Chapter 2:

Being and Existence, Selves and Souls

Introduction

The question this section brings up is one that has concerned thinkers of a broad variety and of many nationalities. The answers to this question can be helpful in some practical senses, but absolute answers are often unsatisfying, even though the question is a good one.

Let me phrase the question this way: “What does it mean that I am a person in a universe that asks questions about why the universe and why I myself exist?” This is a question like: “Why am I here?” or “What is the meaning of my life?”

The question is stated in terms of the universe, because that takes into account everything that I perceive and what is beyond my perception without giving priority to myself over some observation. It may be obvious that the “I” that asks this question may be the most important part. The fact of being a *subject* that experiences is a form of the answer. That is, I am here asking a question about why I exist, and why I am in a universe at all. Any complete answer is not immediately obvious, and not extremely useful, and problematically too simple to be the correct answer.

However, there are plenty of useful answers, though many are exclusive, requiring the rejection of other answers. Philosophy will not force a person to reject one or another answer, but will give the student tools to evaluate those answers and help to decide how to proceed. There are good answers to the questions, but it is likely that it

will not be complete in any substantial way. It may be that one must choose parts of one or another answer and compile a more complete and satisfactory synthesis that takes a wider view. What any answer means to be useful is what it implies for the project of guiding a person's life, of testing the candidates for truth and analysis of observations.

Religions, therapeutic communities, and other ways of life are often exclusive, but for the philosopher, those ways must be robust enough to withstand critique and examination. It won't help the proposed solution if it claims too much that its followers cannot perform.[66] The philosopher will take the claims of these groups under consideration and will evaluate them with the tools they have. But if any proposed answer limits the use of parts of the knowledge project that are considered important, it is likely that their answer is too restrictive. Though neither Christianity nor Confucianism, for example, are in their origins scientific ways of life, they do not deny the truthfulness of the scientific enterprise. Some sects though, do oppose science, but it is arguable that the theory those sects promote will not prove useful in the long run because they will miss the specific value given to the knowledge project by science.

Some other answers are so open-ended that they have little application in the real world, and they contradict themselves in practice. In a later unit, we will explore ethical systems that are like this.[67] But why would questions about morals come up in

[66] If **Religion X** claims to be everything one needs, then, why are they always fighting between themselves, leaving the poor to fend for themselves, starting or approving wars, etc.? If **X** claims to offer salvation, why does it exclude people of a certain race or behavior? If people from **X** make claims but do not fulfill them in practice, then **X** must be something different from what those people are following, or **X** is an unsatisfactory answer.

[67] One of them, *Relativism*, makes the claim that all behavior is relative. That is, murder, lying, adultery, may be acceptable for one person but not for another, and that there is no universal rule that would tell them what behavior is correct. But the failure of views like relativism is that when the relativist needs to choose between two courses of action, they will prefer one type of behavior over another. So even though there are no fixed rules, preferences, which tend to be similar in similar circumstances show that even subjective assessments of behavior are statistically relevant indicators of general moral rules or at least

this section about meaning? Because morals, which all groups of people have, show similarities across cultures, even when specific rules and behaviors are not identical. Most societies have a recognizable respect for their elders, and the traditions of their elders are likely to hold sway even when some group or individual attempts to overthrow them.

But let us settle some of the less troubling questions first. The question of the meaning of life does have some biological and material aspects. These portions of a possible answer don't settle the more difficult questions, but they give context for managing those difficulties. In other words, there are some elements of this basic answer that persist as real, irrespective of how the more important questions are answered or even speculated on.

Chapter 1 above starts us with a material context and finishes with a spiritual, or metaphysical context. Left out of the discussion above is the very fact of human being. We are born. We reproduce. We die. All of us are part of a circle of life that goes back into the corridors of prehistory, and will continue past our deaths. That is a fact we settle for ourselves early on in our young reasoning minds. That is true also for all the other contributions we make in life. We enter the great conversation[68] in the middle and leave it before it's finished. Our contributions, whether good or ill, great or small, are not often remembered long into the future. We keep better records about what we've done in the modern age, but the people who have been part of our lives, who retain a memory of

tendencies. The tendencies of societies to prefer truth-telling to lying, and the preservation of life to murder are two clear examples.

[68] The Great Conversation is just a metaphor to point out that the truths of our lives are most holistically stated in terms of our relations with the universe itself, and the people that inhabit it.

us, also pass out of existence in time. The patterns we impose on the universe as living beings become part of the stream of life, though our particular part of that stream may become indistinguishable from any other part within a few generations. This is the material context of any meaning we extract above and beyond our material existence. On many accounts there is very little people can do to change this context. We're not answering within this material context whether there is life after death, whether the pattern we call a soul persists. We will discuss that later.

With this consciousness of our temporal and temporary selves we begin the quest to discover a reason for being, for being human, for being self-conscious rational creatures. What is my purpose, and why am I here? Let's start this conversation with the barest answer, an answer given by those who believe there is no persistent soul, no life after death, no spirituality to speak of and move toward an answer given by those who believe there is a persistent soul that lives past the death of the body, and spirituality may be a combination of a variety of beliefs about God or gods, spiritual exercises, disciplines, and philosophies. These categories are often labeled as atheistic, agnostic, and theistic, though the student should not consider them fixed because of the large variety of beliefs, systems, and ways of life implied that often cross the boundaries of these simple categories.

To become a **circumspect thinker**, the student, with respect, should avoid the attitude of certainty, and their confidence should be tempered with patience until they have gained significantly more experience in understanding why people choose one set of categories over another. Also, each of the worldviews represented here have compelling justifications. But, choosing to believe one way or another is not entirely a

rational project. The circumstances of one's life, genetic inheritance, upbringing, encounters with other people, tragedy, training, the country they're born in, the relative wealth of their parents, social mobility, etc. are contributing factors toward eventual beliefs. And a child may choose to distinguish themselves from their parents, follow in their path, or find some place in between. Epictetus the Stoic thinker said that there will be some things a person can change, and some they cannot.

One must avoid judging one's own or another's chosen belief without understanding why that belief was chosen. Again, one does not choose their belief in any entirely logical and objective way. Many factors contribute to one's attitudes. Following we will examine a few of the major types of attitudes that help form our beliefs.

Most Skeptical

Let us forgo labelling these modes of interacting with the world at first to avoid hardening the categories. The most skeptical of us may not be ready to accept a wide variety of evidences. Skeptical persons do not follow any particular view. One may hold beliefs of one kind while simultaneously being skeptical about others. Certain kinds of evidences like first-hand knowledge are often preferable, though in any complicated world view, like those that exist today, we will need to take a reliable witness at face value. Historical evidences may also be acceptable, but not without asking serious questions about the historiography that supports that evidence.

Often, scientists fall into this category. For a person of this sort, there will be a preference for *empirical* evidences, that is evidences that can be observed first hand, or

reported on in a strictly objective, unbiased fashion.[69] Research that has stood the test of time is counted as the background for new learning. But possible belief is put to the test in the most stringent of ways. That is, anything that does not stand the test of their core beliefs does not qualify as evidence for new knowledge. We will discuss ways of fixing belief in the next Chapter, but for now, it might be useful to recognize that the skeptical mode stands as a strict challenge to new belief and holds dearly to knowledge that has long standing and reliability.

On one hand, this can be an advantage. If one's beliefs are already true in the best sense of the word, then they risk little when they make the effort to keep out beliefs that don't pass their test. That's fair. If, however, their core beliefs are questionable and even problematic, then their reluctance to admit new evidences can hold them back from new knowledge. The skeptical person will run the risk, for safety's sake, of rejecting some claim even though that claim may lead to substantial truth. They also run the risk of hardening their categories to the point that no evidence will be sufficient to critique their beliefs, or no evidence of a certain kind will ever get a hearing.

Let us also recognize that this spare, skeptical mode of operation may indeed be extended along solid lines to the production of truth where the presuppositions of their beliefs are also in accord with the truth. This mode has been responsible for a great deal of highly productive scientific work and the diligent effort to hold to solid principles has extended a great deal of careful theological work as well. There is a certain doggedness associated with this mode, an ethos of work, that though blind to many

[69] As we will find out later, there may be no strictly objective, unbiased reporting, but one can learn to distinguish between kinds of reporting that take their own bias and lack of objectivity into account and those that do not.

possibilities is also careful to observe the smallest detail and not eliminate it when it seems to oppose their theory.

Meaning in life may not extend to a belief in an afterlife for this person. And an afterlife may be irrelevant to them. Their concern is to get it right now, and the meaning of their life is held in their ethic, their principles, and the work they do. There is a certain focus to the skeptical life that finds satisfaction in often small, incremental, but solid gains.

On the other hand, a skeptical worldview may forbid the sort of exploration of options and ideas that might prove fruitful purely because of the risk of trying something new. When the grounds of avoiding those risks are not sufficiently well developed, or in clear violation of ordinarily accepted views, the resistance to change and opportunity may appear as bad faith, that is, faith in the feeling that their knowledge is sufficient reason to avoid the risks of exploration when their knowledge is insufficient. This is where the even the skeptic must ask the question “Do I claim to know something that is incorrect?”

Middle Ground

In the middle ground, most of the attributes of the skeptic also hold, but they are ready to entertain the possibility that they don’t know enough to eliminate the very difficult and persistent call of spirituality. They recognize that aspects of life can’t be answered by doubt, but rather by an experiment with life. The broad reach of their interests forbids closing off the mystery of life with a limited worldview such as that of the skeptic. This view may be called agnostic.

The narratives that serve them are far broader in scope than those of the skeptic including not just factual data, but myths and stories of the ancients, traditions and carefully thought-through theories, and they don't eliminate by axiom certain elements of human thinking just because they are not favorably held at any moment. They are more open-minded yet cautious about extending the boundaries of what's possible though they are not necessarily open to conversions of many kinds. They don't believe they know enough to happily abandon their worldview. Though an outsider to this view may see it as fence-sitting, their internal judgment is attempting to stay objective, and avoid committing to a view that may be mistaken.

But they are open to a variety of forms of conversion. That is, they are willing to move their theoretical grounds when enough compelling evidence is provided. That is also true of the skeptic, but there may be some conversions the agnostic will make that the skeptic won't. There may be versions of spirituality that are compelling, and ones that promise reconciliation with more believing ways of life without committing to the absolutes the believers hold.

Most Believing

The believer is ready to accept the possibility that a way of life may be productive, and they are willing to experiment with that way of life. They realize that one cannot be of two minds about commitment, either one signs the contract, obligating themselves to follow through with it, or one does not. The most skeptical refuses to admit there is a contract, those on the middle ground can't make up their mind how to proceed, or whether proceeding is any value at all. The most believing will recognize

that a cost for belief is involved, but evaluate for themselves whether the possible loss of truth is worth the risk of not choosing.

William James,[70] an early twentieth-century thinker makes an effort to explore whether taking the plunge into belief is worth the risk. He concludes that there are many sorts of beliefs even those who are skeptical adhere to for no better reason than that it is popular at the moment. He also evaluates the risk of loss of truth for those who do not wish to decide.

James lays out the structure of making a choice to believe in a way that helps us evaluate whether we should commit to that choice. He calls anything that is presented to our belief a *hypothesis*. Hypotheses can either be live or dead, that is, if a hypothesis appeals to us it is live, otherwise it is dead. Whether an hypothesis appeals to us is dependent more on us than on the hypothesis. We can measure whether an hypothesis is live or dead by our willingness to act on it. The hypothesis appears as an *option* between two choices.

This option is either living or dead as explained above, forced or avoidable, momentous or trivial. An option is forced or avoidable when making a decision about this option is either necessary or not. A forced option may be very simple to make because one choice holds the future, while the other holds all the ghosts of the past, or nothing at all. “If I get the operation I have an 80% chance of surviving. If I do not, it is highly likely that I will die.” The risk of death forces the operation, even though its

[70] James, William (1842-1910), “The Will to Believe”, in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1956), originally 1897, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_James>.

success is not guaranteed. An option is either momentous or trivial when the consequences are either important or meaningless, where making a choice will change everything or nothing at all. For example, it will make all the difference in the world whether I go to law school or seminary. It will make no difference if I choose peas or carrots for dinner tonight. In James' parlance, an option is genuine when it is living, forced, and momentous.

Sometimes a decision like this can't be made solely on rational grounds. Decisions about our futures are often like this. Whom do I marry; what should I have as a career; how should I conduct my affairs in life? There is risk of losing the truth in any and all of these choices.

The most believing is one who suggests to themselves that these choices are substantial, live options. The skeptic will withhold themselves from making these choices. That is also a form of choice in itself. The agnostic may not be able to evaluate the risk without also worrying the objectivity their agnosticism provides.

Don't make the value judgment either that one or another of these modes is right or wrong, there may be moments when one of these modes suits our activity better than the others. Some of our work requires the skeptical focus of the first mode, while other parts the most believing mode. At other times remaining undecided or refraining from choosing is the best course of action.

History of the issue

Looking at his issue historically gives us an indication about how people have answered the question about life. Often the conversation is concerned with right and

wrong, suitable and unsuitable, ethical and unethical, or just and unjust behaviors, behaviors resulting in the flourishing or lack of flourishing of human life. The differences between a just and an unjust society are not that difficult to tell. We judge by the fairness of those who lead us and the liberty of the citizens. Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century suggested that just societies are liberal with their citizens. Unjust societies, however, use threat and coercion to enforce strict adherence to their policy. Though we will leave political philosophy to another book, in this chapter we will deal more with the individual. It must be remembered though, that political philosophy reflects the rational sensibility of the age, whether it promotes the flourishing of a society of humans or not. Following are a selection of the efforts of a variety of thinkers through the ages whose concern is to understand people's responsibility as individuals in society.

In the *Analects of Confucius* the Master continually makes note of the centrality of rules of propriety. In the quotation following, note the use of this phrase. "The Master said, 'The superior man, extensively studying all learning, and keeping himself under the restraint of the rules of propriety, may thus likewise not overstep what is right.'"[71] The purpose of people here has to do with a rule that is external to themselves. The rules of propriety for Kongzi are held as superior to an ordinary person's intuition about what they should do. He defines propriety as a rule for living in a family, a society, and concerns one's behavior with respect to others. To keep to the rules means that

[71] Kongzi, *The Analects of Confucius*, tr. by James Legge (1893), Book 6.,<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/conf1.htm>, accessed 10 June, 2016.

persons restrain themselves from behavior that breaks the bonds of society. For Kongzi, morality is not only a private affair but an affair of social interaction. One must study hard, and work hard to achieve a measure of success in it.

A person is therefore defined not only by their own individual self, but by their social self. A being is therefore not merely a self but a self in society. Kongzi therefore defines being as being in society, being a member of a group and promoting the effort toward doing the right thing which will bring about virtue and the improvement of society. “Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others.”[72] The origin of the rules of propriety is Heaven itself, another word for ancient Chinese providence. Providence is here and elsewhere the idea that there is an order in the universe that people must keep if chaos is to be averted. Kongzi, and many others in a variety of ways assert that there is a sense where it is up to us to prevent that chaos, the chaos coming from living foolishly, living to satisfy our desires. The purpose of life is to live within the rules of propriety producing a culture and a society that is in line with the will of Heaven.

Fulfilling one’s purpose and discovering meaning in life is not immediately given by nature. There are many ways to go wrong, and only a few ways to go right. Meaning arises as part of a studied and disciplined life, not the result of following one’s instincts.

Plato, in the *Republic*, gives an explanation about the purpose and meaning of human life. First, he asks the question about justice. What is it and how can we

[72] Ibid., Kongzi, *The Analects.*

recognize it. The arguments of Thrasymachus and others are insufficient to answer the question about how one should achieve a just life, a rational life, a life of meaning that is good and beautiful. In order to accomplish this, second, Plato proposes a thought experiment, an allegory.

Suppose we look at the aspects of a person as if they were a city. Each of the functions of a person would be looked at in terms of an equivalent part of the city. So, the leader, a philosopher king, thoughtful and wise is responsible for the whole city. Their life would be concerned with ordering the city in a way that provided guidance and a rule of reason, aiming at the good. This is like the mind of a person. The mind should be disciplined, thoughtful and give guidance to the whole body. It should be in charge and order the life appropriately. This *logical and rational* feature of people is the first part of the soul.

The second part of the soul in the allegory of the city are the judges, soldiers, and police, the guardians of justice. This *spirited* part in a just person is to side with the logical rational part toward goodness and control the third part of the soul, the *appetites*. The spirited part is that in which the passions reside, zeal and anger, and drives the activity of the body. In the unjust person the spirited part of the soul aligns with the appetites and drives a person through desires that are in conflict with the mind, justice, and goodness, the rational part.

The third part of the soul, the appetites are related to human instinct. These are the ordinary people in the city, the artisans, families, workers of a variety of kinds. The common person is related in this allegory to normal human instinct. That is, human hunger for food, sex, domination, pleasure, riches, and praise guide this feature. For a

person to allow their spirited nature to be guided by these things would and does result in an unjust life, a life that is contrary to the needs of the individual and the society. Criminal behavior and self-destruction is the result of following the appetites as the guiding force of one's life.

Let's not jump to the conclusion that people are split into three discreet parts. None of these three parts Plato enumerates are somehow separate from the others in a single person. In Plato's picture the purpose of life is to live in accordance with reason, and to guide one's behavior in terms of what is best for society. Plato thinks that the reasoning part of humans, the mind, is the part that most corresponds with God, and therefore, the best life is lived in accordance with reason.

Like Kongzi, for Plato, people are not just individuals but social creatures as well. The purpose of people is to live well within society, and not allow themselves to be guided by foolishness, or allow the passionate nature to be guided by base human instincts. For both Plato and Kongzi, there is a sense of divine reason and providence behind the motivations a human must adopt. There are principles, that however well understood or known, nevertheless command our attention and obedience. Purpose and meaning in life are derived by paying attention to those principles, being self-controlled, and just.

Aristotle asks what the *function* of a person is. Whether a person is just or not depends on whether they fulfill their function. So, a just boat builder would be one who builds good boats, while an unjust boat builder would build a faulty ship using cheap materials and or bad craftsmanship. The function of humans is determined by their

nature. Some were born slaves while others born free. Some were born to lead while others born to follow. One could not deviate from this setting. However, a person was placed in society should remain that way. Their place in society was not, however, determined by who their parents were, but by their innate character. One could move up or down in society if their character warranted it. The former slave Epictetus wrote and taught many of the central themes of Stoic belief. He is accounted one of the most brilliant expositors of Stoicism though he was born a slave.

Aristotle defined the ethical life as one who's aim is happiness. But this did not mean the temporary happiness brought about through physical pleasure, riches, or fame. The happiness Aristotle recommended was that achieved through an exercise of the life of the mind in virtue. One achieves happiness through the practice of choosing virtue, the mean between extremes, a life of disciplined moderation. For any individual, the discovery of the *Golden Mean* is rewarded with lasting happiness. One of Aristotle's examples, *courage*, is the middle point between fearfulness and foolhardiness. On the scale where both fearfulness and foolhardiness are both vices, courage is the virtue, and the designated path for a just person to take. Courage is described as boldness to proceed when there are real dangers to avoid. It is the middle way between fearfulness that does not act because of the real dangers, and foolhardiness that pays no attention to the dangers. Courage is therefore the most adequate, the virtuous response. Action comes from an equitable assessment of the dangers weighed against the value of performing the task. A person's purpose is, therefore, to act virtuously in accord with their nature and function. The meaning of life is found by that individual when they achieve happiness by living according to virtue.

The *Stoic* way of life offers another rule. Stoic thought can be traced from antiquity all the way to the modern age. It was the guiding force of Roman law, and a cautionary note to those who would step beyond justice. Living justly was defined as a method that imitated the laws of nature. This imitation began with a study of the laws of nature, the physics, so to speak, and the discovery of the best way of proceeding in any case. Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius represent the latest and perhaps most important versions of this philosophy because of their unique association with the Roman state. The meaning of life for the Stoic was a matter of self-discipline in accounting for every aspect of their life. Tranquility came from an honest estimation of reality and one's conformity to it. Where one did not conform to that reality, one moved toward it through a careful catalog of behaviors and attitudes, seeking slow but steady reform of one's character. It is universal in its appeal, and yet difficult to master. Philosophy on Stoic accounts is not something one learns once at school, but a process of self-development that takes a lifetime of attention.

Each of these descriptions of meaning and purpose defines responsibility to a rule, self-control, and living justly in society as the best way to find meaning and fulfill purpose. And in some sense they are all correct. The best offerings in all of history have these characteristics. They recognize some version of the good life, a rule which can be attained to some degree, and a society within which one can prosper. In that sense most religions and philosophies fulfill the drive toward meaning and purpose, recognizing the broad similarities between us and our societies. We will not compare

societies, rules, or individual accomplishments here, but only recognize that humans are both individuals and social creatures. We are all made as biological, rational, and social beings. The best of us can function well in all of these arenas, though we are all in some sense limited by the particularities of our genetic inheritance and circumstances of upbringing which we cannot change. I am reminded of the Stoic virtue found in the reading of Epictetus, that one must not be anxious to change what is not in our control even though we must make an effort to change things we can and should.

In the common era with the rise of Christianity, we find a new element becoming predominant in the story of meaning. The meaning of one's life is associated not only with virtue, but with the ability to find and accomplish God's will. The mature person achieves virtue by following the will of God. For Christianity that meant the God of the Bible, a God who could be known and understood by those who believed. God was not hiding his will from people, but had revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Meaning in life was then associated with believing, and a person advanced in virtue as they learned to follow God's will. This personal theism parallels the impersonal will of heaven in Kongzi's Chinese worldview. That is, responsibility is found outside of one's character, capacities, or function in the will of a superior. The superior is found in reason, power, knowledge, insight, and virtue for Confucian society, and in God for the Christian. And of course, the context for Christian thinking is both Jewish, Greek, and Roman.

The story of a personal theism becomes embedded in much of Christian theology, where people have experienced a fall from their natural state in the garden of Eden and discovered not only that they have made a mistake but also have a weakness

of will, an inability to do right. They have suffered damage as a result of their actions, and they have lost and forgotten the very ground of their existence. Life is no longer under the assumption of a natural relationship with God and the world, but people have experienced a separation from God as well as the loss of purpose and meaning. Within Christianity then, one must choose the life in God and the will of God over against their own admitted failures. Following God becomes redemption, and successfully doing God's will constitutes the meaning of life. This is true irrespective of whether one's theology believes that Adam and Eve's sin is inherited or not.

A number of ancient voices offer this narrative. Notable among them is Augustine of Hippo,[73] or as he is known in many places, Saint Augustine. At the beginning of Book 1 of his *Confessions* you see this theology worked out in some detail. The selection below shows people as dependent on God for their life and meaning.

> Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and Thy wisdom infinite. And Thee would man praise; man, but a particle of Thy creation; man, that bears about him his mortality, the witness of his sin, the witness that Thou resistest the proud: yet would man praise Thee; he, but a particle of Thy creation. Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.[74]

In the same era, shortly after Augustine, a Christian Roman aristocrat named Boethius,[75] offered an idea that was already present but not at the forefront of

[73] Augustine of Hippo, 354-430 CE, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo>.
[74] Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, Book 1, tr. E. B. Pusey, (Project Gutenberg, 2013), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm>, accessed June 22, 2016.
[75] Anicius Manlius Severinus Boëthius, known as Boethius, 480-524 CE,

Augustine's thought. Our conversation here about what it is to be human takes a turn toward how people can live in the presence of an almighty God who has all power, knowledge, and sees everything, an idea that leaves people in a dilemma. That is, if God knows everything, then he knows my entire future, and there is nothing I can do to change it. My freedom is only driving me into a predetermined set of steps, set in stone before my birth. Does my freedom mean anything in this light? Is it true that just because someone knows something that I will do in the future that I am forced to do it? That is a good question, and it reveals the tension, still present today in many philosophical debates about the nature of freedom.

Boethius develops a view of freedom that retains freedom's real force, that is, my decisions are legitimate and they carry a necessary moral responsibility for my person to be counted free. This is often called libertarian freedom. But that is not incompatible with God knowing what I will in fact choose to do. This is a more subtle view of God that allows the legitimate being of humans at the same time retaining for God the prerogatives of a transcendent nature. Legitimate human freedom and moral responsibility are still the domain of man but still within the scope of God's knowledge. God's knowledge does not drive people to do one thing or the other, even though their choice remains present to God.

This view is contrasted with a God whose sovereignty extends to what has come to be called determinism. That is, people's choices have no effect on the outcome that God has foreseen. Living well, choosing right has no effect on the end of one's efforts if God has already foreseen that the person will be damned. Similarly, choosing poorly,

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boethius>.

living an evil life has no effect on one's outcome in judgment if indeed God has foreseen that the person will be saved. Freedom, in this view means little more than that people control only the local variables of their lives when in fact the result of their life has already been determined. The sovereignty of God therefore takes up the task of saving unworthy people, and damning objectively worthy decent people. People, in this view are nothing more than pieces on a board game subject to the judgment of their player. Some worldviews don't go beyond this, but it leaves people without legitimate, libertarian freedom. They become cogs in a machine about which they have no legitimate concern, and ultimately no responsibility. For the Christian, this also means that though they have the appearance of moral responsibility, there is no necessary accounting for their choices.

The student might see how this diminishes a person and makes God out to be a tyrant. Boethius moves the conversation in a direction that allows both the supreme prescience of God and the legitimate freedom of people. He does this by recognizing the difference between God's perception of time and ours. Humans can only experience time as a stream which inevitably flows forward. We speak of the arrow of time. For us, it only goes one direction. In going this direction, there are three distinct periods: past, present, and future. God however sees our time as a single stream of past, present, and future all in one single view. Viewing our time for God is singular, and instead of an inescapable arrow, is like a picture with past, present, and future all laid out in a single timeless stroke of the brush. The difference between God's perception and ours is significant. For us time is serial, and for God parallel. We talk about how God transcends our reality and this is one instance where that must be true. Though many

choices in our lives have yet to be made, they are still legitimate choices, because God does not make them for us. Nor does he take responsibility for our actions. And the future is not set in stone for us.

The meaning of our life is not predetermined if Boethius is correct. Our freedom is legitimate and we are held responsible for our actions. It would seem fair if our decisions were judged all on their own merits, that there would be straightforward judgment for bad choices and reward for good behavior. But no one who has passed into adulthood fails to see that there are inequities in the distribution of justice, that good people get punished, or that some bad people get away with murder. The unfairness this reveals of ordinary life can't be solved by God stepping in at this moment and redressing injustices. That would make human choices illegitimate, again making all of us the pawns of a larger game. There would be no learning, no recovering from our mistakes, no satisfaction at a job well done, no regret that strengthened our resolve to do better next time.

We are left with incompleteness and unfairness, and yet the opportunity to do good also remains, the opportunity to redress wrongs, the opportunity to choose well when the temptation to do less draws our intentions away. The substantial reward is not to those whose freedom is unconstrained by the complexity of life, but to those who choose the path to good while under pressure to do something else. This is precisely the scenario William James enumerates where an option is genuine when it is living, forced, and momentous.

At this time, we begin to see something of a need to describe the category of being human, a description that allows the legitimate observation of how humans

actually are within narratives, like the theological ones, that have great force in society and culture. The theological narratives during the middle ages have such power that it is difficult for human culture to break free of them or even to distinguish itself within that narrative. But there are efforts later on with a group of scholars we named the Scholastics. Scholasticism,[76] a mode of criticism that grew within the Roman Catholic university system in the West, focused on understanding the teaching of the church in relation to the large variety of challenges that came out of the pluralistic society in which the church existed.

A doctor of the church, Thomas Aquinas, or Saint Thomas, reawakened consideration of Aristotle's work for the West as a way of understanding some features of human endeavor. By this time the Islamic world had flourished scientifically, philosophically, mathematically, and politically, retaining much learning of the ancients by translating and incorporating their texts in libraries and scholarly institutions. Efforts to incorporate Arabic and Islamic learning by the Scholastics moved the conversation about church teaching toward understanding the place of people in a larger scheme of things. Thomas incorporated Aristotle on the side of human, scientific effort, and the theology and philosophy of God on the side of the church's relation to God in the world. Thomas' view of research therefore incorporated elements of natural and theistic philosophy in a larger system of belief. Aristotle contributed to the natural exploration of the world and people in science and politics, while Aquinas combined the ethical contribution of Aristotle with the theistic worldview of the church into a system of beliefs that moved the conversation forward.

[76] Scholasticism, 1100-1700 CE, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scholasticism>.

The system Thomas put in place incorporating human reason into the construction of a theological worldview set the stage for the Reformation and the Renaissance, eventually the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment, the modern era and the scientific project. In addition Aquinas and the scholastics set out the project of education in the West in roughly the form of Aristotle's categories.

Before we enter the modern era, let's go over a problem with freedom that persists even until today. I don't expect that we will be finished with this problem any time in the near future because the views that break the subtlety of human freedom remian attractive for their logic, completeness, and sophistication.

Libertarian Freedom

Why is freedom itself so important in all the views exposed above? Why do humans need to think of themselves as free? Are there any other options besides a worldview of libertarian freedom? Let's start with the last question first by laying out a variety of other worldviews that try to take freedom into account, but always prefer to limit that freedom in some way that takes the essential spirit of it away. The failures of these attempts foreshadow our eventual answer which will contain at least three aspects. One, our answer must be based on evidence. That is, it can't rely on theory itself for its main support, though good theory is itself a support. Second, our important choices must have the qualities William James suggests. That is, choosing peas or carrots is not the sort of choice that is important here. Choosing a mate, religion, or career, or making a sacrifice are important choices because the outcome of those choices is unknown. Making them places us at risk, and an element of faith is required to move forward in them. That is not to say that eating choices are unimportant, but that

those choices tell us nothing about freedom itself. Third, there must be a sound logic of the choice, even if only understood in hindsight.

Often, the views that oppose libertarian freedom are not opposed to making choices but relegate those choices to something less than the morally consequential kind. Or, the freedom is only apparent, not important in the overall scheme of things. But first let's discuss the most glaring problem in the quest to understand the nature of freedom. Usually the issue about freedom is stated in either/or terms. That is, people are either free or not free. But this is a mistake. There are a wide variety of characteristic contexts of being human that are not entirely free and many in which we have no freedom whatsoever. But these non-free features are not morally consequential. At least we can't be held accountable for these things.

Our genetic code is determined by our parents; our development in the womb is determined by the care or lack of care, health or lack of health, and the circumstances of our mother in the world. We can't change that. There is no choice we have in all of that. We cannot choose the family we are born into or the circumstances of that birth, either fortunate or unfortunate. In fact, until we are at an age where we can choose, libertarian freedom doesn't even exist in us, and we can't fairly be held accountable for our actions. Libertarian freedom implies moral content. Our choices mean little if they have no moral content, such as in the choice of foods we eat. But if the choice is to either obey or disobey our parents, that choice has moral value. This is not the place to trot out theories of moral development, of which there are many, but rather to remind us that human kind has been deeply concerned over the content of its choices since people began to write down their thoughts. But that is an artificial boundary. They

probably had these concerns long before they could write, or even keep track of rights and wrongs.

The wide variety of moral philosophies in the world from ancient days until today have to do with the content of our important choices, not with the unchosen and unchangeable roots of our physical being. Even the fact that there is moral philosophy and the study of ethics is evidence that our choices are important. To suggest otherwise, say by believing that moral choices are unimportant in the universal scheme of things, denies us the very center of meaning in our humanity. If we are just machines working out our programming from conception until death, then the entirety of our effort is of no intrinsic value. This is true irrespective of the existence or non-existence of a God or some higher power. We add value to the world and to ourselves by the good choices we make and detract from the value of the world and ourselves by the bad ones.

So, we need to distinguish between the kinds of choices we make and understand what a legitimate morally important choice is. This is not a theoretical problem, but a practical one of deciding when a person is responsible for their actions and when they are not. To help us with this problem I want to bring John Hospers' essay, "What Means This Freedom?"[77] into our discussion. He first asserts that some people are not responsible for their actions. This is a fair observation, but if you have any doubt, just follow along with this short outline. So, what is the criterion by which he declares people responsible, if in fact some are not? Our court system does hold some

[77] Hospers, John, in Burr, John R., and Milton Goldinger, *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ; Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 56-65. I will be quoting and paraphrasing the material throughout the explanation.

people responsible, and parents, teachers, bosses, and government all hold people responsible for one thing or the other, but what is the criterion for holding a person responsible? Hospers gives us five possible scenarios. I will state them positively then say why they may or may not be good candidates.[78]

Thesis 1: *Premeditating an act makes a person responsible*. That means if a person doesn't think about it or is impulsive, then they are not responsible. But can this be true? Hospers asserts that some acts are premeditated but not responsible and some acts not premeditated are responsible. Hospers suggests when a thing is done out of compulsion, even an act that is well planned and carefully executed is not necessarily free, and an act motivated by trained ethical instinct without further thought may be free.

Thesis 2: *A person is not responsible for his act unless he can defend it with reasons*. Just because a person can defend an act with reasons doesn't mean that they didn't do the act as "unconsciously motivated behavior." Most things that we do can be explained in hindsight, though that may not be sufficient to assign culpability to the person who acted.

Thesis 3: *A person is responsible for his action unless it is the result of unconscious forces of which he knows nothing.* Much of our behavior has its origin in our unconscious life. Appealing to the unconscious is problematic on a variety of points, and we won't explore these in any detail. The issue here is whether freedom is purely the domain of conscious choice. If the behavior is based on a now unconscious habit of

[78] The answer to this question does not answer whether a person should be incarcerated for crimes or not.

acting in such a fashion as a trained impulse, then the act may be both based in freedom and arise from the unconscious.

Thesis 4: *A person is responsible for his act unless it is compelled.* The standard illustration for this is the person who does something at gunpoint. We say, and the courts will agree, that the person is not responsible for the act. But, is the person therefore responsible for an act that is free from external compulsion? Hardly, an act may be performed under the influence of internal compulsion or habitual behavior without any reference to external compulsion.

Thesis 5: *A person is responsible to the degree to which that act can be (or could have been) changed by the use of reasons.* Hospers offers this rationale for freedom and wishes that we adopt Thesis 5. It is not the use of reasons, but their efficacy in changing behavior that is being made the criterion of responsibility. So, if we are on a path to perform an act, and someone offers us a reason why that act is not optimal in some fashion, and we change our behavior on the basis of those reasons, the original decision to act was a free act as is the choice to change our future behavior on the basis of new evidence or information.

So, the criterion for freedom is whether we can change our behavior when given evidence that the suspect behavior is less optimal than the freshly proffered one. That means we are not subject to compulsion external or internal, and can choose a better path when offered whether it is from external evidence or internal evaluation and logic.

Hospers is correct here. The possibility that our important choices have no moral value, no meaning is repugnant and on many accounts indefensible. To be able to choose a new path, whether consciously, led by evidence, or unconsciously, led by

morally upright freely chosen habituation makes sense and retains meaning. Freely chosen habituation is the mark of self-discipline, making the choice not to follow a particular route over and over, a route that may be marked by internal compulsion, unconscious preprogrammed motivations, or external compulsion.

Let's now look at criterion one. That is, a morally free choice is based on evidence. I suggested that a theory alone is not sufficient. By that I mean a global theory of human behavior based on something other than evidence. I am aiming here at two different theories: one, a theory of universal causality leading to determinism. This is the scientific method of denying libertarian freedom.[79] That is, one, if all effects are the result of causes, then there is no novelty brought about through the insertion of a theory about libertarian freedom, and two, if all choices lead inevitably to a future already mapped out, all choices are immaterial to the outcome. This is a theory about the inevitability of the future, called by many different groups, Fate.

The short form of the universal causality theory is grounded in the assumption that the entire universe operates by fixed laws, that once understood, can give us access to the causes of everything from the formation of stars to the appearance of mind. That is, rule-governed physical processes give us the ability to trace the causes of every effect, every part of our reality. It must be noted however, that this theory can't explain the emergence of complex effects that surround us. Part of the thesis of this book is that complex effects can't be explained by the simpler rules which govern their

[79] https://johnmccone.com/2019/03/29/some-important-truths-are-scientifically-unprovable/

predecessor states. That is, for example, the causal links between material physics and biological life can't be made purely by the rules of material physics. Something more has emerged in the inherent complexity of biology that forbids the notion that biology is simply the result of physical processes. That doesn't mean that biology did not result simply as a result of physical processes, but that we do not understand the physical processes well enough to say with any confidence that it must be that way. And it may be that there is some other domain of causality different from merely physical causality, say, mind or intelligence that has input into the physical world, transforming its reality in ways we cannot fathom at the moment. We do have examples corresponding to Gödel's incompleteness theorem that hint at domains of truth that are beyond our scope. But to attribute events of the emergence of complexity to something we cannot fathom leaves us little to do scientifically or theoretically. So even if there is something beyond our scope at the moment, humans will explore the available patterns, come up with a theory about it, and make testable predictions about it. Though the assertion of universal causality relies on the assumption of causality, a damaging circularity, we don't know that it is false. But, we also don't know if it's true.

The assertion of universal causality is based on another proposition. That proposition is grounded in the twentieth-century assertion of the unity of science, which assumed that *no metaphysical reality exists* whether it is God, intelligence, or consciousness that would "cause" the emergence of life. But this assertion is artificial and is itself a metaphysical statement, which by its own assertion must be false.

So, problematically, the assertion of a simple physical, material causality is only a presupposition, not a material fact based on evidence and drawn out systematically then reduced to a set of principles.

Determinism is the theory, that, depending on the assumption of absolute material causality, requires that all human behavior be traced back to genetics and training. The freedom we have is only apparent and is void of any external or "real" meaning. If we have some physical characteristic, it can be traced to our parents' biology. If we have some inclination, it is because we were trained that way. When we decide who to marry, or what job to take, it is because we are constrained to do so on account of our physical and social context, the way we were brought up, and the experiences we had.

Tibor Machan explores some of the failures of what is often called hard determinism. At issue here is whether humans themselves are agents, or mere cogs in a machine. Machan suggests that agency, humans causing some of the effects is a substantial part of our interaction with the world. The determinists counter that those feelings are deceptive, because we only do what we were programmed to do.

So, the question arises of what we think. Do we think that determinism is correct? By determinism's own account, we were then determined to think that way. But the person who believes there is free will must also be determined to think that way, and the determinist has no cause to try to dissuade them from believing in freedom. You must see the puzzle here. If our thoughts are determined by the inevitable laws of causality then contradictory views are just that and nothing more. There is no justification to have a conversation and try to convince someone who believes differently from you to switch

to your side. The problem is that we cannot evaluate the issues in any objective way whether determinism is true or false as long as we deny the possibility of freedom. Machan concludes his argument by suggesting that "we'll never be able to resolve this debate, since there is no way of obtaining an objective assessment [under determinism's rules]. Indeed, the very idea of scientific or judicial objectivity, as well as of ever reaching philosophical truth, has to do with being free."[80]

That is not to say that our forms of objectivity don't sometimes fail, but that it is possible in freedom to evaluate with a high probability of success. We often come to the correct judgment about something because we can, with a larger community of observers, compensate for the possible failures of any single myopic view. At least with a variety of witnesses it is possible to see more sides to an issue than a single one and by that eliminate simple mistakes.

There is much more to say about the failures of determinism and bad habits of rational minds that seek to place all causality within a web of natural law assuming that a logical argument does not require contact with the real world. But let's turn to determinism's cousin fatalism and work out how it errs along a completely different line.

Simply described, fatalism requires that in the events of the world along the timeline there is no surprise. This is not a remark about causality, but about inevitability. That is, what is going to happen will happen and there is nothing you can do about it. Each event is fated to happen even as if the timeline of your life is already written out from beginning to end. Like determinism you have the sense that your choices are only

[80] Machan, Tibor, in Burr, John R., and Milton Goldinger, *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ; Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 36.

the illusion of choice, and that there is no meaning to them. It doesn't matter who you marry or how many children you have or how you raise them. It was inevitable that you marry that person and have that many children. Unlike determinism, fatalism gives the future a settled quality, that it is finished already, inevitable, yet there is not a sense that causality either physical or mental plays a part. One's ability to live fruitfully is gauged by whether they learn to accept the future as it is plotted out, not whether one is able to reject the fated future and create their own.

The crux of the issue centers around whether humans can plot their own future, and whether the self is capable of being a cause in itself for changing what appears to be inevitable. If there is true libertarian freedom, then an individual is potentially a cause in itself in the web of causes that make up the physical and mental world. Legitimate change can take place, no matter how small when an individual expresses their will in response to the events of the world, steering a course not plotted out beforehand by a god or some other organizing force. But this does not mean that an individual is capable of changing every aspect of their lives. Human choice is limited to what is possible within the framework of life given to the individual.

All we've done here is reject two theoretical modes of unfreedom. We had to do that because they both smuggle in bad theory as primary justifications. They are not based on evidence. What then could we count as evidence. I offer for consideration a question about how humans react to the possibility that their whole worldviews revolve around the necessity of human accountability. What must be present in each context where we hold people accountable is libertarian freedom, or the context is forced to

dissolve leaving human society without a society at all. In this, human freedom becomes a crucial element, a fulcrum, on which all our efforts rest. It must be that libertarian freedom defines the core of what humans are.

So the evidence I offer is that of what human society would look like without freedom. This evidence takes the form of a proof by contradiction. And here is the crux of the puzzle, the point of paradox. Society would have none of the structures it currently has. There would be no need, desire, or requirement for justice, fairness, and no need for any of the structures of equity or indeed government. That is, why would we want to adjudicate disputes when everybody is just a cog in the deterministic machine. Any attempt at justice would be play acting and entirely unnecessary. Each of us would be playing out the script we were given, and much of that script would be wrapped up in the processes of carrying out the embedded instructions of our genetic code as the result of evolutionary development which itself is just a conversation between our innate machine and the environment we find ourselves in. How could there be any explanation of the difference between lying and telling the truth. Each would be motivated by the same human structures and inevitability.

Every distinction humans normally count meaningful would dissolve under the same mechanistic rubric. But, if that is so, that leaves no explanation for human striving. What would be the reason for seeking something better or different for ourselves; why would we bother competing; what future would we imagine that was different from the one programmed into us? No! We struggle in every way to retain if not the privilege of choice, then the hope of it, and strive to retain for ourselves the last gasp of freedom in the midst of intolerable servitude, even suicide, instead of the depersonalization offered

by the mechanistic rubric of unfreedom. What would we hope for, have faith in, bother to love for, if it weren't possible to change our circumstances. I can declare freely that we are not mere meat machines. Though freedom is not inherent to all the features of life, it is inherent to human life. And it is by our use of that freedom we are judged by ourselves, each other, for the theist, God, for the ancient Chinese, Heaven.

For the Christian person, there are traps in thinking that leave people in unfreedom as well. The doctrine of Original Sin as espoused by many in the Church in a variety of denominations and theologies tells of our desire for an absolute explanation for why we do what we do. But it is pernicious in a variety of ways. Simply stated, humans have all sinned because our progenitors Adam and Eve sinned. We have inherited their sinfulness. This is supposed to explain why we also sin, that is, because we are already at birth sinful. But, this explains nothing, and excuses us for individual sins because we were fated to do them. The big issue here is that if we couldn't not perform sins, then we can't be blamed for performing them, and the death of Christ is of no value because there is nothing we couldn't have done, having been determined before we were born, to sin. How could we be blamed for sinning if we couldn't have chosen not to sin. Why would Christ have come to forgive sins if we were not at fault, if it was Adam and Eve's disease we inherited. This doctrine, embedded deeply in much of Christian theology is pernicious because it makes the death of Christ unnecessary, and our Christianity meaningless.

Again this is where human freedom, in this case freedom to sin, becomes a necessary prerequisite to forgiveness. Without libertarian freedom Christianity makes no sense. I have heard a variety of people espouse belief in original sin and its consequent

poisoning of all humanity. But most people can't believe that a newborn child is bound for hell because they were born in sin. So sinfulness in this doctrine really carries no penalty in itself. What we are left with is just the same as if we didn't inherit original sin. What we did inherit from Adam and Eve was humanity with all the complexity and paradox we still find in ourselves. Original sin then explains nothing.

Another pernicious doctrine found in many forms of Calvinism is that of a poor explanation of divine election. In its naked form it states that God already elected who will be saved and who will be lost before the beginning of time. It therefore doesn't matter what your own personal will decides, whether to follow God or not. If you haven't been chosen by God to be saved, you are lost, no matter what you do. This is like determinism in that freedom is only apparent, not real, and like fatalism in that the outcome of your life is already set in stone before you ever walk the earth.

The difficulty, which I am not going to explain further because it would take an entire volume itself, is that we act as if our freedom is real despite our adherence to beliefs that contradict the very character of that freedom. We do not excuse ourselves or others, or think that there is a good reason to excuse bad behavior or not reward good behavior, and all our societies, with their variety of social structures revolve around the sense all humans have of the constant conjunction between freedom and responsibility.

Libertarian freedom as a property of humans has emerged from a bare animal rationality for a purpose that is not entirely clear to us. But to deny its existence in favor of an idea that regards it as illusion is an attempt to excuse ourselves and each other from the very responsibility that is the corresponding aspect to freedom which is the

beginning of what it is to be characteristically human, with personhood, and the possibility of spirituality, that is, a realm of being beyond the intrinsic Animalia that is the beginning of our possibility.

Since the suggestion of human superiority, as found in the book of Genesis in the Bible, people have thought of themselves as superior to the rest of the creation. It may not be true that humans are superior, but for all that we can observe materially, we seem to be superior. That doesn't imply that humans are best adapted for every environment, but for many more environments than most animals and plants. The key to that superiority is the ability to adapt to a wide variety of changing conditions. It is clearly too soon to assert our superiority to all life in the cosmos, but in our limited context we are the dominant species. Yet it is not time to rejoice in being on top, but a time to humbly accede the possibility of powers superior to ourselves and be prepared with all our tools and capabilities to hold fast the ground we have tentatively gained.

I have gotten ahead of the discussion by talking about libertarian freedom, but I felt it necessary to set it as a ground rule for discussing the modern views. It will serve as a touchstone for accepting or rejecting a view as we steer our way through the modern age.

Modern views

We will begin our exploration of modern views of the self, of meaning, and purpose with what is called The Age of Reason, including the Enlightenment, the birth of the modern society, the age of revolutions, and the modern world. The reason we move to the Age of Reason is that beginning roughly in the fifteenth century is a moment of division between the legitimate claims of the Church and the emergence of reason and

science as independent of the Church in the West. As with any era, we have chosen to begin our exploration of it with the prominent figures of the age, figures who change the nature of the conversation, the topics, and the audience. Let me add to this mix the emergence of the merchant class and the rise of Capitalism in the fourteenth century. The merchant class of capitalists become separate from and independent of the Church and the governing classes, the aristocracy who governed the feudal empires by right to use, misuse, and suppress the working class. But the merchants found a place outside this system of rules and flourished to the point that they were a force to be reckoned with. Their interests could no longer be ignored. The solidarity of groups like the merchants outside of the ruling elite, forced many of the reforms that have become hallmarks of modern republics in the West. That is for example, kings and the nobility in England and Europe were forced to relinquish legal power to groups that had already acquired much cultural capital by moving the economy. In England this resulted in a variety of charters where the divine right of kings was called into question and Parliaments were born to limit the absolute rule of royalty and extend the natural rights of the populace.

Alongside this movement the Western church had begun to splinter in the Protestant Reformation, calling into question problematic behaviors of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Beyond well-known corruption, some Catholic practices became less and less connected to the Christian scriptures that were supposed to be the justification for their thinking and subsequent authority. Martin Luther, and a variety of others challenged the Roman Catholic church and found themselves the head of very violent disputes that destroyed many lives and laid waste to much of Europe.

The tone of this era is that individuals often held opinions different from the church and the monarchy without necessarily suffering for it. And a movement toward independent reasoning and scientific exploration flourished. Many of the early thinkers of this era were people of the church, and many of them did not seek to separate from that church, but some of them were labeled heretics, and punished for their rational and scientific explorations.

A Protestant French thinker, Rene Descartes, devised a view of the self that held sway in the West for hundreds of years. For him, the body and the mind were separate substances, both real and substantial. The results of the mind, the seat of reasoning and the evaluator of perceptions were superior in certainty and truth than the body which was often deceived, could not be held to the same strict rule as the mind, was not the seat of reason, and was often compromised by emotions and appetites.

The meaning of life for Descartes was wrapped up in disciplining the mind to encompass all experience, and understand the world in terms of the mind. The senses could be deceived, and so could not be trusted, but the mind was the seat of certainty. Mathematics and logic were the natural products of the mind and could be relied on because they took their basis in the mind itself. Descartes believed that the purpose of people was to serve God and live according to his will, a thought congruent with the Western church of his era.

The concept of a dual nature, that people were composed of a body and a soul as separate substances was not new. Though Aristotle argued that the soul was the form of the body, a unity with the body, Ibn Sînâ or Avicenna,[81] a Persian thinker some

[81] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avicenna>

650 years earlier than Descartes followed the thinking of Plato, who considered the mind distinct from the material world, the only human element that was like God and had intimate contact with the world of forms, perfect templates of the material world. Avicenna proposed the Flying Man argument in the form of a thought experiment. If a person were suspended in the air and were not able to experience any sensations, then what remains in that person is the perception that there are no sensations. It would be the mind experiencing this, a separate part of the human being. Like Plato and Descartes, Avicenna did not think that the soul perished with bodily death, but that it was immortal.

A wide variety of thinkers like these held to the view of the immortality of the soul, and that one's material life on earth determined in some fashion what one's eternal life meant. Whether the soul was returned to a new body as proposed by Plato, the Hindus, and a variety of others, or lived on in a perpetual afterlife as the Christian faith proposed could not be known using the tools of perception and reason that are the only materially available tools. The afterlife, even though many people have had experiences that suggested it, could not be captured in human terms. However, some like Immanuel Kant, suggested that without immortality, one could not argue for persistent ethical truths, for an ethical law transcending human experience. Kant, though he could not prove immortality, or God, or in fact freedom, required them all for his worldview to have a stable shape that could be reasoned about sufficiently. Kent does not prove these three elements for us, but requires them nonetheless. They are the foundations for his entire corpus of writings about human being.

In contrast to this view about human reality is the view of many in the Age of Reason that the only real universe did not contain gods or spirits or any other non-material thing. To these people, the present life was all that one could have and at the end of it, death, permanent, irrefutable, and unchangeable. They argued for human life as a material unity with no mixture of spirituality at all. I propose that this view should be seen as a variety of the most skeptical stance toward belief. In the modern era, these two views, that the soul is immortal, and that it doesn't exist, are often set against one another.

For the most skeptical, those who hold to some form of *naturalism*, there is no requirement for a god to either make the universe or life as we find it today. The universe is self-forming and life emerges naturally when the right conditions are in place as they are on our earth. When there is life, evolution takes a hand in forming all the complexity in life we find today. But remember that their view of evolution has no intention, it is a bare instrument operating by the laws of nature to eliminate poorly formed life from the reproductive cycle. Only the successful living forms survive long enough to reproduce. There is no purpose that can be understood beforehand for all the forms of life that have existed in the past or have developed and survived until today. In some respects there is no answer at all for the meaning of life in this view. Life at its best is an accident, purposeless, and without need of redemption.

For Aristotle, each thing in the universe had a purpose, a goal toward which it was moving. His view held true for people as well. A human's purpose was to fulfill that goal in their life, whether it was to be a slave or a master, a thinker, a ruler, or an artisan. All of Aristotle's worldview revolved around this goal-oriented behavior. But in

order for a naturalism of the sort I describe here to be true, there can't be any previously specified goal, and nothing in the universe moves toward some internal or external goal that might be understood as a purpose. For the most skeptical, the universe is like a clock that is running on the rules of its own nature, unchanging, and inevitable. One can never really step outside those rules because they determine every aspect of the causes that make the world what it is today. You can see in a worldview like this that freedom must be called into question, or at least explained away, that meaning is reduced to a mechanical cause and effect relationship with nature, a gray expanse of purposelessness.

That doesn't mean that people can't have purposes and meaning, but that there is no overall purpose to life, no narrative that tells the story of why people are here in the first place, or what they should be doing. Many religious and philosophical narratives supply those reasons, purposes, and meaning, but the worldview of naturalism does not. In naturalism, all purposes are tied distinctly to the very narrow scope of what may be done in a life, a focus on what is available to us during life. And it must not be denied that many good things may be done by attending to these limited purposes. However, without a moral center, often supplied by the larger religious and philosophical narratives, one may not be able to know the relative value of a charitable organization or the purposes of a megalomaniac like Hitler, Stalin, or Mao. There may be no guidance for choosing to adopt the good or reject the evil, if indeed good and evil exist. Remember, this is the most spare of possible worldviews while most people act as if there is a difference between good and evil, between right and wrong. In fact, a concept of the good is required for any sense of fairness in civil government. People who don't

respond to moral stimulus that way are often considered incapable of participating in civil life. And one mustn't think that materialists, those who abide strictly by notions of naturalism do not participate as fully in civil life as religious or other sorts of people. Their chosen lack of an overall sense of purpose does not preclude them from seeking improvement in purely material terms.

Conclusions

Real problems

If it comes down to judging the value of a person in civil society, one must not do it in terms of their predispositions, philosophy or lack of one, but on the basis of their acts, whether in fact their behavior tends toward the good of society or its dissolution. For one's life to have meaning at all the basic necessities must be taken care of first. One must have sustenance, shelter, safety and security of a kind. This is why we judge people like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao tse Dong incompetent. Each promoted a twisted view of humans that took away the basic needs of some and the lives of others for reasons that fail basic tests of fairness. They did what they did by ideology, war, for revenge to secure their power and increase it. They used people to serve their purposes, and threatened anyone who would not go along with their plans.

For people to have meaning, most people belong to a group of some kind. Within this tribe, one must be secure to go about their business without threat, and also with the possibility of prospering, of hope. When a society reaches this level of security and flourishing, many aspects of human purposiveness and freedom become possible, even the perfecting of skills, the support of the weak and hurt, the thriving of smaller communities within larger ones, freedom to express oneself without hindering the

expression of others. The many varieties of good society all provide these liberties to make meaning and mutual benefit, and every form of government has an aspect of this. But people hide themselves from bad government of any kind, and must take extra caution to prevent exposure to government that would abuse their liberty. Still that may not be enough to save some and preserve civil society. In a good society both individual meaning and purposiveness is possible. In a bad one, basic necessities may become scarce and meaning and purpose may be reduced to mere survival. In a society at war, either civil or otherwise, one must first survive to ensure the possibility of future liberty. If, as is most often the case, the war cannot be justified, the perpetrators of injustice, whether they win the war or not, will often be held in contempt in future history.

It is very difficult to explain in religious or philosophical terms what the overall purpose of the slaughter of millions of people is. During World War II from 1939-1945 CE, most suggest that around 75 million people died. It is very difficult to explain that loss in any larger narrative about the future of the world, or the purpose of life and death, or the meaning of civilization. But even in war, an individual may be able to have purpose and meaning. Though evil does not permit human flourishing, no evil may of itself prevent a singular purposive kind human action.

Theoretical problems

We have discussed some forms that human meaning and purpose is found. Philosophy, Religion, Science, and doing good are all routes to human meaningfulness, while the perpetration of evil is a route to its dissolution. The difficulty that lies before the considerate human is whether there is one way of making certain that a life of meaning

and purpose can be found. On one hand, the problem is with finding a theory leading to a way of life that is of sufficient depth to guarantee no contradictions with either reason or reality. That would be enough. And there may be such a theory. The difficulty we have as humans deciding what that theory must consist of lies in the tower of Babel. Whether the biblical story is for you a fact of history or a metaphor about human accomplishment, one lesson about languages can be extracted successfully from it.

Between just two languages translation is difficult enough. Students who speak two languages or more understand this problem well. There is no exact translation between one language and another. Language contains more than words that can be strictly defined in a dictionary. So knowing the dictionary translation of a word from one language to another may not be sufficient to understand the meaning of a translated sentence. Languages, besides words, contain intentions, actions, questions, commands, and statements.

Intentions cannot always be understood without an understanding of the culture and background of the speaker. Many things hinder the understanding of intentions. In fact the problem is so difficult, that many in the modern era have abandoned trying to understand the intention of a speaker altogether. Interpreting a text has become a function of what the reader brings into their interaction with the text. Anything the writer has intended by writing is secondary to what the reader extracts from the reading. It may be true that an author's intention is not clear, and some write without any more intention than hoping to get paid. So this may be a case where the reader's interpretation has as much weight or more than the writer.

Some others have invested an intention in the text purely in terms of definitions of the words, the logic of the statements, and their own native presuppositions about texts of that kind. This method of marking intention is sufficient only to impose meaning. And though dictionaries, logic and a good interpretative method are required, these alone are not sufficient to understand the intention of a writer.

Understanding texts well requires an understanding both of the semiotics: formation of meanings in sentences of the language; syntax: formal logical structure of the language; more than a passing acquaintance with the peculiarities of the language: untranslatable words and phrases, idioms, what languages leave out entirely; etc. Understanding a language well enough to translate it involves, on top of all the technical requirements, an investment in culture and history. And even after that, one may only come to the place of knowing what in fact the limits of a translation might be without the certainty that meaning has been captured. Intentions may never be entirely clear without an explicit statement to that effect, but once a reader has done all the work, one understands the possible intentions that may be at play.

A third difficulty with discovering intentions is that under some inspiration, a writer may not know entirely the purpose to which their talents are being used. Plato tells us in the *Apology of Socrates* that poets often speak more than they themselves are conscious of. Others understand their poetry better than they do themselves. The depth of meaning was never invested in the speaker of the poem, rather their usefulness under inspiration may have been to convey the voice of their muse or god. There is also something about human consciousness and the patterns of language that forbids one from denying possible alternate interpretations, or significant alternate meanings.

Hope for Success

Here we face the problem with meaning head on. Every attempt at interpreting either a text, event, or relationship involves one or more conscious persons. Is there any hope then of getting the truth? Certainly, but the Stoics give some advice here. “Don’t expect to get it figured out once for all time. Philosophy is a lifelong project.” Michel Foucault gives some advice when he suggests that knowledge may be know-how. That is, knowledge may be a skill one has for understanding the truth. And philosophical knowledge requires discipline and moral self-formation in an on-going experiment with reality and with people. So, arriving at meaning is the work of a lifetime understanding the relations between people, words, and things. This doesn’t mean a reader will need to work on philosophy the rest of their life, but that they should take the tools they acquire here and apply them carefully throughout their life.