

A MEANINGFUL LIFE IN A MEANINGLESS COSMOS?: TWO RIVAL APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the ancient problem of meaningful life. Given the amount of evil and absurdity in the world around us, how can human life be experienced as meaningful? Two traditional approaches to this issue are identified and critically discussed: the life of action and the life of contemplation. It is argued that none of these can resolve the problem in a satisfactory manner. Finally, the notion of guilt is briefly taken up as one potential source of meaning (or of the fact that life can genuinely lack meaning and that this lack can be experienced as a loss).

KEYWORDS: Meaning in/of life; Action; Contemplation; Evil; Guilt; Wittgenstein; Nagel

THE BASIC CHALLENGE

We all seek meaning in our lives. While the meaning of life may be hopeless to find, at least if it denotes an all-encompassing, overarching meaning of one's life as a whole, meaning(s) in life may, we are entitled to hope, be available in careful philosophical reflection and evaluation.¹ The meaning of life might, for instance, be regarded as the function of a design constructed by someone else than us, presumably by an external God who created us and thereby provided our lives with meaning. If so, there is little hope in the search for the meaning of life in the absence of theistic commitments, unless one attaches some kind of a mystical metaphysical significance to the natural order of things as a totality. The meaning (or meanings) in life, by contrast, invokes the committed perspective of an agent always inevitably situated within her/his life; to experience life as meaningful is to perceive certain specific meanings in one's life. Thus, meaning in life is as much constructed as found; it must be literally made through one's living one's unique life. No external Creator or Designer is required for this process of meaning-construction to take place.

My aim in this paper is not to settle the age-old dispute between theism and atheism but to examine a fundamental challenge to the possibility of viewing human life as meaningful (even in the "meaning in life" sense). This challenge, very simply, arises from the amount and intensity of evil and suffering we cannot fail to notice in the world

1. I recall a helpful conversation on this distinction with Professor Ingmar Pörn back in mid-1990s.

around us—and it is a challenge not only for those who must, sadly, undergo such suffering but for everyone else as well. How could human life in this miserable world be (experienced as) meaningful? More precisely, given the unbelievable sufferings of our fellow human beings, how could our experiences of meaningfulness, or the meanings we claim to construct by living through our lives, be anything but illusory? The cosmos does not seem to care for our aspirations at all; in particular, it could not care less for our search for meaning. Is the concept of meaning even applicable to, say, the life of someone who recognizes that some of her/his fellow humans have gone through Auschwitz? Can the process of constructing meaning in and through life even get started in such a person's life? It is, after all, meaningless suffering that is usually presented as a fundamental challenge for the value of life, and hardly anyone can deny that the world as we know it is full of meaningless suffering.² This is one way of saying that the cosmos, as we limited humans experience it, seems to be fundamentally meaningless.

The search for meaning in life, and the attempt to understand and live with (apparently meaningless) evil, is both metaphysical and ethical. As Susan Neiman puts it in her important book on evil in modern philosophy, “[w]e ask about the point of making theoretical sense of the world when we cannot make sense of misery and terror”.³ Do we have to “deny philosophy” if we take evil seriously, admitting that it cannot, and perhaps even should not, be theoretically analyzed?⁴ These worries go to the heart of the problem of justifying a theoretical, intellectual, or contemplative attitude to life—an attitude that seems to underlie the very issue of the meaning of/in life. But it is not merely the theoretical attempt to understand life's meaning and value that is threatened by evil. The fact (if it is a fact) that “the world contains neither justice nor meaning” is a threat both to our acting in the world and our understanding it.⁵ Philosophy, according to Neiman, begins—and threatens to stop—with questions about “what the structure of the world must be like for us to think and act within it” (rather than beginning with purely theoretical skeptical issues that largely seem to define our philosophical tradition).⁶ Just

2. Evil and suffering intensify our problem but do not exhaust it, because mere *mortality* may be taken to deprive life of meaning. These problems are, of course, connected, as death itself can be, and has often been, regarded as something evil—even though the contrary view, according to which immortality would be meaningless, has also been advanced. The present paper does not directly address the issues of death and mortality; see, however, Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon (eds.), *Death and Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), as well as Sami Pihlström, “Death—Mine or the Other's? On the Possibility of Philosophical Thanatology”, *Mortality* 6 (2001), 265–286.

3. Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, paperback ed., 2004), p. xviii (1st ed. 2002).

4. See *ibid.*, p. 42. On the “intractability” of evil, see also Richard Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002). Both Neiman's and Bernstein's books can be read as reminding us of the problem of evil as *the* challenge for any reasonable or rational attempt to evaluate philosophically the meaningfulness of life, for our inescapable quest for understanding the human condition.

5. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 7.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 5. Thus, Neiman's project is to lead philosophers back to the “real roots of philosophical questioning” (*ibid.*, p. 13), redescribing the tradition of modern philosophy as a struggle with the problem of evil (rather than, say, with the problem of external world skepticism). The details of Neiman's story do not concern us here, but I am, generally speaking, very sympathetic to her project of redescription.

like the problem of evil inseparably entangled with it, the problem of finding meaning in life is “fundamentally a problem about the intelligibility of the world as a whole”, forming a link between ethics and metaphysics.⁷ It is twentieth-century evil, in particular, often captured in the single word “Auschwitz”, that seems not only to challenge all rational efforts to understand the world and our life in it but to render evil thoroughly “intractable” and unintelligible, to undermine “the possibility of intellectual response itself”.⁸

I shall discuss two quite different options in the pursuit of meaningfulness amidst undeniable, apparently meaningless evil: the life of action and the life of contemplation (as I will call them). I shall briefly take up a couple of examples in order to illuminate the hard choice between these two, but my main emphasis will be on the difficult meta-level question of how to choose. It will turn out that it is by no means clear that even a coherent methodology for seeking meaning in life is available, if one recognizes the tension between the alternatives I analyze. Toward the end of the paper, I will take up two potential ways of dealing with the tension: Thomas Nagel’s account of the absurdity of life, as seen from an objective point of view, and the concept of guilt, which I find crucial for developing an adequate view on this complicated matter.

OUR TWO OPTIONS AND THEIR HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Should we orientate in this world of evil and suffering—this meaningless cosmos in which we desperately seek meaning for our lives—primarily through thought or through action? And how should we choose, if we have to focus on one of these alternatives? What, in short, does this choice mean for us?

Let me first describe, in extremely broad strokes, *the life of action*. This ideal can be claimed to be common to traditions and idea(l)s as diverse as the Aristotelian notion of *praxis*, Marxism, pragmatism (especially John Dewey’s pragmatic naturalism), Kantian deontological ethics, critical theory, existentialism (especially Jean-Paul Sartre’s doctrine of radical freedom), and recent trends in applied ethics (e.g., environmental ethics). All of these very different frameworks picture us as active agents capable of changing the world we live in. We can, and should, take our destinies into our own hands. We should do whatever we can in order to turn the world into a better place to live (whatever that ultimately means—and here, of course, the available theories differ significantly from each other). The cosmos is not pre-arranged in any fundamental, unchangeable way; we can at least try to change it through active engagement. Irrespective of what ethical duty actually amounts to from these very different theoretical standpoints, the life of action imposes on us the duty to actively shape the world, to render it more meaningful

7. Ibid., pp. 7-8. This link could be strengthened by following Wittgenstein in regarding the world and life as, ultimately, “one”. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), trans. David F. Pears and Brian F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 5.621; for a useful commentary regarding this matter, see Martin Stokhof, *World and Life as One: Ethics and Ontology in Wittgenstein’s Early Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

8. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 256; cf. Bernstein, *Radical Evil*.

by rendering it more just or happy (in a sense the different theories specify in very different ways). In a word, the life of action pictures us as first and foremost ethical beings. It is the framework that we must adopt, if we (as we presumably ought to) find morality as the most important sphere of human life. The traditional conflicts between, say, deontological and consequentialist ethical theories are minor skirmishes compared to the basic conviction, common to these schools of moral philosophy, that the world ought to be made better, and life more meaningful, by acting in it.

The alternative, *the life of contemplation*, invokes the Aristotelian notion of *theoria* (instead of *praxis*); this ideal can be found, for example, in Stoicism, in certain Christian (especially mystical) traditions, and in twentieth century thinkers such as Simone Weil and Ludwig Wittgenstein. This is the view according to which we should (even if we never fully can) liberate ourselves from what Wittgenstein called “the problem of life”,⁹ calmly learn to “take what comes” (as the Stoic might put it), to utter (with Christians), “thy will be done”. The one who seeks to find meaning in her/his life through contemplation attempts to view life *sub specie aeternitatis*, as a (limited) whole, nevertheless finding her/himself inevitably within that whole—or, if Wittgenstein’s discussion in the *Tractatus* is found pertinent here, at the “limit” of the world and life, which are “one”. If one finds happiness in and through one’s life of contemplation, then one’s life is *entirely* different from the unhappy person’s life; “the happy man” lives in a different world from that of the unhappy man.¹⁰ Alternatively, one might invoke Simone Weil’s vocabulary and try to locate the source of meaning in the decreation or de(con)struction of one’s self, in “de-selfing”.¹¹ All of these suggestions have a religious ring to them, and it might even be said that the life of contemplation is essentially religious (even if it is not based on any of the historical religions), in contrast to the essentially secular ethical structure of the life of action.

Now, should we go on living our lives on the basis of the ideal of action or, rather, that of contemplation? How should we *rationaly* and *non-question-beggingly* make the choice between these two (admittedly only very loosely defined) alternatives?

9. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, e.g., 6.521.

10. Ibid., 6.43. See also the discussion in Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Moral Realism: A Transcendental Defense* (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), ch. 5. We should remember that Wittgenstein’s engagement with the “riddle of life” was not confined to the *Tractatus* but extends through—or at least forms a sub-plot of—his entire philosophical career. See Frank Cioffi, “Wittgenstein and the Riddle of Life”, in Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (ed.), *The Third Wittgenstein: The Post-Investigations Works* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 193-209. It should be noted that, according to Cioffi, Wittgenstein’s riddle of life, and of existence as such, is independent of any theodicy: sheer existence is mysterious, just like the “I”, the limit of the world, is. For Wittgenstein’s description of the experience of wondering at the existence of the world, see his famous “Lecture on Ethics” (1929), *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), 3-16 (reprinted, among other places, in J. Klagge and A. Nordmann [eds.], *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993]); see also the treatment of the solipsism issue in the early Wittgenstein in Sami Pihlström, *Solipsism: History, Critique, and Relevance* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2004), ch. 3.

11. See Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1947). The affinities between Wittgenstein’s and Weil’s views are remarkable, and it is no accident that “Wittgensteinian moral philosophers” such as Rush Rhees and Peter Winch have also been interested in Weil’s thought. This comparison does not concern us here, though.

Before these questions can even be posed, we must pause to analyze what it would even mean to make a choice here. Suppose you are inclined to adopt the perspective of contemplation rather than that of action. Suppose you have read the Stoics, or perhaps Wittgenstein's cryptic remarks on God, destiny, and the meaning and value of life, and have ended up with a determinist or even fatalist position, contemplating the cosmos *sub specie aeternitatis*. What would it mean to really adopt this view as your considered, reflected, "view of life", or *Lebensanschauung*? You may think that life will be easy and peaceful, and in a sense meaningful, if you just know how to "take what comes" and utter "thy will be done" whenever you have the illusion of finding yourself in a difficult situation. You may then decide to act on the basis of this position, to take it as your leading maxim in life. But in this case you have already relied on "the life of action". You have actively decided in favor of—indeed, argued for—the adoption of the contemplative (in this case, determinist or fatalist) principle. You may even have invoked explicitly ethical reasons for the adoption of the contemplative orientation, insofar as you have noticed that a mystical, religious conviction that "all is well" motivates you to help others, to alleviate suffering, and so forth. If you have thus justified your adoption of the life of contemplation on the grounds of principles belonging to the life of action, on the basis of the difference that choice makes in your practices of life, then you cannot be said to have *really* adopted the life of contemplation as your overarching ideal, after all.

This argument leads us to the problem I want to pursue in the rest of this paper, namely, the problem of how to choose and what choosing here means.

HOW TO CHOOSE BETWEEN THE ALTERNATIVES?

If we are to make a reasoned choice at all in the case I have described, it seems that it will have to be made on the basis of the life of action. Choices, in short, are human actions; they are something we make. Reasons and arguments are something that we actively present or provide. We have to *do* something in order to qualify as having chosen. Thus, it seems that action is primary to contemplation at a meta-level. We cannot seriously choose contemplation as our leading principle of life, unless we already tacitly rely on the principles of action. We can imagine a pragmatist—or a representative of some related line of thought, say, a Marxist or an applied ethicist¹²—arguing in this manner.

Isn't this "pragmatist" reasoning somewhat superficial, however? From the point of view of the life of contemplation, *any* choice we make, including the one between action and contemplation, is in a way illusory, or mere surface. This is because ultimately we can, according to the ideal of contemplation, only *think* about, (re)conceptualize, our lives and world, never genuinely change them, not even by choosing the contemplative orientation. Evil or suffering, in particular, cannot be defeated, at least not "in this world"; they can only reveal the fundamental mysteries of life itself, or perhaps God's

12. I am not implying, of course, that pragmatism would be committed to either Marxism or applied ethics, or that these philosophical orientations would have to be based on pragmatism. I am using the word "pragmatism" extremely inclusively here, to cover any philosophy emphasizing practical (habits of) action and locating even the most theoretical pursuits within action or practice, broadly conceived.

mercy—as someone like Wittgenstein or Weil might persuade us to think. Our attempts to change our circumstances in any fundamental manner will inevitably be frustrated. Accordingly, far from relying on the assumptions of the life of action, the life of contemplation uncovers the illusoriness of any allegedly world-transforming actions and practices.

We seem to end up with a stalemate. For the “man of action”, thinking, even contemplation, amounts to action, and it is, in particular, a most important action for all of us to choose between an active and a contemplative (and thus passive) mode of life. For the “man of contemplation”, acting is secondary to thought not only in the sense that the latter is more important but also in the sense that the latter is more real, leading us to the ultimate heart of things in comparison to the actions that merely keep us on the surface of the world (and life). Both perspectives validate themselves, *from within themselves*, but they fail to persuade the one stubbornly insisting on the superiority of the other perspective. This situation might be described as an endless dialectic between action and contemplation. No final solution, from either point of view, can be found for the one who is equally open-mindedly looking for sources of meaning in both.

Couldn't we then just opt for both? We hardly can, because both frameworks judge themselves as superior to the other. If we opt for the life of action, we cannot simultaneously relativize that choice, rendering it only relatively important. If we are serious about ethics, we must realize that ethical duty *is* overwhelming, even more fundamental than religious contemplation. But if we are serious about religion, and find contemplation “from the perspective of eternity” our ultimate goal, then we cannot find practical actions (and the moral duties they may be based upon) as equally ultimate or fundamental. Perhaps we *should*, if we also take seriously the ethical challenge of acting in the world, but we hardly *can*.

Our problem becomes particularly obvious if we straightforwardly, if also slightly misleadingly, construe the life of action as life guided by morality and the life of contemplation as life guided by religion. Both institutions or practices, both perspectives on the meaningfulness of human life, are *from their own perspective* fundamental, basic, autonomous, and irreducible. For the moralist, religious views and practices may and should be ethically evaluated, just like all other human ways of thinking and acting.¹³ For the true believer, the morally right or good depends on, or is determined by, God's will and becomes inconceivable if conceptualized in any other way. Alternatively, the opposition may be construed in terms of the concept of *guilt*: religion, or the life of contemplation in general, ultimately promises to liberate us from our moral guilt (traditionally through some kind of atonement process); on the contrary, the life of action never does so, because there is *always* more we could do to help others, to alleviate suffering, to do what we ought to do. For the moralist, we have never done enough, and we therefore cannot

13. Think, for instance, of Kant's way of arriving at the justification of religion only through the demands of morality. Or think of the ethical concerns at work in William James's reflections on religion: cf. Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology: Understanding Our Human Life in a Human World* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

entirely get rid of guilt as a fundamental moral condition.¹⁴ Guilt is constitutive of our moral identities and defines what we are like *qua* ethical agents.

The kind of craving for absoluteness I have described—the tendency to validate a perspective or an idea from within itself, subordinating rival perspectives—is, we might say, a *transcendental condition* for the possibility of both practices or perspectives I have distinguished. If either of these overarching ideals of meaningful life is to *make sense* as such an ideal, it cannot be relativized or watered-down in order to accommodate the other one, too. An inescapable condition for the possibility of ethics is the overridingness, absolute superiority, of the ethical point of view—and the same obviously holds for religion. There is, then, no neutral ground for making the choice, not even for choosing both. For the moralist, even the choice between ultimate foundational (“bedrock”) practices or perspectives on life must be made on ethical grounds; making such choices in any other way, for allegedly primary non-ethical reasons, would be *immoral*, because that would amount to subordinating ethical reasons for something more fundamental—and from the ethical point of view nothing can be more fundamental.¹⁵ For the religious person, again, God’s grace is the ground of all our being, including our ability to engage in morally motivated actions. Our capacity for moral reflection is also, according to the believer, a gift from God—if also, paradoxically, something demanded of us by God.¹⁶ Either way, the choice must already have been made, insofar as either framework can present itself as a rationally justifiable one, or one we could legitimately choose instead of the other.

Because no neutral, “purely rational” choice is possible in this dialectical situation, that is, because either the life of action or the life of contemplation seems to be always already “transcendentally” presupposed in any choice we make, in any *lebensanschaulich* framework we find ourselves in, are we on our way to a kind of *perspectivism* or *relativism*?¹⁷

14. For an insightful discussion of the concepts of guilt and remorse in moral philosophy, see Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (2nd ed., London and New York: Routledge, 2004; 1st ed. 1991). I will briefly return to the concept of guilt toward the end of this essay.

15. For some reflections on this, see Pihlström, *Pragmatic Moral Realism*, ch. 3.

16. One possible way to capture this difference is to say that the moralist, or the one living a life of action, may (if s/he finds religious faith acceptable) develop a *moral theology*, as Kant did, whereas the one for whom religion (and/or contemplation) is primary to moral action can only operate with a *theological ethics*, subordinating the ethical to the religious. Regarding the problem of evil, the Kantian position is complex (as Bernstein’s discussion in *Radical Evil*, as well as Neiman’s in *Evil in Modern Thought*, demonstrates); however, an interesting feature of it is that, according to Kant, “solving” the problem of evil by coming to know the connection between moral and natural evils would not only be impossible but *immoral*, undermining the very possibility of morality (Neiman, *ibid.*, p. 69). Our standpoint, for Kant, simply is not God’s, and we should not try to overcome the transcendental limits of our human condition.

17. For a discussion of relativism as a problem in post-Kantian transcendental philosophy more generally, see Sami Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental: A Pragmatic View* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus/Humanity Books, 2003), ch. 1. Let me note that my conception of transcendental arguments and transcendental methodology in moral philosophy crucially differs from the strictly foundationalist and apodictic project of justifying fundamental ethical principles, as defended in the tradition of Karl-Otto Apel’s and his followers transcendental pragmatics, recently championed, e.g., in Charles Illies, *The Grounds of Ethical Judgement: New Transcendental Arguments in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). While I agree that the constitutive commitments of moral life and thinking can be transcendently analyzed, as conditions for the

Should we just declare both perspectives or frameworks as relatively valid, non-absolutely correct, each from their own perspective? But subscribing to this compromise would amount to a choice in terms of the life of action, insofar as we would *choose* or *decide* to view both valid “in their own terms”. What is more, such a relativizing move would hardly satisfy the demands of *either* ideal, because both, as already explained, see themselves as primarily important and fundamental. Thus we wouldn’t be able to occupy a neutral ground by this maneuver, either. A tension remains, if not an outright paradox.¹⁸ None of the fundamental frameworks briefly described here can, without begging the question, legitimate its ultimate status to those who consider the other framework more fundamental, and no external philosophical analysis, or relativization, can settle the issue on a neutral ground.

A NON-PERSPECTIVAL PERSPECTIVE?

We might try to avoid the problem I have described by insisting on the possibility of finding a *fully objective* way of looking at things, a perspective devoid of our subjective idiosyncracies (whether inclined toward morally motivated action or passive religious contemplation). Here we might expect some help from Thomas Nagel, one of the relatively few analytic philosophers to have written at length on the problem of the meaning of/in life.

According to Nagel, the major source of difficulty here is a certain dialectics between our *subjective* and *objective* points of view on the world and on ourselves.¹⁹ From a highly

possibility of adopting an ethical point of view, I doubt that any such analysis can end up with justifying “first principles” or apodictic certainties, thus “grounding” morality in some fundamental (and ultimately ethically neutral) philosophical truths. On the contrary, I would be prepared to argue that such a project of foundationalist grounding is in the end (again) both impossible and *immoral*, seeking to locate the sources and foundations of morality in something allegedly more fundamental (metaphysical). If ethics itself is a “first philosophy” (as Levinas famously argued for decades: see, e.g., the writings collected in Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand [Oxford: Blackwell, 1989]), no such metaphysical grounding can succeed, while preserving the full sincerity of the ethical. Consequently, I see transcendental ethical thinkers like Illies as misdescribing both ethics and transcendental argumentation. On the other hand, I must admit that my own “softer” conception of transcendental methodology does invite the problem of relativism, though it need not and should not simply give up to it.

18. I find the tension I have located in this choice between two fundamental frameworks analogous to the one Richard M. Gale perceives in William James’s thought between his “Promethean pragmatism” and “passive mysticism”; here, the former would naturally be compared to the life of action and the latter to that of passive (mystical) contemplation. Cf. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and *The Philosophy of William James: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

19. See Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), and *The View from Nowhere* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). A very different challenge to the meaningfulness of life is presented by John Kekes, who argues that absurdity is less problematic than the facts that most people live in “brutal circumstances” and that we sometimes experience “internal disharmony”, or a “failure to identify with our projects”. See Kekes, “The Informed Will and the Meaning of Life”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47 (1986), 75–90. See also Kekes’s book, *The Examined Life* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988).

objective point of view, my life (including my birth and my expected death) is thoroughly insignificant and unimportant, and so is everyone else's. This is the point of view we might feel justified in adopting on the basis of the enormous success of natural science. This objective, non-perspectival view seems to tell us that our subjective perspectives, from which life may (at least occasionally) appear as meaningful and from which it is extremely hard to imagine either that my birth (which, objectively speaking, was thoroughly contingent and inessential, in a cosmic scale) would never have occurred or that I will certainly die at some point in the future, are deeply illusory. There *really* is no meaning or significance in one's life at all, absolutely objectively speaking. Our real condition is the absurd, pretty much as existentialists like Sartre and Camus assured us in mid-1900s, disillusioned by the extreme absurdity of the war they had experienced.

Nagel argues that it does not help us to claim that we should not be too objective and that we should take seriously our subjective points of view, too: "we can't abandon the external standpoint because it is our own".²⁰ We *have to* occupy both perspectives. Nagel arrives at the conclusion that while "the absurd is part of human life", this cannot be regretted, as "it is a consequence of our existence as particular creatures with a capacity for objectivity".²¹ Nagel, then, does not provide us with any easy solutions. He thinks, rather, that in a sense our problem has no solution, because the objective standpoint cannot be fully "domesticated" by us.²² The absurdity of our situation results from a "collision within ourselves": we are subjectively committed to our individual lives, and to our search for meaning within them, but the objectifying step is also a "natural" one for us to take.²³ It is *we ourselves* who take this step and thus detach ourselves from the particularities of our situation; life therefore seems absurd *to us*, not just to some outside detached spectator. One of Nagel's somewhat skeptical conclusions is that it may simply be hopeless to unify the subjective and the objective standpoints. The "aim of eventual unification" itself may be "misplaced"; the "coexistence of conflicting points of view, varying in detachment from the contingent self", may be an "irreducible fact of life".²⁴

Moreover—and here we arrive at something not emphasized by Nagel—even our subjective perspective of practical action may lead us to a point at which our edifice of meaning collapses. Let us recall the following words by William James, whose active, life-celebrating pragmatism was always surrounded by a full realization of the fragility

20. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 215.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 231. Contrast this, however, with Kekes's statement that while the universe is, cosmically speaking, indifferent to human projects, nevertheless "just as a storm outside enhances the comfort of being inside, so the indifferent physical world enhances the importance of the human world" ("The Informed Will and the Meaning of Life", p. 90). Nagel's response might be that the objective, detached, meaning-destroying perspective *is* part of, or arises from within, our comfortable human world, after all.

23. Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, pp. 17, 21.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 213. One of the questions one might ask at this point is whether this "fact of life" is itself subjective or objective (or, if this is a pseudo-issue, in what specific sense it is misguided to pursue it). That is, should we view our recognition of the absurdity of our condition subjectively or objectively—is the objective insignificance of our lives itself objectively important or unimportant? For some related reflections on Nagel, see Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology*, ch. 8.

of our human projects:

Must not something end by supporting itself? Humanism [one of James's words for the kind of pragmatism he defends] is willing to let finite experience be self-supporting. Somewhere being must immediately breast nonentity. Why may not the advancing front of experience, carrying its immanent satisfactions and dissatisfactions, cut against the black inane as the luminous orb of the moon cuts the caerulean abyss?²⁵

That is, even if we do succeed in seeing our lives as subjectively meaningful, insofar as the “meaning in life” is our own pragmatic creation, whether through active (ethical) action or through more passive (religious) contemplation, we must realize that it is in the end “self-supportive”, something made by us in and through our action and/or thinking, with no higher authority supporting or grounding or justifying it. This perception, by itself, may lead to a collapse of meaning. James, the pragmatist, was also a proto-existentialist accurately observing the absurdity of the human condition, yet refusing to give up the search for meaning, or the “will to believe” in the ultimate triumph of meaningfulness.²⁶

In any event, Nagel's analysis of the dialectics between the subjective and the objective standpoint does not remove our problem. If anything, it deepens it. If it is *we* who must settle the problematic relation between these two standpoints, oscillating from one to the other and back again, then we have to ask whether *this* is best done by means of action or contemplation. Thus, we are back with our original issue. While religion or mere contemplation is certainly not a serious option for Nagel,²⁷ it might be for someone who follows James. But the main point here is that even religious commitments would not help. Even if religion is an option for us, it does not remove the problem of finding meaning in life. Nor, as is well known, can it remove the problem of evil—from which we started our reflection on the problem of meaning. It may be as difficult to justify one's belief in God as to justify one's belief in meaning (whether or not these ultimately come down to the same thing) in a world in which there is as much evil and suffering as there is in ours, in a world that seems as meaningless, cosmically, as ours does. Arguably, the problem of evil was one of James's principal arguments against rationalist versions of

25. William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 55-56. This passage is also quoted by Edward Craig in his *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 271.

26. See also James's discussion of the riddle of existence, of why something (this contingent world) rather than nothing exists, in William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1979), ch. 3.

27. Despite his worries about the absurd, Nagel can be described as a thinker committed to the life of action, given his insistence on the irreducibility of moral reflection and moral reasons. In his more recent book, *The Last Word* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Nagel argues that moral reasoning cannot be reduced to anything more basic (such as individual or social opinions) and that moral objectivity is grounded in “first-order” normative moral judgments and reasons themselves (see ch. 6). While I do not share Nagel's strongly realist metaphysics, I do find this anti-reductionist argument plausible (cf. also Pihlström, *Pragmatic Moral Realism*, chs. 2-3).

theism,²⁸ and this problem should never be overlooked by anyone seeking to understand what the issue of “meaning in life” is all about.²⁹

MEANING AND GUILT: CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have already suggested, if only in passing, that *a* source of meaningfulness might be found in the humanly inescapable, yet puzzling, concept of *guilt*. I want to conclude by raising a couple of thoughts related to this concept, thus briefly returning, once more, to the relation between ethics and religion.

Arguably, guilt is such a fundamental moral category that it plays a constitutive role in the ways in which we conceptualize our ethical relations to others. Without experiencing guilt, or at least being able to do so, we would hardly be capable of employing any ethical concepts or judgments. We have to be able to acknowledge guilt, to see ourselves as guilty, in order to acknowledge responsibility for our actions. The concept of guilt, then, might be said to play a transcendental role in our ethical vocabulary, at least insofar as it is a necessary condition for the possibility of the kind of moral seriousness we (at least sometimes) regard ourselves as capable of.

Now, the two options in our search for meaning that I have identified also differ in their ways of accounting for guilt. For the one subscribing to the “life of action” ideal, guilt is primarily practical, tied to the factual situations of life we encounter. One is always guilty of something specific; moral guilt necessarily relates to what one has done or has failed to do, i.e., which worldly facts one has, by means of one’s actions, caused or failed to cause.³⁰ The meaning in one’s life will then lie in the way in which one succeeds, or fails, in promoting the good, or doing one’s duty (depending on the moral theory one holds). For the contemplative person, on the other hand, guilt is more metaphysical and mystical: because one cannot *really* change the way the world is, or the facts that obtain independently of one’s thought and action, one’s guilt regarding such practical matters of fact is of minor importance in comparison to the guilt embedded in one’s sheer existence as such, in the fact that, in Levinas’s words, “[t]he *I* is the very crisis of the being of a being [...] in the human [...], because, being myself, I already ask myself whether my being is justified, whether the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of someone’s place”.³¹ I might be guilty simply by being (t)here. And this fundamental guilt, not unrelated to—but certainly not to be confused with—the religious concept of primordial sin, might then be a source for my experiencing my life as meaningful. I should always, at any moment, be prepared to put my entire life, my *Dasein*, in question, problematizing my right to exist. Paradoxically, this insight might lead me to view each and every mo-

28. See Sami Pihlström, “On the Reality of Evil: A Jamesian Investigation”, *Streams of William James* 4:2 (2002), 12-21.

29. Again, see Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, and Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, for relevant reflections.

30. I must overlook here all the difficult problems related to agent causation.

31. Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. M.B. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), p. 28 (see also p. 164).

ment of my life as uniquely meaningful.³²

Accordingly, just like our search for meaning itself, the concept of guilt at its core can be interpreted *both* as an empirical and factual concept, tied to our actions, characterizing our practical being-in-the-world, *and* as a transcendental one, structuring our ethical seriousness as such on a meta-level, providing a background or framework without which no search for meaning makes sense. The difficult choice between the two options I have distinguished must be faced by the one who seeks meaning in guilt.

One way of redescribing the problem I have been preoccupied with above is perhaps the following: Could religion (including the religious-contemplative attitude to the concept of guilt), *for us*, play the role of what Charles Taylor has (invoking Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty) called the “background”, the implicit, inarticulate source or enabler of whatever makes sense for us in our explicit lives (in our thought, language, etc.)? Could religious contemplation, that is, be part of what makes our form of life coherent, as seen from within?³³ If so, religion might function as the background of morality, and contemplation could be the background of action, rendering the latter meaningful for us. In particular, a religious contemplation on our metaphysical guilt could then function as a condition for the experience of meaningfulness that might lead us to ethically motivated actions. But, again, such a Taylorian line of thought can only get started by first advancing religious contemplation as the more fundamental ideal of life, thereby again already having made a choice in favor of one of the alternatives, inviting charges of question-begging from those operating within the other framework. How would the religious person respond to the critic who asks her/him to justify, in an ethically acceptable manner, her/his reliance on the “background” s/he (perhaps only implicitly) invokes, and the conception of guilt embedded in it?

Again, I believe we have emptied our resources for dealing with this question. All we

32. Perhaps, ultimately, it is in literature (or art in general) rather than philosophy that the importance of guilt in our relations to others, and the specific role(s) played by this concept in our ethical vocabulary, can be demonstrated. In my view, there are three particularly compelling studies on guilt in the tradition of Western literature: the Book of Job in the *Old Testament*, Kafka's *Der Prozess*, and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Through these works (overlooking their enormous stylistic and cultural differences), moral guilt can be seen as something (lacking a better word) mystical, i.e., inexpressible in ordinary language, yet as fundamental and metaphysically irreplaceable in human life, even as a condition for the possibility of experiencing life as meaningful—or for the possibility of experiencing life as something in which the lack of meaning can be considered a genuine lack, something whose meaningfulness or meaninglessness is a genuine issue. The principal contribution of the concept of guilt to moral theory may, then, lie in the way in which it draws our attention to the groundlessness and irreducibility of the ethical: “Why be moral?” is a question that leads us out of morality (cf. Pihlström, *Pragmatic Moral Realism*, ch. 3), whereas “What have I done?”, like “I am guilty”, is an irreducibly ethical expression of moral commitment. (See also, again, Gaita's penetrating *Good and Evil*.)

33. For Taylor, surely, religion is largely an implicit background, rarely explicitly thematized in his philosophical writings but always to some extent present. Cf. the closing pages of Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); on the concept of the background, see especially Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), and Taylor, “Rorty and Philosophy”, in Charles Guignon and David N. Hiley (eds.), *Richard Rorty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

seem to have been left with is the endless dialectic between the perspectives or fundamental frameworks we started with. No Nagelian fully objective, non-perspectival “view from nowhere” is available for us, if we recognize our human limitations. *We* cannot—though perhaps a non-human being, such as God, can, if there is such a being—avoid the choice between two different perspectives simply by seeking to view our world and lives non-perspectivally, in a cosmic scale. Meaning is a human (and therefore always perspectival) category, not a category of the non-human, objective world itself.³⁴ Yet Nagel may, therefore, be correct in emphasizing the absurdity of our condition. Given that even the methodological issue of how to deal with the different choices we can and must make in our search for meaning will be left unresolved, it is obvious that the question of meaning itself will also be left unanswered.

Referring to Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, Neiman writes:

Dostoevsky underlined the idea that the problem of evil is not just one more mystery. It is so central to our lives that if reason stumbles there, it must give way to faith. If you cannot understand why children are tortured, nothing else you understand really matters. But the very attempt to understand it requires at least accepting it as part of the world that must be investigated. Some hold even this much acceptance to be unacceptable. Thus the rejection of theodicy becomes the rejection of comprehension itself.³⁵

The problem of evil is, then, a real test case for any views that may be defended regarding the issue of meaning. If no meaning can be found in a world of evil and suffering—in a world in which children are led to gas chambers—then the only *ethically* acceptable reaction *might* be to give up the intellectual, rational search for meaning altogether and to adopt a *religious* faith instead, thus moving from action to contemplation. This might, moreover, be the only decent way to live with one’s inescapable guilt, with one’s being part of a world in which children are tortured. But, again, such a move could also be ethically (and perhaps even religiously?) challenged. Would the move from ethics to religion really be a move beyond the life of action, if religious faith were chosen because of its potential ethical results, viz., because it would enable us to avoid an ethically problematic over-intellectualization of our situation? Would such a faith be genuine? Our deepest questions, again, will be left unanswered.³⁶

The possibility remains, however, that someone—perhaps a pragmatist of sorts—might find *this* frustrating situation itself meaningful. That is, the fact that no final answers, either substantial or methodological, to our worries about meaningfulness have been or ever can be given (as far as we can see, on the grounds of the considerations I have provided), as well as the fact that we (insofar as we are able to identify ourselves

34. Cf. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 328.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 325.

36. Let me note that while I find Neiman’s (*ibid.*) rewriting of the history of modern philosophy in terms of the problem of evil highly interesting and plausible, her distinction between the traditions of theodicy and of “condemning the architect” does not correspond to my distinction between action and contemplation. Both theodicy and anti-theodicy may, in principle, choose either reaction to the issue of meaning—and will then have to face the corresponding problems, roughly in the way I have sketched.

as ethically concerned agents) inevitably find ourselves guilty (and that we if we don't, we *ought to* find ourselves guilty on a meta-level), might be taken to be among the key potential sources of meaning in our lives. These might be fragile and definitely less than fully consoling sources of meaning, but they might be sources nonetheless. It is with this moderately promising thought that I want to close.

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