

THE MEANING OF LIFE AND TRANSCENDENCE*

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ABSTRACT. Atheism and naturalism have become the default positions in academic philosophy, and this is reflected in much of the contemporary work on meaning in life, which assumes what might be called a broadly ‘immanentist’ perspective: the sources of meaning must be sought entirely within the sphere of our purely human pursuits and activities. This chapter, by contrast, lays stress on the yearning for transcendence that seems an ineradicable part of our nature. It is argued that no human life can be fully meaningful if it denies or suppresses that yearning, and that this in turn points to the need for humans to find a vehicle whereby they can enact their longing for an ultimate source of meaning and value that might bring fulfilment and completion to their lives.

KEYWORDS: finitude, immanent, incompleteness, meaning in life, meaning of life, incompleteness, teleology, transcendent, yearning

1. Human incompleteness

The once off-limits topic of the meaning of life has become something of a philosophical industry. But bringing it within the acceptable limits of today’s dominant naturalist and secularist paradigm has led to a characteristic shift of emphasis. Instead of the meaning *of* life, most attention is now focused on meaning *in* life. The result, welcome or unwelcome depending on your perspective, has been a certain lowering of the stakes. For the phrase ‘the meaning *of* life’ suggests a rather grand holistic perspective – a sense that our life as a whole is to be measured against some overall standard, goal, or purpose. By contrast, asking about meaning *in* life invites us to take a more pragmatic and piecemeal approach, and to look at various activities and pursuits within human life that we may find fulfilling or regard as meaningful. This latter approach typically takes what might be called a radically ‘immanentist’ perspective: the sources of meaning are to be sought entirely within the sphere of our purely human pursuits and activities. Such immanentism, as Adrian Moore has observed, ‘rejects the idea that life needs somehow to be justified, whether by some *telos* towards which everything is striving or by some transcendent structure in terms of which everything makes sense. Nature has no grand design. Nor is there anything transcendent to it’ (Moore 2012, 249).

Immanentism so construed is not without problems: the bald denial of a transcendent dimension to human life smacks of dogmatic metaphysics – from what standpoint are we supposed to be able to dismiss the transcendent in this way? But on a methodological (as opposed to metaphysical) level, the immanentist framework may initially strike many people as making good sense. It is undeniable that certain human pursuits are fulfilling and worthwhile, and give us a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. So rather than profitless speculation about the ultimate meaning of it all, or the significance of human life against some grand cosmic backdrop, why not simply be content with meaning *in* life, and set about

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cultivating those entirely sublunary but still valuable ways of living that make our short time here, if not ‘ultimately’ significant, at least as significant as finite and contingent beings like us can expect? Adopting such ‘methodological immanentism’, as it might be called, may seem in many practical contexts to offer the best cure for intellectual agonizing about the ultimate meaning of it all: immerse oneself in the particular immanent sources of meaning and forget the grander question.

But the grander question will not go away, and cannot be suppressed by fiat. For any other species on the planet, there is nothing further to be required once its needs and wants have been maximally satisfied. But a human life, even when it is stuffed with maximally meaningful activities, is always open to a further question about its significance. The human being, we might say, is an *essentially incomplete being*. Comfortable and reassuring definitions of what it is to be human, from Aristotle’s famous ‘rational animal’ onwards, cannot disguise the strangeness of our human predicament. Alone of all the creatures we know of, we are not just here, but we are also *aware* of being here, and we are aware that this ‘being here’ is profoundly problematic.

Our incompleteness has many dimensions. Most prominently, there is the *existential* dimension, famously encapsulated in Heidegger’s label for the human being, *Dasein*, or ‘being there’, and his talk of our being ‘thrown’ into existence. We are confronted with our existence as something charged with anxiety, a disturbing disclosure of the uncanniness of our seemingly comfortable everyday being in the world (Heidegger [1927] 1967, §67). Second, there is the *cosmological* dimension: that we are here at all, that the universe exists at all, is a profound mystery that we long to fathom, but we know we will never, and can never, solve. Thirdly there is the dimension of *finitude*: we are keenly aware of our limits, our puniness, our mortality, a tiny speck, as Pascal put it, against an infinite backdrop ([1670] 1962, no. 201). This awareness of our finitude is a doubly disturbing, for even if, as Descartes for instance argued ([1641] 1973, 45), it implies some inchoate sense of the infinite, the infinite necessarily remains out of reach, something that, by its very nature, cannot be encompassed or grasped by the finite mind. And fourthly and finally, there is the dimension of our *moral inadequacy*. We are all too aware that we are flawed creatures, clouded in our perceptions and weak in will, as Augustine put it ([c. 398] 1911, Bk. VII, Ch. 1; Book VIII, Ch. 5), constantly subject to conflicting desires that we cannot fully reconcile, uncomfortably aware that our lives fall short of the goodness we dimly feel they ought to exemplify.

These troubling manifestations of human incompleteness hardly amount to a knowledge base or set of premises from which one might set out to establish the existence of some ultimate source of our being, or some final end that might bring us the completion we long for. So far from furnishing foundations for knowledge, our human incompleteness seems to bring us to a precipice. We confront the cliff-edge, we cannot avoid edging towards it, but all we are left with is a sense of vertigo. Despite the long history of natural theology that would invoke God as the metaphysical solution to all of this, and despite the undaunted labours of those contemporary philosophers of religion who continue to work on this project, systemic doubts persist, from Kant through to Wittgenstein and beyond, as to whether discursive human knowledge could ever escape the confines of the phenomenal world (Kant [1781-1787] 1965; Wittgenstein [1921]1961).

Leaving these difficulties aside, there would seem to be something curiously off-key in the idea that the problem of our human incompleteness could be laid to rest by some demonstrative or probabilistic argument establishing the existence of a divine being with such and such properties or powers. For the idea of God as an object of calm rational cognition seems strangely disconnected from the existential human bewilderment and anxiety just outlined. And one might add that it is at odds with the long tradition of spiritual writings insisting that God cannot be grasped by the finite human intellect (as Aquinas puts it, man is

directed to God as to an end that ‘surpasses the grasp of reason’; [1266-73] 1911, First Part, Qu. 1, art 1). Yet perhaps this need not be the end of the story. For it may be that what is beyond our cognitive grasp can nevertheless in a certain sense be an object of longing.

We have spoken of the sense of incompleteness that is inseparable from our humanity. Yet the inescapable corollary of this is a longing for completion, which is bound up with a desire for what Simon May has called ‘ontological rootedness’ (2014, 7). This is a desire that is so deeply ingrained that we cannot conceive of giving it up. If we ever managed to ignore it, then, as the existentialist theologian Karl Rahner has put it,

The human being would never face the totality of the world and of him or herself helplessly, silently and anxiously ... human beings would remain *mired in the world* and *in* themselves and no longer go through that mysterious process which they *are*. Human beings would have forgotten the totality and its ground, and at the same time, if we can put it this way, they would have forgotten that they had forgotten. What would it be like? We can only say: they would have *ceased to be human beings*. They would have regressed to the level of a clever animal ... (Rahner [1976] 1978, 45-50, emphasis added).

One of the crucial ideas that Rahner brings out here is that of humanity anxiously confronting the *totality of the world*. A similar idea is explored from a different angle in Joseph Pieper’s argument that ‘fixing the mind’s eye on the totality of being’ is the essence of the philosophical impulse that defines our humanity ([1948] 1952, 116). Finding some supposed item *in* the world, perhaps a point in the centre of the galaxy or the cosmos which was its putative source, or the exploding cosmic egg from whence it all sprung, would clearly not answer the case at all, nor would it serve to alleviate our anxiety. For the puzzle that confronts us (as Wittgenstein once put it) is not *how* the world is, but *that it is* ([1921]1976, § 6.44). We find ourselves ‘thrown’ into the world, but we cannot, try as we might, remain wholly and unreflectively engaged in the detailed texture of our lives; we cannot escape being confronted with the mysterious totality of which we are a part, and we cannot cease to raise, at least as a question, the idea of a transcendent source of that totality.

The underlying thought here was articulated perhaps better than any philosopher could do it by means of a famous image introduced by the fourteenth-century mystic Mother Julian of Norwich:

And God showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, ‘What can this be?’ And the answer came ‘*It is all that is made.*’ (Julian of Norwich [1373], 1998 7).

In discussing this passage with an eminent Oxford philosopher I once remarked that whether one accepted the theistic framework or not, the image of confronting the whole cosmos in this way was one that patently makes sense. He replied drily: ‘it patently does *not* make sense’. In a strict and literal interpretation he was I suppose right: the universe is everything there is including us, so we could not see it lying there in front of us. But in another sense, as reflective human beings (and this connects with the point made in our Rahner quotation) we have the special ability that no merely clever animal could have, to see that the universe cannot be a closed system. We can always, at least in our thought, confront it in its entirety. So somewhat analogously to a Gödelian process (reminiscent of Gödel’s famous incompleteness theorem, whereby for any set F of sound procedures of mathematical proof we are always able to transcend the methods of F to see the truth of results that are beyond the scope of F (Penrose 2012)), we can see that any description of the universe can never be complete; for we can always take one step back from this supposedly finished description and

thereby pronounce it incomplete, and so on indefinitely. To put the point another way, even if science were to establish beyond doubt that the entire cosmos is finite, we could still reach beyond those boundaries in our thought and think of something more. Or to put it yet another way, if we think of the universe Spinoza-fashion, as a kind of grand totality, where for every object or *ideatum*, there is a conscious thought or idea, then the total set of *ideata* plus corresponding ideas could never be a complete or closed set. There could always be, as it were, a further thought and its further object. (This may, incidentally, be one route to the Spinozan conclusion that God or nature must be infinite.)

The upshot of these diverse reflections is that in virtue of our conceptual abilities as reflective and questioning beings, we humans, even as we confront or reflect on the cosmos and our own presence in it, are in a certain way brought up against the infinite. This is not a matter of our passively contemplating some object or item of which we have clear and distinct awareness (we have no clear and distinct awareness of the infinite). In a way, it is a matter of *conatus* or striving, rather than cognition or theoretical knowledge. Or to use another Latin term, it has something of the character of what the Romans called *desiderium* – an open-ended longing for something that is beyond our grasp (Cottingham 2019). What is involved is a strange forward reaching of the human mind, a kind of ‘desiderative’ stretching out towards something we glimpse as out of our final reach, yet in which we somehow participate, in so far as our mental reach can never be finally closed or circumscribed.

2. The Urge for Transcendence

As finite creatures we reach out anxiously towards the infinite, which we know we can never encompass. We might say that our human mode of being is an interrogative one. What we long for is something that will answer this anxious question, that will bring us completion. If we could have an answer, then we might know the meaning of human life. But – and here is the rub – we also know that such an answer is beyond our human capacity to achieve. So there is an inherent instability or tension at the heart of the question of the meaning of life: we long for it, but we know we cannot have it. *We are mired in immanence, yet we yearn for transcendence.*

We seem here to have reached an impasse, or a paradox. Part of the feeling that we have reached a dead-end may be due to our sense that there should be a cognitively accessible answer, but that it is beyond our intellectual powers to reach it. Yet there are other ways of dealing with paradoxes than by intellectual unravelling. Lewis Carroll (1895) recommended the maxim *solvitur ambulando* (‘it is solved by walking’) as a solution to Zeno’s paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, suggesting in effect that action or praxis might serve to deal with a puzzle that defied theoretical or propositional solution. Taking our cue from this, it may perhaps be that, although we cannot arrive at the transcendent answer we long for, we can find ways of *enacting* our longing for the transcendent, and thus, though we may not be able to *say* what the meaning of life consists in, we may be able to *show* how the puzzle can be addressed.

Many traditional spiritual practices can plausibly be understood as aiming to do precisely this. They do not produce a propositional answer to the puzzle of life’s meaning, but they offer a series of formalized procedures and rituals whereby human beings are able to express how they stand in relation to the mystery that confronts them. By enacting their longing for the transcendent, they turn what might have been angry or helpless puzzlement or nihilistic despair into a joyful expression of hope, and thereby find a way of reaching towards the transcendent meaning that is longed for.

As but one very brief and schematic example to illustrate how this might work, consider the following offertory prayer from the Catholic mass:

Blessed are you, Lord. God of all creation; through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life.

There are of course elaborate theological doctrines presupposed in the liturgy of which this prayer is a part, and for many people the falsity, or unprovenness, of the doctrines may invalidate any possibility of considering such prayers as a route to meaning. But if we leave the doctrinal questions in abeyance for one moment, and simply attend to some of the resonances of the text as it stands, what do we have? First of all, we have an invocation to the mysterious source of ‘all creation’: in the very way the invocation is phrased we (the participants in the ritual) are acknowledging our finitude – our smallness before the vast totality of the cosmos of which we are a tiny and insignificant part. But next, rather than exploring this intellectually, as if we could fathom it, we instead *do* something: we perform an act of offering. And in this act, the offering of the ‘gift’ of bread, dependent on all the natural processes that sustain it and us, we both acknowledge our dependency on these processes and express our creative human engagement with them: the bread is something that ‘earth has given and human hands have made’. And finally, in offering the bread, we declare that it will become a source of spiritual sustenance.

Even in the enacting of this one small element of the liturgy, the participants are thus weaving their words and actions into a complex web of meaning. They are confronting the infinite, and approaching it in awe, as suppliants, and yet also engaging with it through something very down-to-earth and human, the making and offering of bread. They are bringing their finitude into confrontation with the infinite, but not in fear or anger or puzzlement, but in the focused calm and tranquillity of a resonant ritual, handed down over many generations, so that they become part of a long succession of human beings who have found this ritual sustaining and empowering.

How is such sustenance possible? Again leaving theology aside, perhaps at the simplest level what is enacted here in the performance of the offering is a certain *harmony or attunement*. The prayer opens with a *blessing*, so that, in the terms discussed earlier, we are reaching out to the transcendent, but now specifically conceived as something which we long for as *good*. And the next phrase of the prayer immediately picks this up – ‘through your *goodness* we have this bread to offer’. The harmony established here is a harmony between those who long for the good and the object of their longing which they bless as good. So the human confrontation with the infinite is no longer anxious, or fearful, or resentful, or simply baffled, but becomes a loving confrontation, a reaching out in love and blessing to what is trusted as the source of all goodness.

At this point it seems only fair to allow the sceptic a voice. Is not all this a doomed attempt to try to manufacture meaning where none exists? We shall return to this worry in the following section but for the present it may help to draw a comparison with other less theologically charged spiritual practices and enactments. When two people lovingly give and receive rings in a wedding ceremony to express their love and commitment to each other, it would be absurd, or at least inept, to say that they are attempting to manufacture meaning where none exists. For their enactment is, precisely, a performance that, insofar as it *expresses* their love, carries an ineradicable charge of significance. To be sure, the giving and receiving of rings could be described in purely secular terms, whereas it might be objected that in the case of the offering of gifts at the altar, there must, if the practice is to be meaningful, be a supernatural presence, subtraction of which would strip the ritual of its meaning. Yet putting the matter in these terms involves a certain distortion. For the ritual in

question remains an act of love and trust and thus carries an ineradicable charge of meaning, irrespective of the validity or otherwise of the underlying theology.

Am I saying that religious rituals are self-validating? I should prefer to put it slightly differently. Such rituals function as *vehicles for the longing for the transcendent that is an inherent part of our human makeup*. And insofar as they enact that longing, they express the faith and hope that there is, after all, a meaning to human life as a whole, a meaning that arises from our ability to orient ourselves, or attune ourselves, to the source of meaning and goodness which we long for. Nothing in the ritual, to be sure, can guarantee that there is indeed such a transcendent source; and nothing, to be sure, compels us in logic to adopt the path of spiritual praxis (let alone to do so in the specific form described in this liturgical example). But if we resolve to turn our back on any such path, we will, in the absence of some alternative vehicle for expressing the longing in question, be shutting down something in our nature that is not easily silenced. We will have to fall back on purely immanent sources of meaning, which may of course bring great satisfactions in their wake, but which will leave part of our nature unprovided for. And the life of a creature who longs for transcendence but is mired in immanence cannot be a fully meaningful one.

3. Transcendence, Teleology, and the Good

The conclusions reached so far might seem on further scrutiny to boil down to very thin gruel. If there can be no sound cognitive route to ‘a transcendent structure in term of which everything makes sense’ (in Adrian Moore’s phrase quoted in our opening paragraph), we seem to be left with nothing more than a mere desire or longing for there to be such a structure. So pointing to the fact that there are forms of spiritual praxis that enact our longing for such a structure would seem to show not that there *is* an overall meaning to human life, but merely that we would *like* there to be one.

Such a deflationary reading of the argument is possible, but it leaves out of account certain striking features of our human desire for transcendence. We are dealing not with ordinary appetitive desire, the drive to pursue and possess some object that is plainly in view, but (in the terminology introduced earlier) with a *desiderative* longing, a pervasive, deep, and open-ended yearning for something that beckons us forward but is beyond our grasp. And crucially, the desire in question does not simply relate to something we may happen to want (as some people might for a time want to collect postage stamps, but then turn their attention to porcelain), but constitutes (as suggested in our earlier quotation from Karl Rahner) an indelible part of what it is to be human. Our longing for the transcendent is in a certain sense indispensable: it is not something we can with integrity give up, while still retaining the anxious, questing spirit that is the signature of our humanity.

But could not one address the human urge for transcendence in a lower key or more down-to-earth fashion, by interpreting it not as directed to something that could provide the key to life’s meaning, but merely as the desire to make our lives as a whole more valuable and worthwhile? Along these lines, Clifford Williams (2020, Ch. 4) has offered various interpretations of what he calls ‘the urge to transcend oneself’, such as the urge to do good things for other people instead of focusing only on one’s own good (we could call this ‘altruistic transcendence’). Or alternatively, he suggests it could be construed as the urge to do something that is big and important, such as participating in an innovative and momentous project, or to identify with something ‘larger’ than oneself (we could call this ‘bigger picture’ transcendence). These various notions perhaps capture something of the meaning of ‘to transcend’ – to cross or go beyond certain boundaries, in particular the narrow boundaries of the ego, or the individual agent, and to reach for something wider and grander. But neither of these notions captures the existential and cosmological dimensions of the human desire for

transcendence; neither of them captures the sense in which these deep human longings are insatiable and indispensable. It is not just that there is a perpetual restless inquisitiveness in our human makeup – an evolutionary trait one might well expect to prove an advantage in the struggle for survival. More than that, we know that however many of our wants and goals were secured, we would still be puzzled, anxious, reaching for a completion that for ever eludes us.

But even if the idea of transcending oneself by doing things for others or for a worthy cause does not capture the deeper character of the human urge for transcendence, there seems to be something right about connecting the urge for transcendence with the moral domain. In our earlier discussion of the example of the offertory prayer, it emerged that a crucial element in the alignment of the worshipper with the object of longing was the conception of that object as *blessed* and *good*. And this in turn links with one of the four dimensions of human incompleteness outlined in the first part of our discussion, namely our *moral incompleteness*. This is perhaps a somewhat unfashionable notion in our modern culture, where self-help manuals often stress the importance of self-esteem and discourage wallowing in guilt. No doubt there is something valuable in such advice, but we do not have to be obsessively self-deprecating in order to be all too aware of our inevitably many human failings. To be human is to be uncomfortably conscious that our lives fall short of the goodness we dimly feel they ought to exemplify. Consistently with this, we may say that part of our yearning for transcendence is a yearning to align ourselves with the good, so as to bring our lives closer to how they should be.

The idea of a basic orientation to the good being present in the human psyche is widespread in the theistic tradition, not least in Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas is of course as aware as anyone else that people often seek bad things, and indeed might well have agreed with Hobbes's view that people often label 'good' whatever object they happen to want to pursue: ('Whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire, that is which he for his part calleth good'; Hobbes [1651] 1965, Ch. 6.) But in Aquinas's view, someone who eagerly pursues an evil end (for example bullying another human being or taking delight in their distress) will nevertheless retain, in spite of him- or herself, some residual pull in the opposite direction. As Eleonore Stump has underlined in several of her recent writings, Aquinas is committed to the idea of an objective standard of goodness to which, at least in its rudiments, no human being can be indifferent. And a striking conclusion follows from this, namely that 'no one can be wholehearted in evil'. For 'a person who lacks one or another degree of integration in goodness will hide some part of his mind from himself [and will be] alienated from some of his own desires.' (Stump 2018, 126).

Stump's interpretation of Aquinas may serve as a pointer to a certain way of understanding human incompleteness. In the theistic picture, the conception of the human being is a strongly *teleological* one: we have a destination that is laid down for us by a supremely benevolent and just creator, so that there is something we are meant to be, or a way we are meant to be. We are, as it were, *configured towards the good*, so that our fulfilment is only possible when we strive towards it. But because of human finitude and weakness, our vision of that good is necessarily imperfect, and our resolution to pursue it is weak. Often we choose the bad, or the lesser good. Yet something in our nature, if the theist is right, ensures that such bad choices necessarily produce a psychic dissonance. The yearning for what is truly and objectively good cannot be wholly damped down, however much we try; and this, for the theist, will be part of the diagnosis of that sense of queasiness, the dread, the Angst, of which the existentialists speak so eloquently (Kierkegaard [1843] 2006). We may set our heart on all sorts of bad objectives, and, if we please, take our cue from Hobbes and label them 'good'. But the inevitable result will be self-alienation, a

double-mindedness manifest in the fact that these objectives are at war with the better good that at some level we continue to long for.

Assuming one accepts the psychological validity of the ideas of alienation and double-mindedness just sketched, why, one might ask, could one not rest content with an entirely naturalistic or humanistic account of what is going on? Internal moral conflict or confusion may produce a sense of restlessness, or incompleteness, a feeling of something missing. So much is clear. But why bring in a transcendent dimension?

Part of the answer to this is suggested by the teleological conception of our human nature referred to a moment ago. To think of human nature as teleologically configured is, at the minimal level, to recognize that our lives are structured in terms of goals and purposes. Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the most systematic defenders of this kind of Aristotelian approach, insists that human agents, ‘as participants in the form of life that is distinctively human ... can only be understood, they can only understand themselves, teleologically’ (2016, 237). But the Aristotelian conception is not simply the idea that we pursue certain ends. There is deeply engrained in the Aristotelian and many subsequent accounts an intrinsic connection between the notion of a *telos*, and the idea of the good. Charles Taylor brings this out powerfully in his *Sources of the Self*, where he stresses that to make sense of our lives, and indeed to have an identity at all, ‘we need an orientation to the good’; we need to have some sense of our lives as moving towards moral growth and maturity. It follows from this, on Taylor’s view, that our lives have a *narrative* shape: as I develop, and learn from my failings and mistakes, there is always a story to be told about how I have become what I now am, and where my current journey towards improvement will take me. Just as my sense of where I am in physical space depends on how I got here and where I am going next, so it is, Taylor argues, with ‘my orientation in moral space’ (1989, pt. 1, ch. 2, sec. 3).

This brings us to the nub of the argument. Teleology, selfhood, narrativity, the idea of the self as fundamentally configured towards the good – this cluster of concepts seems inevitably to point us towards transcendence. The reason is simple: on a purely naturalistic or humanistic conception of human nature, the mere facts of evolution and biology cannot possibly furnish the idea of a way we are meant to be, a good we are meant to achieve. For the naturalist, the idea of life as an open-ended journey towards moral improvement can only be understood simply in terms of the drives, inclinations and conflicting desires we happen to have. And there is nothing in this assorted ragbag of propensities that marks out as normative a given *telos* for human life. The *telos*, the goal we are meant to strive for, has to be set, determined by or derived from something that transcends the confused catalogue of biological and historical facts concerning what human beings amount to.

What is more, the *telos* in question also has to transcend the *cultural* facts – the facts of our ‘second nature’, as John McDowell called what we have acquired by social acculturation. For since it is patently the case that cultures can degrade as well as improve, can take the wrong path and resist moral improvement, it follows that the direction of a given culture cannot in and of itself be the furnisher of authentic teleology. McDowell attempts to counter this by presupposing a strong moral objectivism: what acculturation does, according to his formulation, is to ‘bring into view’ normative reasons that are, as he puts it, ‘there in any case’ (1994, 82-83). But this very way of putting it necessarily invokes the reality of objective normative requirements that transcend the facts of culture. Does this take us all the way to Transcendence with a capital T, or to what the theist calls God? Perhaps not all the way – few arguments in philosophy are watertight in this sense – but it does suggest that without theism, or failing that perhaps some Platonic spiritual realm, the idea of a moral teleology, the conception of the self that I am meant to be, is left hanging in the void.

It is time to draw the threads together. If the argument of this chapter has been on the right lines, our human incompleteness leaves us with a longing for transcendence that cannot

be assuaged by an immanent framework of goals and goods, however meaningful we may find them. We retain a longing for a transcendent framework that might disclose the meaning of our lives as a whole and thereby bring us fulfilment and completion. But to access that transcendent framework, to gain a clear grasp of it, is beyond the reach of our human cognitive capacities. As Aquinas remarked, ‘the cause of that at which we wonder is hidden from us’ ([1265-66] 2012, Qu. 6, art. 2); and yet our very wonder bears witness to the *desiderium sciendi*, our presently unrequited longing to know ([1266-73] 1911, Ia IIae, Qu. 32, art. 8; cf. Pieper 1952, 116-7 and 129-130). Where cognition gives out, we have to proceed not cognitively but *desideratively*, by enacting our longing for the transcendent and thereby striving to bring our lives into harmony with what we long for. Such harmony presupposes that we can overcome double-mindedness by seeking to align ourselves by reference to an objective way we are meant to be, a good that is laid down not by our conflicting collection of desires and inclinations but by an objective teleological framework that holds the key to our fulfilment. For human beings, who are acutely aware of their incompleteness, and who can only understand themselves teleologically, the meaning of life must consist in the determination to reach forward and seek to align themselves with the transcendent good for which they long.

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