<h1 style="text-align:center">Evil and the Meaning of Life[1]</h1>
<p style="text-align:center">John Cottingham</p>

1. Evil and the threat to meaning

In that masterpiece of early twenty-first century fiction, W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, one of the themes is the erosion of meaning in life. The eponymous protagonist of the book, Jacques Austerlitz, vividly describes his loss of any sense of meaningfulness in his actions:

> Like a tightrope walker who has forgotten how to put one foot in front of the other, all I felt was the swaying of the precarious structure on which I stood, stricken with terror at the realization that the ends of the balancing pole gleaming far out on the edges of my field of vision were not longer my guiding lights, as before, but malignant enticements to me to cast myself into the depths … I sensed that in truth I had neither memory, nor the power of thought nor even any existence, that all my life had been a constant process of obliteration …[2]

This is strong stuff; but it turns out to be far more than the sometimes rather self-indulgent existentialist *Angst* that has become a commonplace of modern literature. For as the narrative unfolds, it emerges that the haunting horror and emptiness that Austerlitz experiences on his odyssey round post-War Europe is bound up with the half-forgotten story of his own early life, which he is desperately trying to recover. Raised by Welsh foster-parents, and ignorant of his true name, he eventually discovers that he was sent away to Britain from Czechoslovakia on a *Kindertransport* in 1939, at the age of five, and that his mother and father died in the Holocaust.

The suffering that countless human beings undergo is indeed horrifying, and that of children perhaps especially so; but what gives Austerlitz's narrative its particular horror is a growing awareness that his suffering was the direct result of human evil— an awareness that crystallizes as the protagonist gradually reconstructs the story of the systematic brutality and callousness which his family, and so many like them, endured. Philosophers have traditionally distinguished between 'natural' evil (suffering caused by disease, earthquakes, hurricanes etc.) and 'moral' evil (such as that perpetrated by the Nazis). No doubt both kinds can leave people so shaken as to question whether their lives make any sense; but the latter kind seems especially corrosive of meaningfulness. People may perhaps recover a sense of meaning and purpose after a natural disaster or a serious illness, but the kind of vertigo that Sebald describes, as he confronts the cruelty and malevolence of those who robbed him of his family and his childhood, seems to be specially destructive as far as meaningfulness is concerned. We are, to sure, helpless both in the face of natural shocks and in the face of deliberate human cruelty; but the latter, especially when it is unchecked and triumphant, as it was in Germany and occupied Europe in the early nineteen-forties, seems to shake our confidence in humanity itself. It makes us wonder whether the highest achievements of human culture and civilization may not be a thin and fragile efflorescence on a ugly flood of savagery and barbarism that flows on blindly, with no ultimate purpose or meaning.

From a philosophical point of view, there are I think several possible responses to these sombre features of the human predicament. One might be called the *resignation strategy*. The line of thought here, often combined with a radically naturalist or secularist outlook, is that we should give up the idea that human life ought to have a meaning in the first place. On this way of thinking, science has shown that the emergence of humanity is part of an inexorable process of random mutation and competition for survival on a planet itself shaped over billions of years by a

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[1] This typescript is a draft of a article the definitive version of which appeared in C. Meister and P. Moser (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)*,* Ch. 1, pp. 1-26.

[2] W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* [first published in German, 2001], trans. A. Bell (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 173-4.

purposeless nexus of contingent causes and conditions. The results of this process will include both the 'natural evils' that can wreak such havoc on our lives, and recurring instances of human cruelty, which are just as inevitable a part of our genetic inheritance as a species as the more altruistic behaviour we like to praise as 'moral'. But to expect any overall meaningfulness in the inexorable process is, according to this line of thought, simply a confusion, since there is no reason why human life should be 'meaningful' in any ultimate sense. In reality, there are simply conditions that arise and pass away, and we ought to expend our energies trying to maximize the resulting benefits and minimize the resulting harms during the short time we are here, and forget about the vain attempt to discern any meaning or pattern in the whole.

A second possible strategy might be called that of *piecemeal salvage*. Given that humans have a strong desire for meaning in their lives, but meaningfulness is threatened by natural and moral evil, the right response, on this view, is not to resign ourselves to a life without meaning, but rather to salvage what meaning we can in the individual projects we pursue, which can at least bring a sense of localized value and purpose into our lives. It will be admitted by those who follow the strategy now being considered, that such meaning is ephemeral, and that our chosen plans and projects can never endure long and are often cut short by natural misfortune or destroyed by the malice of others; but what we can do, on this line of thought, is to make the best of them we can, since this is the only kind of meaningfulness that human life can offer. As the voice of the speaker in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* puts it, surveying the ultimate fragility and futility of all human endeavour, yet identifying a few remnants of literature and culture that have given him some fleeting sense of meaning: 'these fragments have I shored against my ruins.'[3]

The two strategies just canvassed are not of course entirely distinct, but merely bring to the fore different elements in a characteristically modern package of responses to the problem of living a meaningful life in the face of the gloomy facts of our vulnerability to misfortune and to evil. The underlying tone in these responses is conditioned by a loss of faith in the viability of the traditional theistic outlook— the abandonment of any sense of a benign teleology at work in the cosmos, any sense that we were 'put here' for any end or purpose. One of the most eloquent philosophical spokesmen for this bleak but for many people realistic way of thinking was Bernard Williams, whose view of the human condition was an ultimately pessimistic one. As he put it in his much admired *Shame and Necessity*, the view is one that "refuses to present human beings [as] ideally in harmony with their world," and which "has no room for a world that, if it were understood well enough, could instruct us how to be in harmony with it."[4] It is perhaps worth adding here that although this kind of picture typifies the framework within which much modern philosophizing operates, its origins go well back beyond the birth of modernity, as indeed Williams's own work showed, when (in the book just mentioned) he traced some of its roots back to the recurring themes of ancient Greek drama.

The explorations of evil found in the great Greek tragedians cannot be called non-religious, since they often make reference to the gods of the Greek pantheon. But their underlying outlook is not a theistic one, as that term is now normally understood; for the divine denizens of Mount Olympus are not unequivocal sources of goodness, nor particularly on the side of a loving or just outcome of our human tribulations, but are simply more powerful than humans, often preoccupied with their own selfish rivalries, and typically inclined to view our sufferings from an aloof position coldness or indifference (*agnōmosunē*), as Sophocles puts it in his play *The Women of Trachis*. If we compare this with the kind of picture found in the theistic worldview of the great Abrahamic religions, we find a striking contrast. In the Hebrew bible, natural evil is often interpreted as itself having a moral dimension, being a punishment imposed by God on human wrongdoing. And as for moral evil, this is never presented in the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic traditions as something to which God could be indifferent, but on the contrary it is seen as something running deeply counter to the purposes which a compassionate and just God has intended for humankind. Notwithstanding

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[3] T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* [1922], final section.
[4] Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 164.

these points, however, the exact status of evil in the theistic world picture, and the extent to which it affects the question of the meaning of human life, are complex and difficult questions, and to these we will now turn.

2. Theistic interpretations of evil and the meaning of life

One of the difficulties in assessing the significance of evil in a theistic worldview is the prevalence of certain crude sketches which presume to capture the theistic outlook— caricatures that often bear little relation to what the thoughtful theist actually holds, or what a reflective reading of the relevant scriptural writings actually discloses. Thus Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher noted for her nuanced and sensitive readings of Classical pagan texts on evil and suffering, is sometimes content to offer a most cursory account of the presumed Judaeo-Christian stance. Discussing the case mentioned above, the tragic events in *The Women of Trachis* and the apparently callous indifference of the gods, she comments that the message of Sophocles' play is one of burning anger and outrage at these events, whereas 'a Judaeo-Christian text probably would have said … that everything that has happened is just and good.'[5] Nussbaum no doubt has in mind a Leibnizian style theodicy, where 'all's for the best in the best of all possible worlds;' and in fairness there is no doubt that several Christian theists have indeed taken such a glib line, not least Leibniz himself, for example in his notorious gloss on the rape of Lucretia: 'the crime of Sextus Tarquinius serves for great things: it renders Rome free; thence will arise a great empire, which will show noble examples to mankind.'[6] But the Judaeo-Christian scriptures themselves are for the most part strikingly free of this kind of consequentialist or instrumentalist construal of the significance of evil.

What one tends to find instead in the long catalogue of human anguish recorded in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament is that evil is presented in all its stark reality, with not one iota of the suffering omitted or rationalised. One can scarcely imagine a more terrible fate than that of King Zedekiah, who is forced to watch as his two sons are slaughtered in front of him, and is then blinded, bound in bronze chains and led away to captivity in Babylon (2 Kings 25:7). And the central Christian narrative, where Jesus of Nazareth is subjected to the utmost humiliation, brutally flogged by the Roman occupying forces, and then put to death in one of the most prolonged and agonizing forms of execution ever devised by human cruelty— this is described without any attempt to disguise or explain away the savagery. But the main question for present purposes is about the extent to which the theistic framework within which these events are narrated allows the meaningfulness of human life to be preserved despite its vulnerability to the evil depicted in such narratives.

One answer that will inevitably come to mind here is that the theistic worldview is able to maintain that when human life is marred or truncated by evil it can still be meaningful because of the future existence that awaits us after death. The afterlife is actually not a pervasive feature of Judaism, certainly not in all its forms; but it has an important place in Islam, and in Christianity it has great prominence because of the doctrine of the Resurrection of Christ, who, moreover, is regarded as the 'first fruits' (1 Corinthians 15:20), prefiguring the possibility of eternal life for redeemed mankind in general. But it would probably be rash to conclude (as many critics of religion appear apt to) that on the theistic picture it is the afterlife that bears all or even most of the weight when it comes to allowing a life to be meaningful in spite of the ravages of evil. For it seems highly implausible to suppose that the prolongation of life after death could, *in itself*, bestow meaning on a life that was otherwise a meaningless horror. To put the point somewhat crudely, if a child is subjected to protracted torture (or allowed to be so subjected by someone who could stop it), and then is *subsequently* cosseted and given toys and sweets, that does not seem to do anything to make the horror it has endured meaningful. As Mark Johnston has put it, discussing the problem of extreme and arbitrary suffering, 'nothing that subsequently happens can diminish the tragedy or the

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[5] Martha Nussbaum, 'Tragedy and Justice: Bernard Williams remembered', *Boston Review*, October/November 2003.
[6] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy* [*Essais de théodicée*, 1714], Part II, §416.

horror … the attempt to put an otherworldly frame around such things, so they seem not to be the tragedies or the horrors that they manifestly are, borders on … the obscene."[7]

It is, however, far from clear, despite the prevalence of caricatures to the contrary, that all or most theists do in fact maintain that the role of the afterlife is to 'make everything ok', or that the 'otherworldly frame' of the afterlife is supposed to restore the meaningfulness of our human existence simply by positing its continuation in a blessed post-mortem state. Let us take a specific instance to make this point clearer. Suppose that someone finds meaning in life in virtue of some particular project or endeavour to which he devotes his energies. Let us take a close personal relationship as an example (surely a paradigm case of a something generally regarded as worthwhile and meaningful), and imagine the case of someone for whom a major part of his 'reason for living' is the love and companionship afforded by his marriage. And now imagine that this marriage is cut short as a result of some horrendous evil— perhaps his partner is gunned down at random in a shopping mall by a psychopathic killer bent on destroying those who belong to a particular community or race or religion. Our bereaved victim looses all sense of purpose and meaning in life. The question now arises for standard forms of theism that invoke the afterlife: is meaning supposed to be restored, for this individual, by a future existence in which he is eternally reunited with his slain partner?

There seem to be reasons for doubting that things can be as simple as this. For the Christian, for instance, it will be highly relevant to recall that Christ is on record in the Gospels as saying that 'in the Resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage' (Matthew 22:20; Mark 12:25). Whatever the promise of eternal life can mean, then, it appears it does *not* mean the continuation, *ad infinitum*, of the earthly projects, however worthy, which give people a sense of meaning during the course of their mortal life. On the contrary, the afterlife, as conceived of in mainstream theism, does not seem to be a 'continuation' at all, in this sense, but rather a radical change (1 Corinthians 15:52), which will allow a progressively closer union with God, or the good.

Such union is what is meant by 'heaven', which is traditionally described as a state, rather than a place. So (if we rule out construing the afterlife as the mere post-mortem continuation of earthly pursuits) our question now shifts to whether, for those believers who hope to 'go to heaven', it is this possibility of eventual union with God that is the key to the meaningfulness of human life. In one sense, this seems correct, since union with God represents, on the theistic view, the final goal for which we were created; but even here one should beware of crude caricatures. Traditional Christian doctrine does not take heaven to be, as it were, an extraneous destination that externally and retrospectively confers meaning on the journey of human life; it has always been seen as a kind of culmination or seal set on a life well and meaningfully lived. In other words, the meaningfulness of a life is by no means wholly derivative from this supposed final culmination, on the theistic view, but is importantly determined by what is done here on earth. As it is expressed in that once widely circulated summary of the Catholic faith, the 'Penny Catechism', humans are created 'to love and serve God in this world and to be happy with him in the next.' And the doctrine of the Last Judgement found in the Christian gospels (e. g. Matthew 7) and elsewhere implies that the two parts of this conjunction are intimately interconnected: happiness in the next world depends on what is done now (though theologians differ on the precise respective roles here of divine grace and of our own voluntary actions). The upshot of all this is that on the theistic view it is the moral quality of a lived human life that is vital to its value and meaning; and the question about evil then becomes whether evil has the power to erode that quality.

The authentic theistic answer to this complex question would appear to be that evil can destroy a meaningful human life only by its corrupting effects on the *perpetrator* of evil, but not on in virtue of what it does to the victims of evil. This may appear a paradoxical result, but it is by no means confined to adherents of traditional theism, since it accords with the Socratic intuition, widely shared by those of many faiths and of none, that it is better to suffer evil than to do it.[8] So, it

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[7] Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 15.
[8] Plato, *Gorgias* [*c*. 380 BC], 469-479.

will follow, for example, that Abel had a more meaningful life than Cain, because the former, though his life was cruelly cut short by the murderous attack of his brother, lived a life that was good and worthwhile, whereas Cain, by indulging his envy and murderous anger, ended up as a 'wanderer on the face of the earth', living the futile existence of one who had wasted his life by giving way to evil (Genesis 4:14). And similarly, Judas's betrayal of Christ ended up, when he finally understood its import, robbing his life of all meaning and value and leaving him no option but suicide; whereas the victim of that betrayal, despite his agonies, overcame that evil and died forgiving his enemies (Matthew 27: 5; Luke 23:34).

At this point, however, we are inevitably brought back to the issue raised by W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, with which this essay opened. For though some heroic figures may be able to overcome evil with good, it appears from the Austerlitz case and many similar ones, that being the victim of serious evil can bring about an irreparable disorientation and loss of meaning in life. To address this issue, we need to explore a concept that has hitherto not surfaced in our discussion— the concept of redemption, and the idea that meaning may somehow be recoverable through the redemptive power of suffering.

3. Evil and suffering

In one of his letters, St Paul provides a graphic list of the sufferings he has undergone: 'in afflictions, in necessities, in distress, in floggings, in imprisonments, in riots, in hard labour, in sleepless nights, in going without food …. as dying and yet we live, as beaten and yet not killed, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as having nothing, and yet possessing all things…' (2 Corinthians 6: 4-10). This is far from being a self-pitying or resigned attitude to the evils he has endured, but is rather a kind of glorying in the suffering; as Paul says in another letter, in all such tribulations we are 'more than conquerors through him who loved us' (Romans 9:37). Some hostile critics of theism may perhaps be inclined to construe this in a crudely mechanical way, as if the believer supposes he can count on supernatural invention to make everything right. But Paul's point seems to be *not* that he has a magical short-cut to rescue him from his sufferings, but rather than *through and in the midst* of his sufferings he is aware of the redemptive power of love.

Paul's story, as it is unfolded in the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters, seems a paradigm of a meaningful life, certainly in the subjective sense that the subject takes himself to be engaged on a mission of the utmost importance and value, giving a sense of purpose to everything he does; and this is part of what enables him to retain his sense of meaning in life. However, there is a difference between subjective and objective meaningfulness: people can be mistaken in supposing that their activities, or even their life's work, are meaningful. If we take, for example, the case of a devoted Nazi who gives his all to serving the cause of fascism and Aryan superiority, we may be inclined to say that for all his subjective sense of meaningfulness, he is in fact devoting himself to a cruel and pointless enterprise based on false and confused ideas about race, and that his life is, unbeknownst to him, a meaningless waste of all his efforts. Indeed, one could imagine a deathbed scene in which his wounds are dressed by one of those he had persecuted, and the humanity of the hitherto despised group is brought home to him, so that he comes to see that all his past endeavours, previously regarded as so meaningful, were in fact revolting and tragic mistakes. Paul himself, of course, had undergone just such a shift of perception early on in his career, in his conversion experience, but was given the chance to make it good in the extraordinary life that remained to him. But how is it to be decided whether the resulting life, beset by all the evil and suffering that Paul so graphically describes, was indeed objectively meaningful?

The question of whether the subsequent life of the (converted) Paul was objectively meaningful will depend in part on whether Christian vision to which he subscribed is true; and here the secularist may be inclined to say Paul's belief in the (objective) meaningfulness of what he was doing was false, because his vision was founded on ideas for which there is inadequate evidence (for example, the idea that Christ rose from the dead, or that the God Paul took himself to be serving really exists). But it would be a mistake to suppose that the objective meaningfulness of a way of life requires all the elements of the worldview that supports it to be definitively validated—

that would surely be to place the bar of objective meaningfulness of a life impossibly high. It seems enough for a life to count as objectively meaningful if it is lived in a way that genuinely succeeds in furthering goals and bearing fruits that our careful reflections and intuitions judge to be important and significant. Paul in fact mentions many 'fruits of the spirit' that he takes to be signs or seals set on a meaningful and valuable life of the kind he strove for: 'the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5: 22-3). The upshot is that there seems a strong case for claiming that the evils that Paul endured do not in the end erode or undermine the objective meaningfulness of his life, or the lives of those like him, in so far as such lives succeed in instantiating these shining ideals. Just as the harvest gives meaning to the farmer's toil, so the 'fruits of the spirit' give meaning to the trials and persecutions that are endured in the face of evil.

To be sure, Paul, and many of the saints and martyrs, are recognized as people of truly heroic stature; and one may reasonably be concerned that the fact that such heroes are able to preserve meaningful lives despite terrible suffering does not help the vast numbers of more ordinary people, such as the Austerlitz character, for whom the role of evil seems altogether more destructive and overwhelming of meaning. As with all questions about suffering and theodicy, it seems crass, if not worse, to try to deny that there may be those for whom the ravages of evil disrupt their lives beyond healing; and the best recent work on the subject is notable for not attempting to gloss over this.[9] But in spite of that, it may be argued that there is a valid lesson to be gleaned from the analysis we have offered in Pauline case, and in the examples (of Cain and Abel, Jesus and Judas) discussed in the previous section, and that it is a lesson that holds good for the heroic and the ordinary alike. The lesson, expressed in summary form, is that what makes a life meaningful is above all the striving to hold fast to the good, and what ineluctably erodes meaningfulness is not the evil to which people are subjected, but their turning away from the good. So even in the Austerlitz case, heart-breaking though it is, there is perhaps is a kind of redemptive courage in the agonizing journey the narrator undertakes as he strives to recover his identity amid the wreckage of post-war Europe. The whole novel is, in a way, a testimony to the truth that it is the perpetrators of evil, not its victims, who are excluded from the true humanity which alone must be the framework for any genuinely meaningful life to take shape. No one has perhaps put the underlying point better than George Eliot, in her novel *Adam Bede*:

> Let us . . . be thankful that our sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy— the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love . . . For it is at such periods that the sense of our lives having visible and invisible relations beyond any of which either our present or prospective self is the centre, grows like a muscle that we are obliged to lean on and exert.[10]

The redemptive power of suffering is here seen precisely in its power to connect us to the rest of humanity, and to the love which is the key to what is best in our nature. And meaning flows from that, taking us outwards beyond self-preoccupation towards those 'visible and invisible relations' that give shape and purpose to our lives. Eliot's reflections are phrased in secular terms, but they are unmistakably shaped by the Judaeo-Christian culture she inherited, with its deeply moralistic core, and its central emphasis on love and compassion as the key to a meaningful human life.

The lesson about the intimate link between morality and meaning might perhaps even be pushed further and applied to what is widely regarded as the ultimate evil, the evil of death itself. For when St Paul says 'the sting of death is sin' (1 Corinthians 15:56), this could be understood in part as saying that the erosion of meaning comes not from the ending of life in itself, but from the misuse of the gifts of life in wrongdoing. This is part and parcel of the uncompromising message of

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[9] See Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 480.
[10] George Eliot, *Adam Bede* [1859], Ch. 50. For further discussion of this passage see J. Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), Ch.3.

the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which gives absolute primacy to the moral over all other possible dimensions of meaning. Any philosophical inquiry into how evil affects the meaning of life will therefore have to tackle the question of whether this notion of the absolute primacy of the moral is defensible, and this will be the starting point of the next section.

4. Alternative sources of meaning.
The 'moralistic' tone of our conclusions so far may seem to strike the wrong note for those philosophers who take a pluralist view of the sources of meaning in human life, and regard morality as but one among many incommensurable values, any one of which can be the basis for a meaningful human existence. The ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche have been highly influential here, since he is famous for extolling the *Übermensch*, who rises above the constraints of 'herd' morality, with its 'almost feminine inability to remain spectators, to *let* someone suffer', and instead finds meaning through creativity and self-expression, which, as he put it in *Beyond Good and Evil*, may require 'the conscience to be steeled and the heart turned to bronze.'[11] Following on from this, in our own time, Bernard Williams has mounted a comprehensive critique of what he called the 'morality system'— that 'peculiar institution', with its associated idea of a special class of inescapable obligations. Williams felt that this institution exerted a kind of tyranny over our thinking about ethics, and that we would be better off without it.[12] One of his examples was the 'Gauguin case' (loosely based on the painter Paul Gauguin's flight to Polynesia), where it is suggested that achieving a meaningful life as a successful creative artist vindicated the painter's abandonment of his wife and family.[13] There is, of course, a conflict of values here, but Williams saw no reason to cede universal precedence to the 'morality system', and pointed out that there are many varieties of human excellence, which it is simply a mistake to try to fit into a hierarchical order, or a 'harmonious whole'.[14]

For the purposes of our present inquiry what is significant here is the severance of the link between morality and meaning, and as a result the rejection of the idea of moral evil as necessarily eroding meaning in life. Indeed, the very title of Nietzsche's treatise, *Beyond Good and Evil,* implicitly suggests that a life of the kind he favoured, the life of power and creativity, may require the agent to abandon normal moral rules in the search for self-expression and meaning. The avoidance of evil, on this picture, ceases to be an absolute requirement that constrains our choices, and sets limits on the possible meaning and value our lives can achieve. Instead, the idea is that it is up to us to set our own standards of meaning and value, subject only to the need to fulfil ourselves. In the words of Alexander Nehamas (another supporter of the Nietzschean position), the goal for the individual agent is to 'dislodge what was in place as the good and the true in order to find a place for himself, for his *own* truth and goodness.'[15]

These positions, whether one finds them attractive or repulsive, clearly contain an element of plausibility. It is patently true that there are various forms of human endeavour, including for example musical, artistic, athletic, scientific, and many others, which require determination and effort in order to achieve excellence, and which, for those who pursue them, contribute very significantly to their sense that their lives are meaningful and worthwhile. But to concede this is certainly not to concede that any of these activities require the practitioners to go 'beyond good and evil', or justify them in so doing. If we return to the Gauguin case, there seems to be no evidence that artistic excellence somehow requires the sacrifice of moral values (as if Gauguin could not have been a great painter had he done his duty to his family). If anything, the evidence seems to point the othe way: for in so far as great art involves the full engagement of our human sensibilities and responsiveness to others, there is every reason to suppose that the cultivation of artistic and of

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[11] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886], §§202-3.
[12] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1985), Ch. 10
[13] See Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Ch. 2.
[14] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits,*, Ch. 8, p. 153.
[15] Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 183.

moral sensibility are intricately interlinked. This is not to deny that many great artists have led very selfish lives, but it does call into question the self-exculpatory fantasy that addressing such failings might have threatened their artistic achievement.[16]

In the light of this we can see that the idea of the absolute primacy of the moral, which in the previous section we argued has its roots in the religious perspective found in Judaism and Christianity, does not necessarily crowd out all other values. It is no doubt true that in aiming to live a meaningful and worthwhile life we may have to make hard choices; indeed, even in the overwhelmingly moralistic framework of the gospels, it is allowed that there may, for example, be a choice between doing something 'fine' or 'noble' (*kalon*), and maximizing welfare (by selling an asset and giving the proceeds to the poor), and that the maximizing answer may not always be the correct one (Matthew 26:8). But none of this implies that human life can remain meaningful for the agent if there is a deliberate turning away from the good, a deliberate violation of what is right. To hold, *pace* the Nietzschean position, that evil is fundamentally corrosive of meaning in the life of the perpetrator is something that is not just a matter of religious dogma, but is supported by a wide spectrum of human experience. It is this that enables us to recognize something profoundly true in the way that Shakespeare portrays Macbeth, for example, or Iago: by allowing ambition and envy respectively to turn them towards murder and treachery, these two protagonists end up at the close of the drama, as completely cut off from any source of meaning in their lives. For Macbeth, life becomes 'a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing;' for Iago, there is nothing but grim empty silence 'from henceforth I never will speak word.'[17] Nietzsche himself of course ended up going mad; and although it would no doubt be grossly unfair to treat this as an argument against the tenability of his position on evil, there does seem to be something fundamentally incoherent, or at least wilfully myopic in his extolling of the *Übermensch* as the model for a truly great and meaningful human life. As Philippa Foot put it (in very simple and low-key but highly effective terms), in looking down on "inferiors", as Nietzsche did, he lacked that deep sense that 'one is always, fundamentally, in the same boat as everyone else, and that therefore it is quite unsuitable for anyone to see himself as "grand"'.[18]

5.Coda: evil and redemption

The main focus of our discussion has been on the power of moral evil to corrode the meaning of life for its perpetrators, and the extent to which its victims may at least sometimes be able to preserve meaning in their lives despite the ravages of evil. In this latter context we have spoken of the redemptive power of suffering. Redemption is a topic that, in many of its dimensions, takes us beyond human philosophizing into matters of theology and faith. But it is worth noting as we bring our discussion to a close, that the concept of redemption is not one that applies only, or even chiefly, to the victims of evil, but which is traditionally taken to be something that is specially applicable to sinners, to those who commit evil. Although the so-called problem of evil is invariably taken by philosophers to be concerned with underserved suffering, there is also another kind of 'problem of evil' that impinges on us all as agents rather than patients: the problem that we all to a greater or lesser extent blight our lives by harming others, or failing them in compassion and love. This is the 'wretchedness' of humankind of which Pascal spoke, and which he saw as redeemable only by the grace of God.[19]

It would take us far beyond the confines of this essay to explore the idea of divine redemption; but this much can perhaps be said that is relevant to our special focus on evil and the meaning of life. If we share that characteristically human impulse to make sense of our lives as a whole, then we need to come to terms not just with the fact that our projects may be arbitrarily damaged by natural accident or the malice of others, but with the in some ways much more

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[16] See further Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, Ch. 1.

[17] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* [1606], Act V, scene 5; *Othello* [1603], Act V, scene 2.

[18] Philippa Foot, 'Nietzsche's Immoralism,' in R. Schacht (ed.) *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 3-14, at p.9.

[19] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no 6.

worrying fact that we ourselves may damage our lives by our own selfishness and wrongdoing. The path of redemption here may be a very hard one; but some have suggested that suffering can play a very significant part, by shaking us out of our former complacency, bringing us in touch with our own finitude and dependency, and thereby making us vividly aware of how we have failed others who were dependent on us. This connects with the 'vale of soul-making' idea that is familiar from the theodicy literature: the idea that suffering and stress may have a the function of enabling moral growth.[20]

Whether such strategies are successful as theodicies (that is, whether they 'exonerate' God for permitting the kind and extent of suffering in the world) is very much open to question; but the issue for present purposes is not that, but whether suffering can play a role in shaping the meaning and significance of a human life. The answer to this seems clearly to be an affirmative one: as we saw above in section three, it is possible to think of conversion cases where it takes a traumatic event to shake someone out of an ingrained pattern of wrongdoing and make them start to see for the first time the full significance of the harm they have done to others. In such cases, they may come to look back on their trauma, whether caused by natural mishap such as illness, or even by the morally evil actions of someone else, as the turning point that allowed their life to take a truly meaningful direction for the first time.

This in turn suggests a final point: that the evil that we perpetrate, and that which we suffer at the hands of others, do not fall into such discrete compartments as we sometimes like to think. The famous dictum from one of the meditations of John Donne, 'no man is an island',[21] reminds us that all human lives are interconnected, and that however we may like to see ourselves as victims (sometimes with good reason), there will always be others who are to a greater or lesser extent victims of what we do or allow. Understanding this at a deep level may perhaps move us a small way towards seeing the overall meaning of our existence; for if the implicit argument of this essay has been on the right lines, such meaning can only validly be sought within a moral framework which has at its centre the overriding imperatives of justice, compassion and love. In Charles Dickens's novel *Barnaby Rudge* there is a passage which, though no doubt tinged with a Victorian sentimentality that is not to modern taste, nevertheless captures well this strange interconnectedness of doing and suffering evil, tribulation and comfort, suffering and redemption:

> In the exhaustless catalogue of Heaven's mercies to mankind, the power we have of finding some germs of comfort in the hardest trials must ever occupy the foremost place; not only because it supports and upholds us when we most require to be sustained, but because in this source of consolation there is something, we have reason to believe, of the divine spirit; something of that goodness which detects amidst our own evil doings, a redeeming quality; something which, even in our fallen nature, we possess in common with the angels; which had its being in the old time when they trod the earth, and lingers on it yet, in pity.[22]

Despite the references to heaven and to angels, which some readers may find off-putting, the underlying insights here do not have to be expressed in religious terms. The search for meaning in life is arguably an ineradicable part of what it is to be human, and that search cannot be satisfied merely by security, comfort and convenience. We can try to satisfy it by self-aggrandisement, or by the single-minded pursuit of our personal goals, but that again can never be quite enough. Given the kind of creatures we are, a life that is meaningful, subjectively and objectively, in the end requires some attempt to understand our human predicament; and that in turn requires us, whether we like it or not, to come to terms with our own 'evil doings', as Dickens puts it, and to realize how these

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[20] See J. Hick 'Soul Making Theodicy' [1981], repr. in M. Peterson et al., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 2nd edn 2001), part v, and Richard Swinburne, 'The Problem of Evil', in S. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1977).

[21] John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* [1624], Meditation XVII.

[22] Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* [1841], Ch. 47.

impact on the lives of others. The struggle is not just to endure the evil that may impinge on us through the actions of others, but also to rise above the evil in our own flawed nature, and to understand that both kinds belong to our common humanity. Whether this struggle is one that can be undertaken from our own resources alone may be a subject for dispute between believers and non-believers; but what seems hard to dispute is that a life that turns its back on that struggle will be hard put to it to be a truly meaningful life.