfulness. Elsewhere Singer reminds his readers of "the old wisdom that the way to find happiness or lasting satisfaction is to *aim* at something else, and *try* to do it well."²⁴ Later, Singer mentions "the need for a *commitment* to a cause larger than the self."²⁵ These passages indicate that on Singer's view, to live an internally meaningful life, one must *intend* to reduce suffering -- one must have this as a conscious goal. A person who pursues only his own pleasure and accidentally reduces the total amount of suffering in the universe is not living an internally meaningful life. Although Singer does not explicitly say so, certain remarks he makes suggest that he would also hold that one must have at least some degree of *success* in achieving one's pain--reducing goal.²⁶ At the heart of Singer's view, then, is this principle:

- (S) An activity of S's, A, has internal meaning for S just in case (i) in doing A, S is trying to accomplish goal G, (ii) G is objectively worthwhile, and (iii) A in fact leads to G.²⁷

According to Singer, one way -- in fact the best way -- to make your life worth living is to devote it to the reduction of avoidable pain in the universe. Singer calls a life like this "an ethical life" and he declares that "living an ethical life enables us to identify ourselves with the grandest cause of all, and. . . is the best way open to us of making our lives meaningful."²⁸ Singer's view seems to be that the reduction of avoidable suffering is the most objectively worthwhile goal that there is, and hence devoting one's life to it is the best way to bring internal meaning to one's life. Since this can be done whether God exists or not, the absence of God does not render all human lives internally meaningless.²⁹

To establish his position Singer adopts a method similar to the one used over two thousand years ago by Aristotle in his masterpiece *Nicomachean Ethics*. Early in the *Ethics*, Aristotle introduces three kinds of lives that humans might live. These are a life devoted to the pursuit of bodily pleasure, a life devoted to political activity, and a life devoted to contemplation.³⁰ Aristotle examines each of the three lives and tries to determine which of the three is the best human life. For much of the *Ethics* it appears that Aristotle has selected the life of political activity as the best, but, in a surprise move that has puzzled commentators for two and a half millennia, Aristotle ultimately selects the life of contemplation as the best.³¹ In similar fashion, Singer considers a variety of activities and tries to determine which, if any, hold out the prospect of providing a life with internal meaning. The activities Singer considers include drug and alcohol use, shopping, competition (both financial and athletic), psychotherapy, and, of course, the pursuit of the ethical life. In examining each of these activities, Singer seems to be mainly concerned with whether the activity in question produces a lasting sense of fulfillment. Singer reaches the conclusion that only the ethical life meets this condition and hence it alone of the activities under consideration can bring internal meaning to one's life.

It is important not to misunderstand what Singer is up to here. It can appear that we are back to Taylor's view that what gives a life internal meaning is simply one's attitude toward that life; Singer could be misunderstood as maintaining that what makes one's life internally meaningful is that it produces a sense of fulfillment. But Singer's position is more subtle than this. Recall the case of the pianist David Golub, whose photograph Stephen Darwall described in a passage I quoted in the previous section. The sentence immediately following the passage I quoted is: "Mr. Golub's delight is a *sign* of his activity's value, not what *makes* it good."³² Similarly, Singer ought to be understood as viewing a lasting sense of fulfillment as a *reliable indicator* of internal meaning -- much in the way that Descartes took clarity and distinctness in his ideas to be a reliable indicator of truth.³³ But what if the gods gave Sisyphus a potion that caused him to experience a lasting sense of fulfillment as a result of his stone--rolling? And what about a fulfilled excrement--eater? Singer is not committed to the absurd conclusion that such beings live worthwhile lives. His argument does not depend on the claim that a sense of fulfillment is a reliable indicator of internal meaning in every possible world; rather, he

needs only the weaker claim that it is a reliable indicator in the actual world. And in the actual world fruitless stone--rolling and excrement--eating do not, in general, produce feelings of fulfillment, lasting or otherwise.

From time immemorial western philosophers have claimed that a life devoted to the acquisition of bodily pleasure is not a particularly worthwhile life for a human being to live. In the Platonic dialogue *Philebus*, Socrates imagines a creature living at the bottom of the ocean with just enough of a mind to experience mild pleasure but utterly unable to reason, remember, or even form beliefs. Of such a life, Plato has Socrates say that one who lived such a life “would thus not live a human life but the life of a mollusk or one of those creatures in shells that live in the sea.”³⁴ Aristotle characterizes a life devoted to bodily pleasure as “a life suitable to cattle.”³⁵ Elsewhere he says that “even a slave, can enjoy bodily pleasures. . . But no one would grant that a slave has a share in happiness”.³⁶ Aristotle thought of slaves as less than fully human. The consensus, then, of the two greatest of the ancient Greek philosophers, is that a life devoted to pleasure might be acceptable for mollusks, cows, and sub--humans, but it is no way for a human being to live.³⁷ The tradition continues in the twentieth century with Robert Nozick’s well--known example of “the experience machine”, a Matrix--esque device that produces any desired experience in the mind of someone who is hooked up to it. Nozick says: “We learn that something matters to us in addition to experience by imagining an experience machine and then realizing that we would not use it.”³⁸

Even those philosophers who are traditionally associated with hedonism are careful to make clear that it is not the unbridled pursuit of bodily pleasure alone that they recommend. Epicurus, for example, in his “Letter to Menoeceus” writes:

When we say that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasure of the profligate or that which depends on physical enjoyment – as some think who do not understand our teachings, disagree with them, or give them an evil interpretation – but by pleasure we mean the state wherein the body is free from pain and the mind from anxiety.³⁹

Similarly, in *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill, defending utilitarianism against the charge that it is a “doctrine worthy only of swine”, notes that there are different qualities of pleasure, and that bodily pleasure is of the lowest quality and hence is the least valuable kind of pleasure: “[T]here is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation.”⁴⁰

At this point it might be objected that, at least for the purposes of Singer’s argument, the testimony of all these philosophers should not be given much weight. After all, they are *philosophers* -- precisely the sort of people who *haven’t* devoted their lives to the pursuit of bodily pleasure. Wouldn’t the testimony of those who have done so be more relevant to the question of whether such a life can bring lasting fulfillment?

One of the strengths of Singer’s argument is that he considers the testimony of those who have devoted themselves to the various activities he discusses. I will not repeat all of Singer’s examples here, but one of the most remarkable bits of testimony comes

from Tom Landry, the extremely successful coach of professional football's Dallas Cowboys:

. . . even after you've just won the Super Bowl -- *especially* after you've just won the Super Bowl -- *there's always next year*. If 'Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing', then 'the only thing' is nothing -- emptiness, the nightmare of a life without ultimate meaning.⁴¹

One piece of interesting testimony not discussed by Singer comes from an infamous devotee of bodily pleasure -- the Marquis de Sade. Here is a man who surely has some insight into whether the pursuit of bodily pleasure can bring lasting fulfillment! In Sade's story *Justine*, the heroine Justine falls into the hands of four lascivious friars who hold her captive and take advantage of her. It is telling that Sade has one of the friars make the following remark to Justine:

Spending the night with one woman always makes me want another in the morning. Nothing is quite as insatiable as our urges; the greater the offerings we make to them, the hotter they burn. Of course, the outcome is always pretty much the same, yet we always imagine that there is better just around the corner. The instant our thirst for one woman is slaked is also the moment when the same drives kindle our desire for another.⁴²

The similarity between these remarks and the remarks by Tom Landry is striking. In both cases we get a portrait of men driven by relentless desires that reappear the instant they are satisfied. More significantly, a sense of fulfillment seems to be entirely absent; the desires reappear, often stronger than before, precisely because the satisfaction of the previous desire fails to yield fulfillment.

Turning to the ethical life, Singer discusses the cases of Henry Spira, a life-long activist, and Christine Townend, who, together with her husband, sold her expensive house and flew off to India for five years of volunteer work. According to Singer, both find fulfillment in their devotion to the ethical life. Of Spira, Singer writes: "When, on my occasional visits to New York, I stay with him and his cat in his Upper Westside rent-controlled apartment, I always find him thinking about strategies for getting things moving ahead, and relishing the next challenge. I leave in good spirits."⁴³ Like Taylor's book, Singer's ends with an inspiring message. Indeed, it is clear that Singer is calling for a kind of ethical revolution:

If 10 percent of the population were to take a consciously ethical outlook on life and act accordingly, the resulting change would be more significant than any change of government. . . Anyone can become part of the critical mass that offers us a chance of improving the world before it is too late. . . you will find plenty of worthwhile things to do. You will not be bored, or lack fulfillment in your life. Most important of all, you will know that you have not lived and died for nothing, because you will have become part of the great tradition of those who have responded to the amount of pain and suffering in the universe by trying to make the world a better place.⁴⁴

In response to the pointless existence argument, Singer, like Taylor, would reply that we do not need a supernaturally bestowed purpose for our lives to have internal meaning. But Singer's basis for this claim is different from Taylor's; Singer's claim is that the presence of avoidable intrinsic evil in the universe takes the place of a supernatural commander as the thing that renders our lives internally meaningful: "There is a tragic irony in the fact that we can find our own fulfillment precisely because there is so much avoidable pain and suffering in the universe, but that is the way the world is."⁴⁵ Similarly, it does not matter whether an omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect being cares about our lives or not; preventing suffering is worthwhile regardless of whether there is any such being around to pay attention to it. So we should not be concerned by the nobody significant cares argument. In response to the final outcome argument, Singer would reply that such an argument arbitrarily places an undue amount of importance – indeed *all* of the importance – on the *final* state of affairs to which a life leads. But why single out the very last outcome as the only one that matters?

Suppose that we become involved in a project to help a small community in a developing country to become free of debt and self-sufficient in food. The project is an outstanding success, and the villagers are healthier, happier, better educated, economically secure, and have fewer children. Now someone might say: 'What good have you done? In a thousand years these people will all be dead, and their children and grandchildren as well, and nothing that you have done will make any difference.' . . . We should not, however, think of our efforts as wasted unless they endure forever, or even for a very long time. If we regard time as a fourth dimension, then we can think of the universe, throughout all the times at which it contains sentient life, as a four--dimensional entity. We can then make that four--dimensional world a better place by causing there to be less pointless suffering in one particular place, at one particular time, than there would otherwise have been. . . we will have had a positive effect on the universe.⁴⁶

Regardless of whether we accept all that Singer has to say, we are now in a position to see that the final outcome argument fails. That argument fails because it is based on what Paul Edwards calls a "curious and totally arbitrary preference of the future to the present".⁴⁷ There are a variety of ways of assessing the relative importance of various times. Singer suggests that we ought to view them as being of equal importance. Another view ranks the present and the near future as most important. This point of view lies behind the now--cliché command to "seize the day". Yes, death awaits us all, and in the end we will turn to nothing more than food for worms -- but the proper reaction to this fact is not to give up but rather to get moving! Marcus Aurelius expressed this idea in the 2nd century C.E. this way: "Do not act as if you had ten thousand years to throw away. Death stands at your elbow."⁴⁸ A third perspective views the final moments of time (or, if time has no end, the final *outcome*) as the most important, and it is this perspective that lies behind the final outcome argument. But of the three perspectives, the last is surely the *least* reasonable. Later I will offer a diagnosis as to why this manner of thinking can seem reasonable, but for now it is sufficient to see that it is not. Returning to Singer's remarks above, the proper response to the question 'What good have you done?' is 'I've made these villagers happier than they would have been otherwise -- and what things will be like a thousand years from now is utterly irrelevant to this fact.' Isn't it better that the

Nazi Holocaust ended when it did rather than in, say, 1970 -- regardless of what the world will be like a million years from now? I can remember the occasions in junior high gym class when a basketball or volleyball game would become particularly heated and adolescent tempers would flare. Our gym teacher would sometimes attempt to calm us down with such rhetorical questions as "Ten years from now, will any of you care who won this game?" It always struck me that a reasonable response to such a query would be "Does it really matter *now* whether any of us will care in ten years?" In much the same vein, Thomas Nagel suggests that "it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter."⁴⁹

There are many questions that might be asked about Singer's position. Is a sense of fulfillment really a reliable indicator of internal meaning? Is the ethical life as it is characterized by Singer really the *best* way to bring internal meaning to one's life? With respect to the second question, consider that the painless annihilation of all life would drastically reduce the amount of avoidable suffering in the universe -- yet surely Singer would not endorse this as an objectively worthwhile goal! Perhaps the ethical life needs to be characterized a bit more carefully. Nevertheless, Singer's position is superior to Taylor's in at least one respect: It provides a straightforward and plausible model that allows us to reject the first three arguments from the second section of this chapter. At the heart of Singer's view is the idea that committing oneself to increasing the amount of intrinsic goodness in the universe (or decreasing the amount of intrinsic evil) -- committing oneself to making the universe a better place overall -- can bring internal meaning to one's life. Since one can do this even if one's life lacks supernatural meaning, no omnipotent being cares about one's life, and the *final* outcome to which one's life will contribute is valueless, it follows that the final outcome argument, the nobody of significance cares argument, and the pointless existence argument fail.

5. Aristotle's Way Out: Intrinsically Good Activity

There is a third view that suggests another way of responding to these arguments. This view is the oldest, simplest, and perhaps the most powerful of the three responses considered in this chapter. This view is found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* -- and one doesn't have to read very far at all to find it. The *Ethics* begins with these lines:

Every art or applied science and every systematic investigation, and similarly every action and choice, seem to aim at some good. . . But it is clear that there is a difference in the ends at which they aim: in some cases the activity is the end, in others the end is some product beyond the activity.⁵⁰

At the end of this passage Aristotle divides activities into two categories -- those that are good because of what they produce, and those that are good in their own nature. In this brief remark, Aristotle suggests a possibility not considered by either Taylor or Singer. It is a simple yet profound insight:

Aristotle's Insight: Some activities are *intrinsically good*.

Aristotle is suggesting that some kinds of activity may be good in and of themselves. Activities of this sort are worth engaging in *even if they lead to nothing of value*. They

would be worthwhile even if they had no consequences at all. This suggests a third way of bringing internal meaning to one's life: Engage in intrinsically good activities, activities that are worth doing for their own sake. It is part of the very nature of such activities to bring internal meaning to one's life.

In the surprise ending to the *Ethics* that I mentioned earlier, Aristotle singles out contemplation (*theoria*) as the activity with the greatest amount of intrinsic value.⁵¹ This activity may be very roughly characterized as reflection on the basic nature of the universe. This activity is not the acquisition of knowledge; rather, it is reflection upon what one already knows. One of the more interesting arguments Aristotle offers to support his claim that this is the best sort of activity goes like this:

We assume that the gods are in the highest degree blessed and happy. But what kind of actions are we to attribute to them? Acts of justice? Will they not look ridiculous making contracts with one another, returning deposits, and so forth? Perhaps acts of courage – withstanding terror and taking risks, because it is noble to do so? Or generous actions? But to whom will they give? It would be strange to think that they actually have currency or something of the sort. Acts of self-control? What would they be? Surely, it would be in poor taste to praise them for not having bad appetites. If we went through the whole list we would see that a concern with actions is petty and unworthy of the gods. Nevertheless, we all assume that the gods exist and, consequently, that they are active; for surely we do not assume them to be always asleep. . . Now, if we take away action from a living being, to say nothing of production, what is left except contemplation? Therefore, the activity of the divinity which surpasses all others in bliss must be a contemplative activity, and the human activity which is most closely akin to it is, therefore, most conducive to happiness.⁵²

Whatever activity the gods engage in is the intrinsically best kind of activity; the gods engage only in contemplation; therefore, contemplation is the intrinsically best kind of activity. Thus, Aristotle singles out for the highest praise the activity of the successful philosopher -- reflection on what he has learned. In reaching this conclusion, Aristotle outdoes his great teacher, Plato. In the *Republic* Plato had argued that philosophers *ought* to be *kings*.⁵³ In these lines Aristotle suggests that philosophers *are* like *gods*. Philosophers alone among the great stinking masses of humanity are capable, at least briefly, of rising above their place in the universe and doing the sort of thing that is normally reserved for the gods. It is clear that in the Aristotelian universe philosophers hold a special place indeed!

There is an interesting contrast between the view expressed here by the great pagan philosopher and the Christian tradition that is worth noting. Aristotle praises the attempt to transcend one's station in the universe and to become like the gods. But, according to one strand of thought in the Christian tradition, this sort of thing is harshly condemned. Indeed, according to traditional Christianity, it is precisely this sort of thing that lead to the Fall of Man. For instance, in John Milton's classic *Paradise Lost*, the angel Raphael warns Adam against probing the secrets of the universe:

But whether these things, or whether not, / Whether the sun predominant in
heaven / Rise on the earth, or earth rise on the sun, / . . . Solicit not thy thoughts

with matters hid; / Leave them to God above, him serve and fear; / . . . Think only
what concerns thee and thy being; / Dream not of other worlds, what creatures
there / Contented that thus far hath been reveal'd / Not of earth only, but of
highest heav'n.⁵⁴

Later, the serpent convinces Eve to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge by telling her that if she and Adam eat the fruit “ye shall be as gods / Knowing both good and evil as they know”.⁵⁵ And, of course, it is Eve’s eating of the fruit that leads to disaster for all of humanity. The message is clear: Mind your own business, be grateful for what God has revealed to you, and, whatever you do, do not, under any circumstances, attempt to transcend your station in the universe.

What, then, are we to make of Aristotle’s proposal that contemplation is the intrinsically best sort of activity? In his discussion of the case of Sisyphus, Richard Taylor considers a version of the scenario in which Sisyphus’s labors do produce something. Taylor imagines that Sisyphus’s efforts are directed toward the production of a beautiful and enduring temple. Taylor writes:

And let us suppose he succeeded in this, that after ages of dreadful toil, all directed at this final result, he did at last complete his temple, such that now he could say his work was done, and he could rest and forever enjoy the result. Now what? What picture now presents itself to our minds? It is precisely the picture of infinite boredom! Of Sisyphus doing nothing ever again, but contemplating what he has already wrought and can no longer add anything to, and contemplating it for an eternity!⁵⁶

Taylor suggests that contemplation of the completed temple would be no more worthwhile than Sisyphus’s pointless stone--rolling in the original version of the story, and I am inclined to agree. Furthermore, the contemplation that Aristotle praises seems to me to have much in common with Sisyphus’s contemplation of his completed temple. I don’t see much intrinsic worth in either activity. If the gods who condemned Sisyphus were gods of the sort Aristotle envisions, then the fate to which they condemned him was no worse than their own.

Still, even if we reject the details of Aristotle’s proposal, we can accept Aristotle’s Insight. If there are activities available to us during our lifetimes that are intrinsically valuable then our lives can have internal meaning even if God does not exist. Even if there is no supernatural commander to assign purposes to our lives or a suitably Significant Deity to care about our lives, the existence of intrinsically good activities would make it possible for us to bring internal meaning to our lives. I submit that there are such activities. What are some of these activities? And how can I prove that my favored list is the right one? As to the first question, I have nothing particularly insightful or novel to say; my list of intrinsically good activities would include falling in love, intellectual stimulation, creative activities of various sorts, experiencing pleasure of various kinds, and teaching.⁵⁷ To such a list it might be objected: Aren’t you simply listing things you happen to enjoy doing? The answer is no. There are plenty of things that I enjoy doing but do not consider to be intrinsically worthwhile and I suspect that a bit of reflection will reveal that the same is true of you. In my own case, playing video

games fits the bill. For many years now I have had a passion for video games, and I can waste hour after hour playing them. But I do not regard this activity as intrinsically worthwhile and I think that a life devoted entirely to it would be a wasted one. In fact, precisely because I enjoy it so much and yet consider it intrinsically worthless, I intentionally refrain from purchasing home video game systems and from installing them on my computer. I know that if video games were readily available to me I would waste countless hours on this frivolous pastime. So the list of activities that I consider to have intrinsic worth is not the same as the list of activities that I enjoy.

Turning to the second question, how can I justify the items on my list of intrinsically worthwhile activities? I am afraid I have no philosophical proof for, say, the proposition that falling in love is intrinsically good. Of course, as has often been pointed out, many of the things we know are such that we cannot give an adequate philosophical proof for their truth. The method I recommend for deciding which activities are intrinsically good is a version of Moore's isolation test described in section 1.4: To see if an activity is intrinsically good, consider whether you would find it worthwhile *even if it had absolutely no consequences*. If it seems to you that it would be worthwhile then you have a good candidate for an intrinsically good activity on your hands. Claims about what is intrinsically good are the axioms of ethical theory; they are the starting point, the first principles. As such, they are unlikely to be the sort of things that can be *proved*. But it is perfectly consistent with this that some activities are intrinsically valuable -- and that we *know* what some of these are.

Aristotle's distinction between activities that are good because of what they produce and activities that are intrinsically good helps us to understand why the final outcome argument can seem convincing even though, as I have argued, it is a bad argument. The final outcome argument can be made to seem convincing by focusing on activities that are not intrinsically good. If one becomes convinced that all the activities available to us in our earthly lives are of this sort, then the final outcome of all these activities can seem to be of the utmost importance. The reason is that, convinced that the activities that make up our lives are intrinsically worthless, we may believe that the only way they can be worthwhile at all is if they lead to a worthwhile final outcome. Toward the beginning of this chapter I quoted from William Lane Craig's talk "The Absurdity of Life Without God." In that same talk Craig discusses Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Craig uses the play to explain what he thinks human life would be like without God: "During this entire play, two men carry on trivial, mind--numbing, banal conversation while waiting for a third man to arrive who never does. And our lives are like that, Beckett is saying. We just kill time waiting. For what? We don't know."⁵⁸

Notice that the activity in this example is trivial, mind--numbing, and banal. The activity Beckett singles out is obviously *intrinsically* worthless; any worth it might have would derive from the arrival of Godot. Because Godot never shows up the activity is altogether worthless. In likening all of human life to the play Craig implies that all the activities available to us during our earthly lives are intrinsically worthless. In fact, this is the unstated assumption underlying each of the three arguments we have been discussing. All three arguments assume that no activity available to us on earth has any intrinsic value; such activities can have value only if it is bestowed on them from the outside -- by

being part of a divine plan or an object of concern on the part of a Significant Deity, or by leading to something else of value. But it is precisely this assumption that should be rejected. If the characters waiting for Godot had been in the process of falling in love with each other would the fact that Godot never showed up have rendered their activity worthless -- would the entire evening have been a complete waste? Hardly.

Recall Tolstoy's example of the traveler who falls into a well. The nature of the traveler's predicament depends on what activities are available to him while he is trapped. Recall another part of the story: The traveler sees some drops of honey hanging from a bush and reaches out and licks them. In likening his own situation to that of the trapped traveler Tolstoy added the proviso that "the honey is no longer sweet to me" -- that is, none of the activities available to me has any intrinsic worth.⁵⁹

Ask yourself this question: If you found yourself in the traveler's predicament, would you have a preference concerning the presence or absence of honey? If the final outcome argument is correct it should not matter to you. But I suspect you are like me and you do have a preference for honey. As a matter of contingent fact some humans may be unable to engage in activities that are intrinsically good; they may be like travelers trapped in the well with no honey in sight. But this is hardly an essential feature of the human condition. Since you are reading this book it is likely that you do not face such a situation. There is honey all around you; you have but to reach out and lick it. You do not need God to give your life internal meaning.⁶⁰

The main character of the 2002 film *Adaptation* is Charlie Kaufman, a screenwriter trying to write a screenplay based on Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief*. At one point in the film, Kaufman, struggling to complete his script, attends a screenwriting seminar. During the seminar Kaufman raises his hand and asks the following question: "[W]hat if a writer is attempting to create a story where nothing much happens, where people don't change, they don't have any epiphanies. They struggle and are frustrated and nothing is resolved. More a reflection of the real world --" Kaufman is unable to complete his question because he is interrupted by the speaker. The latter part of the speaker's response can be construed as a response to Craig and Tolstoy in the spirit of Singer and Aristotle. It also serves as a fitting end to this chapter:

Nothing happens in the real world? Are you out of your f***ing mind? People are murdered every day! There's genocide and war and corruption! Every f***ing day somewhere in the world somebody sacrifices his life to save someone else! Every f***ing day someone somewhere makes a conscious decision to destroy someone else! People find love: People lose it, for Christ's sake! A child watches her mother beaten to death on the steps of a church! Someone goes hungry! Somebody else betrays his best friend for a woman! If you can't find that stuff in life, then you, my friend don't know much about life!⁶¹