

The Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers

Edited by Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia

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The Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers reveals how great philosophers of the past sought to answer the question of the meaning of life. This edited collection includes thirty-five chapters which each focus on a major philosophical figure, from Confucius to Rorty, and that imaginatively engage with the topic from their perspective. This volume also contains a Postscript on the historical origins and original significance of the phrase 'the meaning of life'.

Written by leading experts in the field, such as A.C. Grayling, Thaddeus Metz and John Cottingham, this unique and engaging book explores the relevance of the history of philosophy to contemporary debates. It will prove essential reading for students and scholars studying the history of philosophy, philosophy of religion, ethics, metaphysics or comparative philosophy.

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30 Weil and the meaning of life

LISSA MCCULLOUGH

In the final years of her short life, Simone Weil's philosophical perspective was profoundly transformed by the unexpected religious turn that occurred in her late twenties.¹ The later Weil, now transmuted into a religious thinker, believed that the transcendent meaning of life is narrated in the story of Job, which she judged to be an utterly pure account of spiritual purification, the perfect exemplification of a human soul under trial. In the course of his endless afflictions, Job discovers a divine grace beyond every possible mundane consolation (Job 19.25–27; Weil 1970: 139).² Weil attests: "Supernatural compassion is a bitterness without consolation, but one that envelops the void into which grace descends. Let it be an *irreducible* bitterness, like the irreducible bitterness of the suffering one undergoes in the flesh [In Job,] the contemplation of human misery violently pulls us toward God" (Weil 1956: 281). Life's ultimate meaning, for Weil, is a transcendent contact with a reality that is most real to the one who suffers catastrophic loss of meaning, rather than to the one who is confident of life's meaning. Readers in search of "existential meaning" are likely to balk at the extremity of Weil's spiritual asceticism; she is profoundly skeptical with regard to not only commonplace social sentiments and naive optimisms but also to the most austere consolations resorted to by God-obsessed mystics and saints. In her view, even if they succeed in being self-lacerating ascetics and self-denying minimalists, in finding any consolation whatsoever they have their reward. This is because, for her as a Christian, crucifixion is the central mystery that grounds pure faith and renders joy transcendent. Transcendent joy is not merely a product of happy circumstances, destined to be demolished by a change in conditions, but is a redemptive joy that abides in the midst of abject affliction (*malheur*) and most extreme forms of suffering.

William James helpfully distinguished between the healthy-minded once-born soul and the sick soul (James 1902: lectures 4–7), but to contend with Simone Weil's notion of spiritual purity we must interrogate this distinction between sickness and wellness, recognizing it to be a social construct that is itself highly relative to truth conditions, to the exigencies of reality within which life is lived. Attitudes that appear healthy and adaptive in the context of undisturbed civil society suddenly become maladaptive under the

conditions of a concentration camp. Souls that embrace their illusions greedily, without a second thought, appear quite hale from the point of view of privileged social life while being utterly deluded or nescient concerning the actual conditions of their existence.

The only meaning worth finding in life, ultimately, is spiritual salvation – identical to sanctification. The *true* meaning of life transcends life; all other meanings are conditional and ephemeral. Life as such persists as a supremely complex set of conditions, therefore life can have no meaning that is not essentially conditional, vulnerable to destruction or dissolution, except for one unconditional possibility that is a surd, an impossibility – that is, to be spiritually detached from all expectation of meaning, from the very notion of life's having a meaning. To live thus is to *transcend* in an authentically spiritual sense, in total detachment from illusion and consolation; it is to *live beyond life* in pure faith, embodying a supernatural compassion suspended in the void.

For Weil, truth trumps life. Life is a lie; only death is true.³ The authentic saint is marked by a radical humility, a spiritual poverty, an uncompromising passion for truth that is extraordinarily rare precisely because *greed for life* is the fundamental corruption that motivates the living. Human beings are prone to cling to illusion precisely because we prefer falsehood to crucifying truth. As Matthew 16.25 avers, the truth will make you free, but it will do so by taking your life.

The natural joy experienced in life is beautiful, a grace to be loved and relished with religious awe, as God the creator is the giver of every such natural joy. But natural joy is grounded in a set of conditions that will pass. When the time comes that the conditional joy passes, we must choose the truth of reality (crucifixion) over illusions that console, conceal, and deny this bereft condition. This brings us to a core structural tenet of Weil's religious thought, which employs and enlarges Plato's distinction between necessity and the good (see *Republic* 6.493c; *Timaeus* 47e–48a). "One should ever be conscious of the impossibility of good, that is to say, of how much the essence of the necessary differs from that of the good" (Weil 1956: 410). Weil maintains that the world is necessity, not purpose (Weil 1968: 196). "The sensible universe has no other reality than that of necessity, as every phenomenon is a modification of the distribution of energy, hence is determined by the laws of energy" (Weil 1949: 293).

In consequence, when we reach the end of our natural energy, our will is rendered impotent and cast into the void. Our response to the shock of impotence is to wail, to rail, to lash out with *ressentiment*. There is a wrenching of every natural expectation in us; "meaning" fails, perhaps never to return. Weil employs the analogy of a cow reaching the end of her tether – suddenly brought to her knees: "End of using my energy" (Weil 1956: 179). On these grounds Weil rejected Henri Bergson's notion of *élan vital*, the energy of organic life, as a philosophical or spiritual basis on which to rely for meaning (Weil 1956: 167–68; 1949: 249). *Élan vital* offers nothing to the

sufferer of extreme *malheur* whose afflictions extinguish all natural joy and natural energy, suddenly bereft of every foothold for worldly meaning by an infinite suffering without meaning. Only faith in the thought of God's voluntary self-emptying and crucifixion can offer a grace that reaches the soul in such a bottomless hell.

To know what is impossible for us by nature is the first opening to supernatural possibility, hence Weil considered it an urgent and essential task to formulate a logic of the absurd (Weil 1970: 182). Our life is nothing but impossibility, absurdity: with all our being we desire a good that does not exist – the existence of which is impossible – and on the other hand we suffer an ironclad necessity that exists but is not good. Really to experience this impossibility through suffering is to undergo a death more encompassing than a merely personal or bodily death. “Impossibility – that is, radical impossibility clearly perceived, absurdity – is the gate leading to the supernatural. All we can do is to knock on it. It is another who opens” (Weil 1956: 411–13). An attachment that contains an impossibility is a *metaxu* (ibid.: 222).⁴

Given that our life is an impossible attachment, nothing less than a wrenching absolute detachment – acceptance of the void – makes possible the initial birth of the spiritual capacity to be nourished by the light of a transcendent truth. It is our contradictory attachment to life – which we actively prefer to seeing and assenting to the truth of reality – that results in our incapacity to feed on light rather than on natural energy. “There is only one fault: incapacity to feed upon light; for in the absence of this capacity, all faults are possible and none is avoidable” (ibid.: 223). Ours is not to judge, since all human faults are worth the same. To be just, to be pure in spirit, it is necessary to be naked and dead (Weil 1989–2006: III, 96, my translation).

Light is the transcendent food that feeds the soul with beauty rather than worldly energy, if only we can detach from life and accept that death is the truth; that is, if we do not grasp at life, if we let it be conditional and beyond the reach of our will, we can simply *witness* reality without insisting on *having* it. Weil refers to this light as a supernatural beauty that is “imperceptible”: meaning that the soul is no longer *feeding on* anything but is rather *fed by* a light in the void, a gratuitous grace that is perceptible only to a spiritually transformed capacity to see.

Beauty is always a miracle. But the miracle is raised to the second degree when the soul receives an impression of beauty which, while it is beyond all sense perception is no abstraction, but real and direct as the impression caused by a song at the moment it reaches our ears Everything happens as though, by a miraculous favor, our very senses themselves had been made aware that silence is not the absence of sounds, but something infinitely more real than sounds, and the center of a harmony more perfect than anything which a combination of sounds can produce.

(Weil 1951: 213)

This beauty is the face of the eternal “yes” (Weil 1970: 194); the beauty of God's creation is an absolute YES, a “yes” that is inaudibly audible in the effect of every heartrending song, captivating landscape, glorious saintly act, and the dark emptiness of the void.

Our experiences of beauty and suffering alike are manifestations of our desire. In beauty there is something irreducible, exactly as there is in physical suffering. Indeed, enjoyment of beauty is a “suffering” of the necessity embedded in reality, unaccompanied by pain; it is the appearance of necessity when it manifests itself as desirable. Whereas beauty gives joy through a sense of perfect finality, suffering imposes a sense of perfect emptiness of finality: absence of significance, futility, meaninglessness, void. Both beauty and suffering reflect the same irreducibility of reality *qua* real, an irreducibility that is impenetrable for the intelligence (Weil 1956: 308). The essence of reality lies in beauty, or “transcendent appropriateness” (ibid.: 515), for beauty is the manifest appearance of reality (Weil 1970: 341); and joy, Weil proposes, is the fullness of the sentiment of the real (Weil 1956: 222, cf. 360). The beauty of the world is the order of the world that is loved (Weil 1951: 170). Our joy in reality is ultimately a joy in God, the source of all reality, and this means that on the plane of events, “the notion of conformity to the will of God is identical with the notion of reality” (Weil 1949: 270). Because of its absolute sacrality, there is nothing beyond Beauty, Weil observes; or rather, “Good alone is more than beauty; but it does not lie beyond, it is at the end of Beauty in the same way as the point that terminates a segment of a straight line” (Weil 1956: 605).

Weil believed that a sense of beauty, however mutilated and distorted by the alienations and predations of modern life, remains rooted in the human heart as the most powerful incentive toward justice, faith, hope, and love. Just as the later Dostoevsky prophesied that “beauty will save the world,” (Dostoevsky 1869: 356) so similarly Weil imagined that the power of beauty might somehow call forth a new impulse to purity in the decadent wartime civilization she observed destroying itself around her. She lamented that the modern world has “forgotten” this to its own catastrophic detriment, commenting that we “must have piled up a mass of crimes that have made us accursed for us so to have lost all the poetry inherent in the universe” (Weil 1956: 540). Beauty is the only value that is universally recognized, in Weil's view (Weil 1957: 103); it was the universality and inalienability of this value that permitted Weil to hope for an authentically *catholic* incarnation of Christianity right in the midst of a decaying former Christendom, displacing the ruins of compromised hieratical church traditions with the universal body of the secular world.

In her last notebooks, Weil pondered the existential paradox that is human life with a purity of insight into its absurdity that can only be compared with the genius of Kafka. “The hunger of the soul is hard to bear,” she wrote, “but there is no other remedy for our disease” (Weil 1970: 286). Hunger as

remedy? This is because the impossibility of satiating desire is the ultimate truth about it; the hope of satiating it is falsehood (Weil 1956: 60). The eternal part of the soul feeds on hunger. When the human vessel is shattered by necessity in the form of deprivation, suffering, degradation, wrenching demoralization and disillusion, the core absurdity of life comes to be nakedly exposed. There is only one option that remains available in the void: it is to begin *ex nihilo*, having nothing, being nothing. To begin this way, with an absolute beginning “outside” the terms and conditions of life, is the miracle of a faith beyond faith. Nothing is more fragile and fleeting than that upon which the afflicted soul relies for salvation. Salvation arrives as an impossible, paradoxical manifestation of supernatural good: a weightless, bodiless, unconditional joy infused with a light beyond visible light, a beauty beyond physical beauty, a truth beyond meaning, a life beyond death. The only pure and infallible good is supernatural good, Weil insists. These spiritual truths are ancient, but Simone Weil brought them forward into early twentieth-century Europe and made them palpable for the modern mind in the wake of the death of God.⁵

Notes

- 1 Simone Weil recounts this utterly unexpected spiritual transformation in her own letter, entitled “Spiritual Autobiography” in English translations, which appears in Weil 1951: 61–83.
- 2 Since most of Weil’s work was only published after her death in 1943, and was compiled from notebooks produced over many years, references are made only to the original date of publication (whether in English or French).
- 3 Weil’s notion that “life is a lie, only death is true” is treated in McCullough 2014: 22–24, 67–69.
- 4 This term, deriving from Plato’s *Symposium*, means “middle-ground” or “in-between,” and is traditionally used to indicate the manner in which oral traditions can be perceived by different people in different ways. Weil uses *metaxu* to mean “bridges between the world of the good and the world of the necessary” (Miles 1986: 30).
- 5 For my take on the cultural-historical contextual background from which Weil’s religious thinking emerged, see McCullough 2017.

31 Ayer and the meaning of life

JAMES TARTAGLIA

A.J. Ayer sat in with the Vienna Circle, and enthusiastically embraced the logical positivism he thereby discovered. The result was *Language, Truth and Logic*, published when he was twenty-five. As becomes clear from the first paragraph, the project that most enthused him was that of discrediting large swathes of the history of philosophy. He wanted to terminate traditional, historically embedded discourses which he thought would otherwise run on interminably, and thus to his mind, fruitlessly, by establishing ‘beyond question what should be the purpose and method of a philosophical inquiry’. This was feasible, he thought, because, ‘if there are any questions which science leaves it to philosophy to answer, a straightforward process of elimination must lead to their discovery’ (Ayer 1936: 45). Science might *not* leave anything for philosophy, then; it might have all the answers, or at least the resources to provide them – some contemporary physicalists still think it does (Rosenberg 2011). But Ayer left open the possibility of preserving something of the philosophical tradition, and the strand he liked best was the empiricist tradition stemming from Locke, the original ‘under-labourer’ for science. If science did leave questions for philosophy, however, they would have to be answerable in a science-like manner: decisively and through the application of technical apparatus – logic would be philosophy’s substitute for experimental equipment. So legitimate lines of philosophical inquiry were to be closed down with the right answers, and the rest discredited as nonsense. Progress was in the air, and if philosophy was to help science achieve it, its most urgent task was to purge itself.

Ayer’s main tool for this project was his principle of verification, according to which if a proposition is neither a tautology, nor an empirical hypothesis for which there is some possible sensory experience which would be relevant to determining whether it is true, then it is a metaphysical proposition; and all such propositions are literally senseless. Applying this principle allows him to take a uniquely hard line on religion in the sixth chapter, ‘Critique of Ethics and Theology’, which was primarily responsible for the book’s early notoriety. Thus the assertion that God exists is nonsensical because no experience could help determine its truth. But equally, the atheist’s denial of God is nonsensical, as is the agnostic’s refusal to take a positive stance, which presupposes that