

FRITZ WENISCH
Department of Philosophy
University of Rhode Island, Kingston, USA

"WHAT ARE WE TO DO, AND WHAT MAY WE
HOPE FOR?" A SEMI-KANTIAN TREATMENT
OF THE SECOND AND THE THIRD
OF KANT'S THREE BIG QUESTIONS

PART I: ROOTS--CONDITIONS OF THE POSSIBILITY
FOR HUMAN EXISTENCE TO HAVE MEANING

1. A NON-KANTIAN INSPIRED BY KANT

I am not a Kantian. In fact, I consider the outlines of the Kantian system as he developed it in his first Critique as incoherent in several respects. Two of them are: First, as Fichte suggested, the very concept of a thing-in-itself causes an insurmountable problem for Kant; for how can one know that an entity supposedly totally unknown to us is the origin of the chaos of sense perception?¹ Second, there is the well-known related difficulty with respect to causality, a category supposedly applicable only in the realm of phenomena, while at the same time, the non-phenomenal thing-in-itself somehow is to "give rise to" the chaos of sense perceptions. As a minimum, this comes dangerously close to a strictly forbidden transcendent application of causality². I consider both problems as fatal to the Kantian system.

My general outlook on Kantianism is, of course, compatible with finding numerous admirable insights in the vast body of Kant's critical philosophy, even though I must liberate them from the "spin" they inevitably receive by virtue of their being embedded in Kant's system of thought. He himself would consider what I call a liberation as a systematic falsi-

1 "The next objection, to be found in Fichte already, is directed against the 'thing-in-itself'. . . . Actually, we cannot say anything about the 'thing-in-itself,' inasmuch as we cannot reach beyond the sphere of appearance." Christian Thies, intersemester 2003/2004: Kolloquium Praktische Philosophie (Internet Version, URL <<http://www.uni-rostock.de/fakult/phil/fak/fkw/iph/thies/Hegel.pdf>>), p. 4 (translated by Fritz Wensch).

2 "Various other philosophers did notice that Kant had made an egregious mistake when he assumed a causal relation between phenomena and the 'things-in-themselves.' For the category of causality applies only within the confines of phenomena." Ibid. (translated by Fritz Wensch).

fication, of course; so I must precede my exposition with an apology to the thinker whom this volume commemorates on account of the two-hundredth anniversary of his death.

Among Kant's admirable insights is his emphasis on the categorical character of the moral imperative.³ I do not agree with any of the various ways in which he formulates what has become known as the categorical imperative; but the absolutely unconditional manner, the entirely non-hypothetical way in which ethical duties call for being carried out is seen by Kant with especial clarity.

A second insight refers to a point more procedural than substantive: Kant's speaking about the "conditions of the possibility" of various items.⁴ I am appropriating the methodology embodied in that expression: I propose to investigate the "conditions of the possibility" for human existence to have meaning.

A third insight with respect to which there is a confluence between what I propose in this paper and a Kantian insight concerns his insistence on a relationship between moral goodness and happiness.⁵

Later in the paper, it will also become clear that besides Kant, I owe a big debt to Pascal, in particular to his wager argument.⁶

2. THE SECULAR HUMANIST CRITIQUE OF A TRADITIONAL FORMULATION OF THE "CONDITIONS OF THE POSSIBILITY" FOR HUMAN EXISTENCE TO HAVE MEANING

Is there a meaning to human existence? How would human life have to be for there to be such a meaning? ("What are the conditions of the possibility for human life to have meaning?") How is one to lead one's life in the absence of certainty as to whether or not these conditions are met?

It has been said that, given the realities we face on this earth, and given the deep aspirations for permanence characterizing so many aspects of our lives, human existence would ultimately be pointless if one assumes death to be the destruction of the human personality.

In American secular academic circles, this view is severely criticized especially, but not exclusively, by thinkers belonging to the secular humanist movement. They point to the undisputable fact that people considering death as a final end can and do have a sense of well-being; that there are even periods within their lives during which they experience profound happiness; and that most of those considering death as a final end of their personalities quite obviously prefer their existence to their non-existence.⁷ Suicide is, after all, an option chosen only by relatively few.

³ "The categorical imperative directly commands a certain conduct without being conditioned by any other attainable purpose . . . This imperative may be called the imperative of morality." Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Morals*, in *The Philosophy of Kant*, edited by Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1993 [henceforth referred to as, "Kant, Foundations"]), p. 181.

⁴ Kant himself often uses the formulation, "Bedingungen der Möglichkeit," meaning, translated literally, "conditions of the possibility." To use one of many examples, in his discussion of the most fundamental principles applying to all synthetic propositions, he states that "the conditions of the possibility of experience" are "simultaneously the conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience" (Translated by Fritz Wentzsch.) See *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 158=B 197).

⁵ "A good will appears to constitute the indispensable condition for being worthy even of happiness." Kant, *Foundations*, p. 154.

⁶ See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, # 233. Those familiar with Pascal will notice similarities as well as differences between his and my argument.

⁷ In the words of Paul Kurtz, the "Dean" of secular humanism, "Most human beings, in normal conditions, find life worthwhile." Kurtz, *In Defense of Secular Humanism* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1983), p. 159.

All of this may be true enough; nevertheless, secular humanists miss several decisive points.

For first of all, the mere fact that people prefer their existence to their non-existence while life "lasts" does not indicate that they consider human existence to be meaningful in the sense of having a purpose beyond living in the "here and now." It is quite possible for someone not contemplating suicide to reply with a decisive "no" when asked whether there is a point to human existence. Such persons would not be inconsistent; they would be like people on a ride they consider as "going nowhere" while nevertheless enjoying "going along."

The secular humanist could, of course, say, focusing on that last point, "The meaning of life is limited to whatever enjoyment one gets out of it. Nothing beyond that is to be sought." This would make life similar to a roller coaster ride rather than to a voyage to a destination. And it is no doubt an empirical fact that, just as there is a purpose immanent to the roller coaster ride, so can there be a point immanent to someone's life. At times, living is enjoyable, exhilarating, rewarding; and there are even segments of one's life meaningfully related to other segments, such as if someone notes that he or she has been well trained for an interesting and enjoyable career by his or her university studies. In this case, a meaningful relation between that person's university years and his or her later work is affirmed, as opposed to the case of a person who says that the courses that were required by his or her university turned out to be a total waste of time with regard to the profession entered later in life.

Thus, there is meaning in human existence in the following two (limited) senses: First, life obviously is at times enjoyable; inasmuch as enjoyment (in the form of pleasure as well as happiness) is an end in itself, there is no need in those cases to look for an additional, "What for?" "To what end?" Second, it is obvious that earlier parts of a life often bear a meaningful relationship to later parts.

3. THREE SENSES OF THE QUESTION, "DOES HUMAN LIFE HAVE MEANING?"

While both are true enough, to the extent to which secular humanists use them as allegedly demonstrating that there is a meaning of human existence, they are somewhat disingenuous. For take a person who asks, "What--if anything--is the meaning of human existence?" That person would not be satisfied with being told that at times, life is enjoyable, and that earlier parts of one's earthly existence are meaningfully related to later ones. For he or she wishes to know whether a human's earthly life as a whole has meaning; whether--to stay with the analogy used before--life is nothing but a roller coaster ride, or whether it is like a voyage to a destination, and, if the latter, what that destination is.

There are, therefore, at least three senses in which one can understand the question, "Is there a meaning to human existence?" A first sense is, "Is human life at times enjoyable?" A second is, "Can there be segments of one's life which are meaningfully related to other segments?" Both of these can be called--somewhat inexact, to be sure--the "small senses," and are to be distinguished from a third, larger sense: "Is there a meaning of human existence beyond the here and now?" The term, "meaning of human existence beyond the here and now," might not be ideal; but for want of a better one, I am adopting it.

4. WHAT "DEATH AS AN ABSOLUTE END" DOES TO THE MEANING OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

Assuming that death is an absolute end of the human personality necessarily deprives life of meaning in the third, larger sense (that is, in the sense of a meaning beyond the here and now); it also makes the two "meanings" in the smaller sense rather shaky, or, to speak more accurately, it makes enjoyment of life possible only because we humans have the ability to block certain stark facts out of our consciousness. And besides, the lives of many are dreadful rather than enjoyable, and it is only a drive of self-preservation that keeps them in a frame of mind of preferring their existence to their non-existence.

Think of it again in terms of the earlier example: Suppose the fair is in town again, and I decide to ride on my favorite roller coaster. The chain has just pulled my car up the long incline, and we are slowly moving towards the first steep descent. Just before we start picking up speed, but when it is no longer possible anymore to stop the ride, we hear a loud explosion, a gas tank located right next to the stretch of the tracks following the final curve blows up, and it is clear that we will be engulfed in a raging inferno as soon as we will have traversed that final bend. What used to be on earlier occasions a thrilling ride around curves, grades, downward and upward slopes, including even two instances of "upside down" travel, is going to be sheer terror this time.

But is not the roller coaster ride following the explosion quite similar to a human life that absolutely ends in death? Is not the chief difference between the two that life is much longer than a roller coaster ride, long enough that, because of the limited attention span we do have as humans, my consciousness can easily be drawn away from the extinction at the end to being preoccupied with events during the ride?

This calls explicit attention to the feature of human consciousness which enables us to feel reasonably well even in the face of doom, provided that we consider that doom as sufficiently far away. Let me bring it into even sharper focus by considering someone else's doom rather than my own.

One of the most profound sources of happiness in human life are friendship and love. Think about the person you love most. Suppose while you are together with him or her, the thought strikes you with absolute clarity, and as more than just a theoretical observation: "At one time, death will totally obliterate this personality so precious to me. And that time could even be closer than I think--it could be tomorrow, or even sooner." How can one be happy with that person while this thought intrudes into one's consciousness with perfect clarity and vividness? The secular humanist might respond, of course, "That shows it to be all-the-more important that you make the most of it while you still can." This might be sage advice; but in following it, does one not have to take advantage of the uncanny ability we do have as humans to push certain realities to the periphery of our consciousness, to ignore them? For how could I be happy if my own impending death as well as the impending death of all those I love would stand before my mind in all its starkness and unavoidability, and if I would be convinced with certainty that death is the total, absolute, and irrevocable dissolution of an individual's personality?

Besides doom--one's own and that of others--there is another thought people must block out of their minds to feel reasonably well during this life if they are convinced that our earthly existence is all there is. For many of us, the roller coaster of our life offers a ride quite

enjoyable in itself (as long as we do not focus too much on the conflagration that will end it under the supposition to be adopted for the sake of the present argument). As soon as one looks at the quantity of misery existing for humans, one sees that comparing life to a ride enjoyable in itself, although ending in disaster, holds true only for some humans. Why do so many have to suffer so intensely? And once again, do I not, in order to make my own "ride" "comfortable," have to block the unspeakable suffering existing for so many humans out of my mind? If I would allow myself to be totally conscious of the extent of excruciating suffering among humans in the world in which I live, and if I would be convinced that there is absolutely no possibility for comfort for those wretched souls except for their liberation through death, if I would consider the promise from the Book of Revelation that "every tear will be wiped away" as nothing but an empty promise born of wishful thinking, would not my ride, instead of being quite enjoyable, have to be nothing but heartbreak for me? What would it be except for my insensitivity and callousness that would allow me to enjoy my ride?

5. A KANTIAN INSIGHT SHOWING THAT ASSUMING DEATH TO BE TOTAL EXTINCTION WOULD MAKE HUMAN EXISTENCE WORSE THAN A CRUEL JOKE

Enough about what it is that I must successfully block out of my mind to enjoy my roller coaster. Comparing a Kantian insight about an important "ought" with the empirical circumstances under which we live will show human existence to be a cruel joke (understatement!) if we assume death to be an absolute end.

The Kantian insight I refer to is the one about the relationship between being morally good and being happy.⁸ Nothing seems to be clearer than that, if anyone deserves to be happy, it is the morally good person--the person who charitably helps his fellow humans, is just, fair, upright, honest, and has all the other qualities traditionally designated as moral virtues; and it seems to be equally clear that the degree of happiness experienced by a person ought to be proportionate to the extent of moral goodness realized in the life of that individual. Nothing else would appear to be just.

Need I remind you, though, that on this earth, the ones who are well off often are the ruthless, the ones who do not care about the well-being of others, the ones who take advantage of others, who brutalize their fellow human beings? These uncaring sorts may not be happy in the sense in which happiness differs from pleasure; but undoubtedly, their lives often are quite bearably pleasant, which is sufficient to cause one to be outraged by the fact that in contrast, those who try hard to be good often suffer profoundly; at times, it is even their very goodness that intensifies the depth of their suffering, such as if a compassionate person's heart is broken by witnessing the devastation an earthquake causes, or by learning about the plight of infants born with AIDS.

If death is the destruction of the human personality, then an Adolf Hitler would come to the same end as a Mother Theresa; a Stalin would end up exactly like a Maximilian Kolbe; and an Eichmann would have the same ultimate fate as a Martin Luther King. Language is not strong enough to furnish terms of opprobrium appropriately describing the outrage this situation would entail.

⁸ See footnote # 5.

That in an universe not governed by a higher power there would be no one to whom to direct that outrage would make matters only worse, for it would add a cruel element of absolute futility.

In the absence of arguments against the view just formulated, it is, of course, logically quite possible for it to be so--but it should be clear by now that under the supposition that it is so, the question whether human existence has a meaning beyond the here and now (that is, a point beyond at times being enjoyable in itself, and having earlier parts meaningfully related to later ones) is a resounding NO. "Cruel joke" is a description which does not even begin to do justice to such a world.

6. TWO "CONDITIONS OF THE POSSIBILITY" FOR HUMAN LIFE TO HAVE MEANING BEYOND THE "HERE AND NOW"

Thus, protestations to the contrary on the part of secular humanists notwithstanding, the following is a condition of the possibility for human existence to have meaning beyond the here and now: Death is not an absolute end; there is something beyond the grave.

I do not wish to follow Kant by introducing immortality as a "postulate of practical reason"; for first, his grounds for doing so are quite different from the ones my argument might suggest,⁹ and second, I am quite unclear about the "status" of the "entities" he postulates. Rather, I observe that the Kantian insight concerning moral goodness and happiness shows a mere existence beyond the grave to be only necessary, but not sufficient as a condition of the possibility of human existence to have meaning beyond the here and now. An additional requirement is that the state in which we will be in that future existence--whether or not we will be happy--must sensibly be related to this life. And the Kantian insight tells us precisely what at least one ingredient--actually, the chief ingredient--of that relationship must be:

Suppose peoples' happiness in an afterlife to be determined exclusively by how popular they were, how many hairs they have on their chests, or how often they won in poker. Even though under those assumptions, one of the conditions of the possibility for human existence to have meaning beyond the here and now would be met, human existence would still be quite outrageously absurd. It would be different, however, would peoples' happiness in an afterlife depend exclusively or at least chiefly on the extent to which they practiced moral goodness in this life. While this idea might not be encouraging to me if I look at my own past life, I would be dishonest, were I to deny that, if this second condition is added to the first (that is, to the mere existence of an afterlife), human existence might be eminently meaningful.

Thus, human existence is ultimately pointless unless two conditions are met: First, there must be an afterlife; second, a person's state of happiness in that afterlife must chiefly be dependent on the extent to which he or she has led a moral life. I am not claiming that

⁹ Kant finds it necessary to postulate immortality because of the fact that what he calls "holiness," i.e. the complete agreement of a person's will with the moral law, is "a perfection of which no rational being in the world of sense is at any time capable." (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason And Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, translated by Lewis White Beck [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950], p. 225.) It is only through an infinite process of approximation that holiness is "attainable." No such process is possible during a short human life; consequently, immortality must be postulated.

these two "conditions of the possibility" of human life's being ultimately meaningful are sufficient even if occurring together (in fact, certain contingencies of our lives will show at least one additional condition to be a requirement). Clearly, however, the two conditions formulated are necessary ones.

The second of these conditions calls our attention to two modes of living: One is a life in which moral considerations are of little or no concern; the other is a life in which moral considerations are paramount. Which of these two modes of living an individual engages in is a matter of personal choice. (That it is possible--and normal--for a person to vacillate between these two modes of living should almost go without saying.)

PART II: SHORING UP KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE BY A HYPOTHETICAL ONE, AND THE HOPE FOR FORGIVENESS

I. TWO ALTERNATIVES, TWO MODES OF LIVING, AND FOUR LOGICAL POSSIBILITIES--PROCEDURE FOR THE REMAINDER OF THIS INVESTIGATION

With regard to whether or not human existence does have a meaning beyond the here and now, there are obviously two and only two alternatives: Either it does, or it does not. Further, which one of them applies is a pre-given fact about which an individual human can do nothing. The only matter under an individual's control would be living up to the purpose of life if indeed there is such a purpose.

While I think that several arguments are available in support of the first of these two alternatives, this paper will proceed as if there were no arguments for the one or the other side. It will be shown that even then, choosing a moral life recommends itself as the most prudent course of action (that is, it recommends itself apart of any categorical imperative to lead such a life), and that this conclusion could reasonably be dislodged only on the basis of arguments supporting the second of the two alternatives formulated, the one that life lacks meaning beyond the here and now.

Combining the two modes of living with the two alternatives concerning a "purpose of human existence beyond the here and now" generates the following four logical possibilities: First, human existence lacks a purpose beyond the here and now, and a person does not make moral considerations into a primary concern. Second, human existence lacks a purpose beyond the here and now, and a person does make moral considerations into a primary concern. Third, human existence does have a purpose beyond the here and now, and a person does not make moral considerations into a primary concern. Fourth, human existence does have a purpose beyond the here and now, and a person does make moral considerations into a primary concern.

As mentioned, the categorical character with which the moral imperative presents itself is one of Kant's admirable insights. Permit me, however, to tease the sage from Königsberg with a question he might, initially at least, view as quite inappropriate, although my later emphasis on the categorical character of the moral imperative might reconcile him somewhat with my procedure:

What is the role which a person's self-interest can reasonably be expected to play as a motivating force for leading a moral life under each of the four possibilities outlined

above? To determine this, I shall first examine this question under the assumption that human existence lacks a purpose beyond the here and now; second, I shall examine it under the assumption that human existence does have a purpose beyond the here and now, and finally, I will examine it assuming there to be a state of uncertainty as to whether or not human existence does have a purpose beyond the here and now.

2. ASSUMING THAT HUMAN EXISTENCE LACKS MEANING BEYOND THE HERE AND NOW

In line with the procedure just summarized, suppose first that human existence lacks meaning beyond the here and now. Even then, it would be possible to recognize a duty to lead a moral life.¹⁰ What does one have to say, however, under this supposition about relative losses or gains for an individual, depending on whether or not he or she chooses to lead a moral life?

Surely, if human existence does not have a meaning beyond the here and now, losses and/or gains beyond the here and now could not rationally be appealed to as motives in support of lifestyle choices an individual is considering. This is perfectly clear if it is assumed that life lacks meaning because death is an absolute end of a human's individuality. Under this supposition, it is irrelevant to a human being after death whether or not he or she has led a life in accordance with moral standards. While still alive, it might be important to a person how later generations will remember him or her; but for the majority among us, there is no remembrance anyway beyond two or three generations at the most.

What if, however, death is not a final end of our personality, but our fate in the afterlife is related to this life not by considerations of morality, but by other factors? Couldn't there then be humans who in the end will turn out to be fortunate, while others will be unlucky? Isn't one suggestion that those who are rich will be well off, while those who are poor will not? And would not then the Rothschilds and the Vanderbilts laugh about Socrates and Diogenes? Is it not clear that even under the assumption that factors other than a person's "moral standing" determine his or her fate in the hereafter, some people might lead their lives such as to make it in the end, while others might lead lives such that they do not make it?

If these considerations are intended, however, to introduce one's state in the hereafter as a motivating force for lifestyle choices in the present, one would miss the force of the statement that the fate of a human after this life would, under the assumption being considered at present, be determined by considerations either totally arbitrary, or at least not central to what being human reveals itself as. Consequently, a discovery of the factors relevant for one's well-being in the afterlife would be next to impossible. Why should wealth be decisive? The universe may be completely indifferent to what wealthy people want. Why should the determining factor not rather be getting up every day before eight A.M., or never getting up prior to eight, or 76.13% of the time getting up prior to eight, or always having eggs for breakfast, or at least once vacationing in Hawaii, or never vacationing there, and so on? If one's fate in the hereafter is

¹⁰ Thus, very much contrary to the position of many Evangelical Protestants, I consider the view that a recognition of the existence of God is a logical prerequisite for recognizing moral obligations as mistaken. With regard to this issue, I am squarely on the side of the secular humanists.

determined by arbitrary considerations, there are literally billions of factors--many within a person's control, many beyond a person's control--and any combination between them which could enter into a determination of one's ultimate fate. This would lead one to say, "I do not have any clue as to which kind of life is advantageous to me in the long run." While then, it may de facto be possible to do certain things enhancing one's chance at a pleasant experience in the hereafter, practically speaking, their effect on one's existence in the hereafter could not be a motivating force for human conduct, except if someone were to come back from the dead to tell us just what it happens to be that will make us well off in the life to come.

If human existence lacks a meaning beyond the here and now, the thought of losing out on the point of human existence need not concern us when we are considering our ultimate well-being, for if there is no hereafter at all, it will, after our death, be irrelevant to us what kind of life we have led; if there is a hereafter not meaningfully related to this life, we do have most likely no hope of ever discovering how to lead our lives such as to contribute to our well-being in the next life.¹¹ There are, however, some factors that might suggest it to be a dictate of enlightened self-interest to lead a moral life under this assumption, as will become clear from the purely this-worldly "losses-and-gains" calculations to be presented shortly.

3. ASSUMING THAT HUMAN EXISTENCE DOES HAVE A MEANING BEYOND THE HERE AND NOW

Things are, of course, different if it is assumed that human existence does have a meaning beyond the here and now, which must include, as a minimum, that there is an afterlife, and that one's fate in that afterlife is determined chiefly by the extent to which one has led a moral life. From what has been said above, one would then know that the only way to accomplish the goal of one's life is to live in accordance with moral considerations; one would know that one would surely miss out on the point of one's life, were one to disregard moral concerns. While one would not know, of course, whether or not the degree to which one is able to live up to one's moral duties can ever be sufficient,¹² one would know at least that not even trying to lead a moral life is sufficient for missing out on the purpose of human existence.

4. ASSUMING A STATE OF IGNORANCE CONCERNING WHETHER OR NOT HUMAN EXISTENCE HAS A MEANING BEYOND THE HERE AND NOW

We turn now to the role one's self-interest can reasonably be expected to play as a motivating force for choosing between the two modes of living under the assumption that a person is in a state of ignorance about whether or not human existence does have

¹¹ In both cases, there would continue to be a categorical imperative to lead a moral life. I am repeating this to stave off Kant's wrath at least somewhat, should he somehow wind up in the hereafter with a copy of this essay.

¹² Christianity indeed does claim that "natural" efforts at leading a moral life are not enough, and that, moreover, humans do not have any just claim on the supernatural aid that is needed to overcome this deficiency. Is, however, not the Christian conception of God wide open to the possibility that there is nothing more apt to move God's compassion than a sincere attempt on the part of an individual human to be moral even in difficult circumstances? Might not this compassion "motivate" God to give freely what the person in question cannot claim is owed to him or her?

a meaning beyond the here and now. Then, it makes sense to compare losses and gains connected with lifestyle choices. It is at this point that a consideration similar to Pascal's wager argument enters the picture.

a. Losses and gains supposing that human existence lacks a meaning beyond the here and now

As has been stated before, if human existence lacks a meaning beyond the here and now, it is not rational to take losses or gains beyond this life into consideration when deciding whether or not one should live in accordance with moral standards. That this applies under the assumption that death is a final end of the human personality is clear; as has been shown, though, it applies equally under the assumption that, while death is not a final end of the existence of the human personality, one's fate in the afterlife is determined by arbitrary considerations rather than by the extent to which one has led a moral life.

What, however, if the "balance sheet" is limited to entries taken from the "here and now"? What about losses and gains during his life depending on whether or not one chooses a moral life?

A person leading a moral life might lose out on the one or the other unjustly gotten pleasure, while at the same time possibly winning the trust, confidence, and respect of his friends. The unjust person risks losing this respect, might, however, become able to bask in the adulation of people impressed by ruthlessness, and experience other similar satisfaction.

On the basis of a superficial and purely hedonistic calculus, it may be difficult to determine which one of the two is "better off." Without being able to go into details, however, let me make a suggestion based on the difference between happiness and pleasure:

It may not be easy to define the general nature of happiness in contrast to pleasure; that both are different can, however, perhaps be made clear if it is observed that a person can experience intense pleasure while being at the same time deeply unhappy. As a matter of fact, it appears that many people chase after pleasure in order to "crowd" their unhappiness "out of their lives." Further, in the case of most people, there seems to be a pretheoretical understanding of the difference between happiness and pleasure so that one can successfully call the difference between both to the attention of people by using examples. Friendship, love, family, beauty in nature, or being a parent of children who turn out well are sources of happiness; overindulgence in food or drink, drug use, exercising power and influence over others, seeing misfortune in a person one dislikes, and similar things can be sources of pleasure.

Further, if I treat others truly generously (often a requirement of a moral life), I must treat them generously for their own sakes rather than only for my sake. If I help someone else only in order to get a reward for myself, I may have acted in accordance with duty, as Kant would say;¹³ but I have not truly acted justly; I have truly acted justly only if I have helped the other out of genuine concern for his or her well-being, or in order to comply with what my duty prescribes, or both, that is, if I have acted in a manner which is at least partly non-self-regarding rather than acting in a purely self-regarding way. In general terms, acting in accordance with demands of morality often includes acting in a

¹³ Consider Kant's example of the shop keeper who does not overcharge his customers, but does so "merely with a selfish view." See Kant, *Foundations*, p. 159

non-self-regarding manner; committing oneself to a moral life includes a strong commitment to non-self-regarding conduct.

Next, it seems obvious that helping others successfully out of genuine concern in their well-being rather than to make them subservient to one's goals is likely to make the agent truly happy.¹⁴ Thus, in the case of a person not committed to a moral life, this important source of happiness will be missing or at least greatly be reduced. This makes it reasonable to assume that all other things being equal, a person who lives according to moral standards has a better chance at becoming happy in the "here and now" than a person who does not.

The phrase, "all other things being equal" is important for two reasons: First, it is certainly not to be denied that persons who commit themselves to upholding moral standards can be deeply unhappy during this life.¹⁵ Second, being unjust can go together with earthly happiness. As an example, think of a man who believes that he could persuade someone else's wife with whom he has fallen in love to leave her husband. This conduct may be grievously unjust: It may amount to stealing a wife. As demonstrated, though, by many second marriages which begin with the injustice just referred to, they are not necessarily a source of unhappiness during this life. Persons who steal spouses seem often to be happy with them; and whether or not their conduct will make them unhappy in the long run depends on whether or not this life is actually followed by an afterlife in which the scales of justice will be set right, and in which the wife stealer's conduct will appropriately be sanctioned.

Nevertheless, inasmuch as committing oneself to a moral life necessarily involves committing oneself to a higher degree of non-self-regarding conduct, and inasmuch as non-self-regarding conduct is a major source of happiness, the person leading a moral life has, all other things being equal, a better chance at happiness in this life than the unjust person. Simultaneously, he or she may be forced to forego, on occasion, pleasures which can only be achieved unjustly. Surely, however, being happy is preferable to being unhappy even while experiencing a large quantity of pleasures. Thus, leading a moral life recommends itself even under the assumption that human life does not have a meaning beyond the here and now. Even prescinding from a hereafter as a motivating force, a moral life seems to be generally more conducive to one's happiness than an immoral life.

There is, of course, a negative entry on the ledger--a side alluded to earlier. The person committed to a moral life will also have a keener eye for the suffering of others, and suffer with them. Does this suffering outweigh the happiness which is a consequence of successfully engaging in non-self-regarding conduct?

This may be difficult to calculate. The result may depend very much on a person's individual circumstances in the sense of how much suffering there is among people physically and emotionally close to him or her. It is, after all, a human limitation that distant suffering has little effect on our well-being.

¹⁴ This happiness is a consequence of the non-self-regarding action rather than its primary goal, for if the agent's own happiness would be his or her primary goal, the action performed would not be non-self-regarding. This would be the case of the person using another person's misfortune for the purpose of causing himself to be happy, which interestingly involves a futile attempt at striving at one's own happiness.

¹⁵ This is a major factor aiding in the recognition that this life is meaningless if death is an absolute end.

b. Possible loss assuming that human life does have a meaning beyond the here and now

Suppose now that human existence does have a meaning beyond the here and now. In addition to the calculations just considered, this assumption makes it possible for me to wind up in the awkward position of having to admit at the end of my life that I have wasted it. It is, of course, this possibility which I should wish to avoid, and I can avoid it only by leading a life conforming to moral standards. This is all that needs to be said about that possibility.

c. What is the most prudent course of action in the face of uncertainty?

What is now the most prudent course of conduct, in the face of uncertainty as to whether or not human existence does have a meaning beyond the here and now? Well, it clearly turns out to be a dictate of enlightened self-interest to live in accordance with moral standards. Of the four possibilities mentioned earlier, the one which is to be avoided at all cost is the one according to which human existence does have meaning beyond the here and now, but simultaneously, one fails to lead a moral life. For not only would one then diminish one's chance for happiness in this life; one might ruin that chance forever in the life to come. And in the face of uncertainty as to whether or not life has meaning, the only way one can make sure to do one's utmost with respect to avoiding this outcome is by attempting to live in accordance with standards of morality.

Thus, living justly recommends itself even under the assumption that there is no hereafter capable of bestowing upon one's life a meaning beyond the here and now, and in the absence of knowledge on whether or not there is such a hereafter, living justly is clearly the most prudent course of action.

True, if a person is convinced that there is no hereafter capable of giving one's life meaning beyond the here and now, he or she might not have enough motivation for a just life in all circumstances. A man might say--staying with the example used earlier, "True, all other things being equal, the just person has a better chance of becoming happy than the unjust person; but now, at this stage in my life, all other things are not equal. If I cannot be with this woman whom I love, but who happens to be someone else's wife, I will suffer; on the other hand, if I succeed in persuading her to leave her husband and marry me, I will be unbelievably happy. Thus, in my case, it is to my advantage to be unjust at least in this one circumstance." And in our society--different from the one in which Wronsky and Anna Karenina lived--he is surely not running only after an unrealistic dream that will inevitably shatter on the rocks of societal disapproval.

If, on the other hand, that same person is convinced that human existence has meaning beyond the here and now, even he might have to say, "Marrying this woman might be abandoning eternal happiness for the sake of temporal happiness." And even he would then have to say that surely, to be unjust even in a situation in which injustice could have profound temporal happiness as its consequence is more than imprudent.

What has just been said applies, however, also to persons who do not know whether or not human existence as a whole has meaning. It applies at least to the extent that they have to admit that as far as they know, they would be risking unhappiness for an eternity for the sake of being happy for a time which compared to eternity is very short indeed.

Thus, what can philosophy say about the kind of life it is prudent to lead? Philosophy does not know as much as religion claims to know. But philosophy can claim to justify

with the use of human reason alone that leading a moral life is the most prudent course of action; even more, it can say that, unless a person would have conclusive proof that human existence does not have meaning beyond the here and now, leading a moral life is the most prudent course of action in all situations, including in situations in which it is excruciatingly difficult to be moral.

5. THE HYPOTHETICAL AND THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE TO LEAD A MORAL LIFE

The preceding argument provides, if sound, only a pragmatic justification of a moral life. It leads only to a hypothetical imperative addressed to persons who take seriously at least the possibility that human existence might have meaning beyond the here and now. This hypothetical imperative in its "problematic" version is, "If you wish to lead a life such that you do whatever is in your power to avoid disaster, then you must lead a moral life." Possibly, one can go even a step further and formulate the following assertoric imperative, "Since you obviously do want to lead a life such as to do everything in your power to avoid final disaster, you will want to lead a just life."

The moral imperative is, of course, as Kant points out, a categorical one: "Be just regardless of the consequences it has for your state of mind." The considerations of prudence presented above do not suffice to justify such a categorical imperative. It does, however, not seem harmful to add the problematic or possibly even the assertoric hypothetical imperative to a person's motivation to be just. It may be more ideal for a person to act right motivated exclusively by a categorical imperative; for humans who are capable even of setting aside their own long-range well-being for a short-term advantage, this may, however, in many situations not suffice as a motivating force. And I at least would consider it to be undue rigorism to insist on a motivation by a categorical imperative alone. There does not seem to be anything untoward with a hypothetical imperative entering the picture as a secondary motivating force.

6. A THIRD CONDITION OF THE POSSIBILITY FOR HUMAN LIFE TO HAVE MEANING BEYOND THE HERE AND NOW

A final point: Suppose that a man decides, on the basis of considerations like the ones presented in this essay, from now on to take moral considerations seriously. As a weak human being, he will, however, have to admit realistically that even in the future, he will, due to his own fault, fail to conform to the standards of morality. Even worse will it be if he thinks about his past life in which perhaps he has not taken the moral point of view seriously at all, and in which he may have become gravely guilty.

What about this guilt? Will it simply go away? Even if our feeling of guilt may be affected by the passage of time, the state of guilt is not. The murderer, for example, is, all other things being equal, just as guilty ten years after the deed as he was three days after it.

Someone at the threshold of a phase of his or her life in which moral considerations will be taken seriously may have to exclaim, "For all I know, it may be too late for me already. Through what I have done, I have accumulated guilt, and if one's happiness in

the afterlife is determined by the extent to which one has lead a moral life and avoided immorality, then I am doomed."

It may have been considerations of this nature which led Kierkegaard to the position that a person who has entered the ethical stage of life will end up in a paralyzing state of "consciousness of sin" from which one can be liberated only through a leap of faith, leading into the religious stage.¹⁶

Whether or not such a leap of faith is appropriate is not a topic for this paper, in which I do not intend to leave the area of philosophy. There may now be no philosophic evidence for the thought to which the Judeo-Christian tradition has made us quite accustomed, which is, however, not ordinary at all: That in fact, there is a forgiveness from an absolute justice. The idea of such a forgiveness is, however, certainly not contrary to human reason either. In fact, given that we all have made ourselves guilty through our conduct, the existence of forgiveness from an absolute justice is a third "condition of the possibility" for human life to have a meaning beyond the here and now, or at least for it to be possible for a human to live up to this meaning.

Is there such forgiveness? While it may be impossible to demonstrate its actual existence, it does not seem irrational to hope for it. Moreover, in order to avoid the paralysis of the thought that at this point, it is "too late for me," is it not necessary to hope for this forgiveness? For this hope to be genuine, there must, of course, also be sincere repentance, coupled with equally sincere attempts to make up for the wrongs one has done, to the extent to which this is possible.

It seems that in the final analysis, an answer to the question of what kind of life to lead, considered by means of human reason alone, unaided by revelation, boils down to, "Lead a life in accordance with moral standards; do so to the best of your ability, and hope for being forgiven by an absolute justice." And perhaps Mercy will seek you out.

¹⁶ As Siegbert W. Becker says, "It is the dread and fear which is awakened by the consciousness of sin which finally drives a man to plunge into the abysmal darkness to lay hold of God who in that moment reveals Himself as the only possible Savior." Becker, "The Epistemology of Soren Kierkegaard," Internet Version (URL: <http://www.wls.wels.net/library/Essays/Authors/b/BeckerKierkegaard/BeckerKierkegaard.rtf>).