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Reflections on the Meaning of Life in Light of Word as Logos

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It is popular today to propose that we should not be concerned with the meaning of life in which this "meaning" is to be found in terms of some objective, Archimedean point, or cosmic viewpoint. It is often suggested instead that the meaning of your life is a far more subjective affair. Perhaps the meaning of your life is up to you. You can decide whether the meaning of your life is being a public servant, a chaplain, doctor, athlete, parent, lover, soldier, and so on.[1] Probably the most famous literary embodiment of the view that meaning is utterly subjective (where the meaning of something can be determined individually) is the odd figure of Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's beloved *Alice in Wonderland* series. Humpty Dumpty declares, "When *I* use a word…it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." When Alice then asks whether one can simply "make words mean so many different things," Humpty Dumpty replies, "The question is…which is to be master—that's all."[2]

[1]I survey different accounts of the meaning of life, including ones that hold that such meaning is utterly subjective in "Jesus and the Meaning of Life," in *Jesus and Philosophy*, ed. Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 215–229.

[2]Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, in *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.) 214.

What is the meaning of life? Is it merely subjective? Or perhaps worse, merely absurd? John's Gospel offers an alternative: Here there is no split between utterance and meaning. Here there is a profound unity of word and action, of the human and divine. Here there is meaning on which to pin one's hopes and one's life.

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The Limits of Subjective Meaning

I suggest that there are severe limits on subjective meaning. When someone asks you for the meaning of some act or event, this seems to be a question about truth and significance. If I see you going through papers on my desk and I have not asked you to do this, when I ask you about the meaning of this, I am asking, first, "What are you doing?" or at least "What do you think you are doing?" and, second, I am asking, "Why you are doing it?" or "What do you hope to gain or lose or discover or hide?" Moving away from the office, and considering life as a whole, when we ask about meaning I think we are asking about truth and significance on a scale that goes well beyond subjective meaning. Imagine, for example, that classical

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Christianity is true. Then the meaning of someone who devotes themselves to self-pleasure is that they have neglected God's call to love others and missed out (in this life anyway) on a holy, transforming relationship with God through Christ. Or, if a version of Buddhism turns out to be true, then the meaning of someone who devotes his life to material advancement is that his life has been built on an illusion. And this line of thinking continues, for all the big worldviews from secular naturalism to Hinduism. Contrary to the assertion of Humpty Dumpty, our language has severe limits. If someone were to tell you, "I hope you have a life full of suffering and a pointless death" (as someone did to me this spring during a seminar), she may be able to alter the meaning of this declaration if she convincingly demonstrates that she was merely joking and that, of course, she instead wants me to be happy and flourish. But only just barely, and certainly it would be hard to declare that what she meant was that the bus for the Twin Cities leaves at noon. Fortunately or unfortunately, we cannot exercise radical mastery over our words.

Meaning and Logos

Perhaps the strongest statement historically of the unity of meaning and expression can be found in the Gospel of John. In that Fourth Gospel, the concept of "logos" has a double life: the term is used to refer to Christ's words and to his teaching (his utterances), but it is also used to refer to Jesus Christ himself. When the term is used in relation to God or to Jesus, the double life of logos is unbreakably united. There is, in logos, no split between utterance and meaning. The prologue to the Fourth Gospel could almost be translated as "In the beginning, there was meaning" (John 1:1), though this would not capture the scriptural testimony to the profound, ideal, divine unity of that which is uttered or expressed and

what is meant. One of the lessons of Johannine theology is that while you and I may fall into hypocrisy, fragmentation, and lying, Jesus the Christ embodies a profound unity of word and action, the divine and human. To be sure, Christ was tempted, and in the passion and death of Jesus his bodily life was shattered and proved to be mortal. And yet in the theology of the Fourth Gospel the power of the divine logos is irrepressible and indomitable.

The theology of Jesus as the incarnate word or logos of God in the Gospel of John stands in stark contrast to Gnostic teachings about the unreality or pointlessness of the material world. There are various forms of Gnosticism in the early centuries, but most forms hold that the material world is, in essence, a mistake—the creation of a sub-deity. We contain a spark of the divine and our goal (in Gnosticism) is to transcend this world, to achieve a saving knowledge of the God beyond the god of this world. In John, however, the material world is fully real and the incarnation thorough (Jesus thirsts and bleeds, for example). The eternal God is also truly revealed in this material world as Christ, a tangible, living presence. As C. H. Dodd describes the perspective of John: "He writes in terms of a world in which phenomena—things and events—are a living and moving image of the eternal, and not a veil of illusion to hide it, a world in which the Word is made flesh."[3]

Beyond the Absurd

Viewing one's life in light of the word of God as logos involves realizing that there is awesome meaning to all our actions and utterances. As Dodd has pointed out, John builds on the Hebrew belief that God's word has active, sustained powers: "A blessing, for example, once pronounced continues to bless."[4] This outlook is profoundly different from the treatment of meaning in one of the most important philosophical works in the last forty years, Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere*. In a final chapter on the meaning of life, Nagel argues that, from an external or objective point of view, each of our lives is pointless. Yes, subjectively we have our commitments and projects but from an Archimedean point our lives are absurd: "From far enough outside my birth seems accidental, my life pointless, and my death insignificant."[5] Nagel's most recent book, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament*, seems to hint at his not being content with such an empty point of view.[6] Nagel now seems prepared to entertain a religious alternative or a secular Platonic philosophy that might ground our lives in some concept of goodness and beauty. Perhaps his earlier position seemed, in some sense, to undermine human dignity or even moral objectivity; it is hard to think human life is precious

[3]C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 143.

[4]Ibid., 264.

[5]Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 209.

[6]For Nagel's more recent views, see the collection of essays *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Nagel distances himself from "new atheists" like Richard Dawkins.

if you also believe, as he wrote in *The View from Nowhere*, that "from an external view of the universe…it still wouldn't have mattered if we had never existed."[7] In that earlier, more famous book, Nagel likens our position to that of a spider stuck for weeks in the men's urinal at Princeton University, which he tried to rescue. After lifting the spider out of the urinal, "the next day I found him…his legs shriveled in that way characteristic of dead spiders. His corpse stayed there for a week, until they finally swept the floor."[8] Nagel's tale of the spider effectively captures what he sees (or at least used to see) as our pathetic condition from the point of view of the universe, though his account will probably not equal some of the other great literary portraits of acting in an absurd world like Camus in *The Plague* or *The Myth of Sisyphus,* or like Prometheus, acting defiantly against the gods in *Prometheus Bound*.[9]

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MEANING BECOMES PERSONAL

As I write this, my wife is preparing to undergo surgery in two days. What is or will be the meaning of this surgery? Subjective meaning will enter the picture to some extent: we are facing this event with hope as opposed to despair and fear. But the truth and significance of the event is not something we can completely master. Whatever the outcome, I am moved, not by the story of an aging, atheist (but perhaps now a reluctant atheist) academic in a men's bathroom at Princeton trying to help a sad little creature. I am moved far more by the sublime Johannine testimony: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). From a Johannine perspective (or, more broadly, from a Christian perspective), the Word as logos takes the initiative. This theology is linked to the Old Testament point of view in which the word of God is described as active: it comes and goes; it accomplishes things; it returns to God with people and things and events (Isa 55:10–11; Wis 18:15–16). The logos or word of God surprises and entices us. Here is a vivid testimony of this kind of initiative of the divine in an account by the British poet W. H. Auden.

[7]Nagel, *View from Nowhere*, 214.

[8]Ibid, 209.

[9]Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Modern Library, 1948); Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Knopf, 1955); Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein, Loeb Classical Library 145 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) 432–563.

> One fine summer night in June 1933 I was sitting on a lawn after dinner with three colleagues, two women and one man. We liked each other well enough but we were certainly not intimate friends, nor had any one of us a sexual interest in another. Incidentally, we had not drunk any alcohol. We were talking casually about everyday matters when, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, something happened. I felt myself invaded by a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine. For the first time in my life I knew exactly—because, thanks to the power, I was doing it—what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself. I was certain, though the conversation continued to be perfectly ordinary, that my three colleagues were having the same experience. (In the case of one of them, I was able later to confirm this.) My personal feelings towards them were unchanged—they were still colleagues, not intimate friends—but I felt their existences as themselves to be of infinite value and rejoiced in it.
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> I recalled with shame the many occasions on which I had been spiteful, snobbish, selfish, but the immediate joy was greater than the shame, for I knew that, so long as I was possessed by this spirit, it would be literally impossible for me deliberately to injure another human being. I also knew that the power would, of course, be withdrawn sooner or later and that, when it did, my greeds and self-regard would return. The experience lasted at its full intensity for about two hours when we said good-night to each other and went to bed. When I awoke the next morning, it was still present, though weaker, and it did not vanish completely for two days or so. The memory of the experience has not prevented me from making use of others, grossly and often, but it has made it much more difficult for me to deceive myself about what I am up to when I do. And among the various factors which several years later brought me back to the Christian faith in which I had been brought up, the memory of this experience and asking myself what it could mean was one of the most crucial, though, at the time it occurred, I thought I had done with Christianity for good.[10]

This experience was the beginning of Auden's coming to Christian faith as an adult. It is very Johannine in the sense that it testifies to the reality of a loving power that comes to us in a fully real, material world and yet it also invites us to a transcendent, holy reality.

It is interesting to note in the above account that Auden refers to what the experience he had that evening means. When you have an experience like that (and while I am no Auden, I have had them), you are naturally led out of subjective revelry and take seriously the possibility that our lives may include an encounter with a living, transcendent, life-giving reality. Trying to master the meaning of the experience would be as absurd as Humpty Dumpty aspiring to master the meaning of his utterances!

[10]W. H. Auden, "The Protestant Mystics," in *Forewords and Afterwords* (New York: Random House, 1973) 69–70.

As I go to the hospital, I am not having a lucid, transforming, tangible, overwhelming sense of God's provident love. But I am putting faith in that abundant, meaningful divine love that is testified to in the logos of the Johannine tradition, come what may.[11] ⴲ

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[11]I am happy to report (as an addendum to this essay) that the operation was a success and my wife is well. Thanks be to God.