

our deepest yearning is to discover God as the one who explains who we are, both miserable and magnificent.

THE MEANING OF LIFE: A BEGINNING

In Douglas Adams' book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a massive supercomputer named Deep Thought worked for 7.5 million years to formulate "the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything." The answer produced is "42," which obviously puzzles everyone. However, the supercomputer informs the audience that the ultimate answer would make perfect sense if they knew the ultimate question. So they go to work on creating an even larger computer that, after millions more years, will make sense of "42" as the answer to the ultimate question "of life, the universe, and everything."

This quirky scenario illustrates the problem of tossing out an answer before we know the question (or questions). In examining this chapter's five interpretations of life's meaning, you may have begun to suspect that putting the "meaning of life" question up front jumps the gun. A *thoughtful* conclusion about the good life depends on our answers to questions about God, ethics, and our own nature. Life's purpose hinges on beliefs about what makes governments just, the means by which we express and interpret our beliefs, and the standards that determine which beliefs are true. If biological cessation marks the end of our existence, life will have a different meaning than if life after death is a reality, and the type of postmortem existence we anticipate also influences our views about the purpose of this life. In short, conclusions about life's meaning cannot be isolated from answers to a whole raft of other questions. The chapters that follow provide a systematic investigation of pivotal questions that are critical to a good, full, and meaningful life. And at this point, we have to agree with Pascal. The ultimate point of philosophy is not simply to answer all the big questions, although we also don't want to diminish the satisfaction that comes from good intellectual ideas. Instead, good philosophy assists us toward the sort of life God intends for us, and we are betting that God wants us to experience fullness and goodness.

that they are inconsistent about demanding this degree of evidence for belief in God. In real life, prudential reason often functions as a tiebreaker when the available evidence is inconclusive. For example, if I bet a dollar on a coin flip coming up heads but I know that I only win a dime if I'm correct, prudence tells me that is an unwise choice. On the other hand, I'll take the bet in a heartbeat if offered the chance to win ten dollars while risking only one dollar on the coin flip, and the fact that I'm motivated to make this wager out of self-interest does not diminish the prudence of the decision.

Pascal's second aim in the Wager is to remind the skeptics that they don't get to determine how God is known. God is not an object to be observed in a distanced and neutral manner. If one concludes that God exists but remains detached, they may *know about* God, but do not *know* God as Savior. However, God is a personal being who desires our salvation, and this is only available through faith. Thus, Pascal is confident that if we "bet" on God in sincere trust, we not only gain certainty of God's existence but also know God as the one who forgives sin and gives eternal life. Moreover, Pascal is convinced that a personal knowledge of God is infinitely more satisfying than what the philosophers seek. After all, being in love is much more fulfilling than arriving at an abstract, intellectually accurate definition of love.

Pascal's emphasis on relational knowledge brings us back to where our investigation of life's meaning began, because if Sartre is one of the early advocates of existentialism, Pascal may be existentialism's grandparent. The two philosophers draw on the same existentialist themes—humans as relational beings, the emphasis on will over reason, and the focus on the individual in concrete situation—but they end up with very different conclusions about life's meaning. The source of this difference results from Pascal's notion that a relational God exists who can be known by faith (an act of the will). So while Sartre finds only absurdity in our quest for an impossible completion within our always incomplete freedom, Pascal believes that God resolves the tension between our finitude and our intimations of immortality through salvation. The issue of salvation is where Pascal's existentialism is most evident, because our most pressing issue is not a matter of answering abstract questions about God's existence. Instead,

asks what sort of payout would make selecting one equally possible choice wiser (more prudent) than the alternative.

What are the potential payouts for a wager on God's existence? Regardless of whether you bet for or against God, the results are not dramatically different if God does not exist. If you chose to believe in God's existence and that proved false, there might be some loss. You might have spent your time and energy differently if you had known the truth. Even here, though, Pascal says that those who wager on God's existence benefit by dedicating themselves to a higher purpose, living ethically, and working within a community that endeavors to love and serve others. If you chose not to believe and were correct, you had the satisfaction of living in a manner consistent with that reality. Still, this is a hollow victory because you died without knowing you were right. The differences in payout change dramatically if it turns out that God does exist. If you bet against God's existence, the consequences of disbelief are quite dire. You have lost everything. In contrast, if you bet that God exists and that was the correct wager, you win eternal life with God, something infinitely more valuable than a \$100,000,000 Super Lotto jackpot. Because the potential payout for belief in God is significantly higher than any available from disbelief, prudential reason seems to clearly favor belief.

Pascal's Wager has fascinated and, in some cases, repulsed people for centuries. Before we determine which response we should have to his big bet, we need to be clear what Pascal does *not* intend for us to draw from his Wager. First, he clearly does not see this as an argument for the probability of God's existence. The Wager assumes that the evidence is equally weighted on each side, and bringing potential payoffs into consideration does not change that. Second, Pascal is not encouraging belief in God as a form of fire insurance in which we believe simply to avoid eternal punishment. Although his Wager has often been criticized for this, Pascal's notion of faith assumes a commitment to actions that are consistent with our affirmation.

There are two takeaways for what Pascal intends in his Wager. First, as noted above, Pascal wants to awaken the skeptical agnostics to the reality that they must make a decision about God, even when objective reason does not provide proof. The Wager reminds them

philosophers recognize our misery and the absurdity of our attempts at self-salvation without seeing our grandeur (Sartre, for example).

The Wager

Pascal is convinced that faith defeats our misery and fulfills our glory, but he still has a problem to overcome. How does he break through the denial and distraction that fill most people's lives, and how does he convince the sophisticated agnostic who demands rational proof of God's existence before making a commitment? Pascal's attempt to shake up both groups is found in what has come to be known as "Pascal's Wager." Pascal introduces the Wager by saying, "At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong. . . . Yes, but you must wager. There is no choice, you are already committed." The coin that is flipped is the question of God's existence, and two possibilities exist. God either does or does not exist. The tension arises because we cannot sit out the coin flip. Failure to commit to belief in God means that we have bet against God, just as failure to commit to another person in marriage means that we will remain unmarried. By acting or refusing to act, we bet on one result or the other; and since we are betting with our lives, we are "all in" in the most profound way.

If we have to place a bet, we will want to know a couple of factors. First, we want to know the odds of the potential outcomes. With coin flips, the odds of either heads or tails is fifty-fifty. And this is about where Pascal says that objective reason leaves us on the question of God's existence. There is evidence of God's existence, but not enough for certainty. If either choice has an equal chance of occurring, we move to a second factor to determine how we should place our bet: What are the potential payouts of the various choices? This is where the Wager gets interesting, because objective reason puts us in a quandary by determining that either outcome is equally likely, but that does not necessarily mean that the potential payouts are also equal. At this point, we may rely on another type of reason, prudential rationality, to guide our decisions. Prudential reasoning

in the bodily order, we are mortal. By means of reason, we *know* we are mortal, no matter how pleasant and comfortable our present circumstances. Thus the rational capacity that elevates us above brute animals brings with it awareness that we are corrupt, unworthy, and susceptible to death. At the same time, objective reason cannot provide a resolution to the tenuous situation in which we find ourselves, suspended between wretchedness and magnificence.

Given this situation, two themes that frequently intersect in *Pensées* are our misery without God and our unwillingness to face this misery honestly. Our avoidance of wretchedness often takes the form of distractions such as sexual promiscuity or drunkenness, but it is also found in diversions created by cultured interests in the arts and scientific study. Most characteristically, however, our evasion of misery often takes the form of preoccupation with entertainment, trivial tasks, and the errands of life that keep us too busy to contemplate our true state. Pascal views the life of mindless diversion as a tragedy because it denies the majesty of human life. He is particularly scathing in his observation that distraction and willful ignorance numb us to the prospect of losing life itself, even though the loss of a minor possession or a social snub enrages us. To Pascal, this is a monumental perversion of perspective.

Ironically, an aspect of human grandeur is that we know our wretchedness. The same rationality that allows us to investigate ourselves and the universe also makes us aware that we are momentary blips in a vast and threatening cosmos. In our honest moments, reason recognizes the futility of mere amusement and drives us to despair. Yet reason itself offers no way out. This dilemma sets the stage for Pascal's assertion that Christianity offers the most rational explanation for our situation. Christianity interprets our wretchedness as the result of sinfulness and alienation from God. At the same time, it explains our intimations of immortality and our moral nature as signs of the image of God within us. In short, Pascal says that Christianity alone holds our transcendence in proper tension with our sin and wretchedness. In contrast, theistic intellectuals "know" of God but do so apart from our sin, thus failing to acknowledge our wretchedness (Hegel, for example). On the other end of the spectrum, some

For example, he says that reason cannot prove the existence of "time, space, motion, or number," nor can we prove the rules of logic. However, reason relies on these first principles in order to do its own work. Thus, reason cannot prove the law of noncontradiction (A cannot equal non-A), the existence of time, or the reality of 27, but it also cannot make sense of our world without assuming that 27 does not equal 6.3, that material objects exist in a temporal sequence, or that numbers do not change. Pascal says that moral knowledge and awareness of God are additional instances of "heart knowledge." Objective reason cannot prove that God exists or that moral good is something real, but without these first principles we are unable to make sense of our nature and situation and cannot rightly discern the purpose of life.

Dangling between Finitude and Infinity

Existence for petunias, bricks, and octopi is relatively straightforward. They are material entities without powers of reflection. They belong to what Pascal refers to as the "order of body," and what can be known of them is available to the senses. Human beings, in part, inhabit the bodily order as well. As physical beings, we are subject to the laws of physics, characterized by weight and size, and susceptible to death and decay. As part of the bodily order, human beings are but "a reed." However, we also participate in the "order of the heart," in which we know of transcendental and divine first principles. Through "heart knowledge," we understand that our ultimate fate is not necessarily death and decay but potentially a life that is beyond death and decomposition. In short, the order of the heart raises us above the merely temporary and physical domain and connects us with the divine.

The distance between the orders of body and heart is infinite, and positioned in the infinite gap between them is the "order of reason." Reason allows us to gain valuable truth about the physical cosmos, and it also can detect faint echoes of the sublime, transcendent, and divine. Thus, though we are but "reeds," Pascal says that we are also "thinking reeds," and even though it is limited, reason is the source of human magnificence. Paradoxically, though, reason is not just a sign of our glory. It is also the root of human misery. As participants

by “personal knowledge”; it is the difference between *knowing about* a person and *knowing* that person. For example, viewed from the outside, there may be tangible evidence that your mother loves you. She tells you so, smiles when she sees you, and makes your favorite meal on your birthday. However, it *could* be that she doesn’t really love you but is just doing those things so that you will support her in grand style when you become wealthy. There is also counterevidence to the claim that your mom loves you, like when she grounded you for two weeks when you broke curfew by ten minutes. While most evidence supplied by objective reason points toward the conclusion that your momma loves you, it still leaves open the possibility that she really does not. So why are you still convinced that your mother loves you? Pascal would say that it is personal knowledge, something known from within the context of a relationship that goes deeper than *knowing about* certain facts.

Pascal says that our knowledge of God is similar. Objective reason has evidence (but not proof) that points toward God’s existence. Still, it is possible that we have misinterpreted the evidence or have overlooked other data to the contrary. However, God is not simply an object about which we accumulate knowledge. Christianity views God as a personal being—albeit not a human person—since God is conscious, loves, wills, and engages in mutual relationships. Thus, Pascal argues that, like our deepest knowledge of human persons, our most intimate knowledge of God is not factual information collected by objective reason. It is personal knowledge that occurs within a relationship. This, then, makes sense of the opening of his “Memorial.” Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob know God through personal encounter and commitment, not intellectual argument. Their personal knowledge of God differs from the objective knowledge of “the philosophers and . . . the learned,” which withholds commitment while waiting for indisputable and objective proof.

The second form of knowledge Pascal wants to include is “heart knowledge.” He is famous for his statement “The heart has reasons that reason knows nothing of.” But we need to tread carefully here. For him, the “heart” does not refer to sentimental or romantic feelings that come and go. Instead, “heart” refers to intuitive knowledge.

offers the only satisfactory solution to that emptiness. In this sense, *Pensées* reflects Pascal's own journey from sophisticated skeptic to passionate believer.

Reason's Glory and Limitations

Pascal is often described as a fideist, one who believes that religious truth claims are grounded in faith (*fide* = faith). Because **fideism** is often viewed as a rejection of reason, we should be careful about how (or if) we apply this label to Pascal. After all, we have already noted that he was an accomplished scientist who believed that Christianity is the most rational way of understanding ourselves and the world, so he clearly was not advocating the wholesale rejection of reason. Perhaps the best way to avoid misunderstanding is to see him as proposing a "deeper rationality" that includes, but goes beyond, the intellectual processes we normally have in mind when we speak of reason. This deeper rationality includes both heart knowledge and personal knowledge. Thus, he will argue that traditional reason cannot prove the truth of Christianity at the same time he argues that only Christianity satisfies the spiritual and intellectual demands of deep reason.

For Pascal, reason refers to knowledge we might gain from the observation of the world. We will call this **objective reason** in the double sense that it is knowledge about things (i.e., objects) and that it strives to be neutral and unbiased (i.e., objective) about what we are seeking to know. Because objective reason allows us to do wonderful things (like build calculating machines), Pascal affirms that reason, despite its limitations, should be celebrated as a wonderful gift from God. Another cause for celebrating objective reason is that it helps us learn about other people. Through observation of behaviors and habits, we can usually draw fairly accurate conclusions about others' interests, values, and commitments.

While reason gives partial knowledge of others, Pascal reminds us that people are not only objects. They also possess inner consciousness, love, will, and the ability to form mutual relationships, all of which are internal dimensions that are not open to the direct observations required by objective reason. However, Pascal says that we can know another person at this internal dimension. This is what he means

that God reveals certain truths about God's nature and life's meaning that are accessible to reason. However, not all Christian philosophers share Boethius' belief that reason clearly reveals God and points the way to the good life.

PASCAL

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) established himself as a notable mathematician, scientist, and inventor at a very early age. At nineteen he invented a calculating machine, the Pascaline, and was awarded a royal patent granting him sole right to produce these calculators. In addition, Pascal made a name for himself in politics, literature, philosophy, and theology despite chronic poor health and a premature death at the age of thirty-nine. This is all the more impressive in view of the fact that he received no formal schooling but was educated at home by his father.

Pascal's amazing accomplishments connected him with France's intellectual elite and, as was typical in these circles, he maintained a cautious **agnosticism** toward God in his younger years. However, his detached attitude toward faith left him with a sense of emptiness. This changed dramatically at the age of thirty-one with what is called "The Night of Fire," a profound spiritual experience that he never describes directly. However, he speaks poetically of this "Night" in what is known as "The Memorial," a few brief verses on a paper scrap found in his coat seam when he died. The first few words of "The Memorial" hint at the reorientation this night brought for Pascal: "FIRE. GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned."

Following his "Night of Fire" experience, Pascal's attention turned toward theological writing, the most significant of which is his *Pensées* (i.e., *Thoughts*). He died before *Pensées* was finished, and his notes were compiled into a book. *Pensées* is an apologetic (i.e., defense) for the Christian faith that addressed the refined skeptic who could not believe without proof. However, unlike most apologetics today, which present purely intellectual arguments for God's existence and Christian truths, Pascal focuses on our (often unconscious) emptiness apart from God and attempts to demonstrate that Christianity

the power to follow God's will and experience happiness—belong to human beings only. Thus, our humanity becomes more complete when we direct our abilities toward their highest uses. In contrast, the greater our attachment to vice, the less human we become and the further happiness is from our reach. As a result, evil people cease to exist as persons and become like brutish animals that are incapable of goodness and happiness. Stated otherwise, Philosophia says that goodness and reality are identical. God is the perfection of all goodness and is also the most real of all beings. Evil, therefore, is not an equal and opposite reality to goodness. Evil is the absence of goodness, just as darkness is the absence of light. Evil people thus cease to be people.

Boethius wants to convince us that a good life is potentially available to anyone, regardless of their situation. External circumstances do not determine the value or goodness of life. Instead, life's richness depends on having an understanding of power, goodness, reality, and happiness that guides us toward virtue and union with God. If you look at the picture from one angle, you might believe that evil people have power and live a happy and good life. However, Boethius, through the voice of Philosophia, reminds us that a God's-eye view of circumstances leads us to the opposite conclusion: evil is the *absence* of power, goodness, and even our very humanity.

One interesting feature of *The Consolation of Philosophy* is that we know from Boethius' background and writings that he is a Christian. Indeed as you read this summary of *Consolation*, you may have noted that many of its ideas about living well are compatible with Christian values. For example, Boethius argues that our identity is not determined by temporal goods and situations. He also emphasizes that God is the origin of all good and provides the true meaning of our existence. Despite this, nothing in the book explicitly mentions Christianity. However, during his life, he wrote extensively about Christian theology, and we have no reason to conclude that he had given up on his faith while imprisoned. Instead, it seems that *The Consolation of Philosophy* lays out the route to a meaningful life for a broader public that would not accept arguments drawn from Scripture. Stated otherwise, his argument relies on **general revelation**, the idea

and expressing the moral virtues that draw us in God's direction. Since true happiness is found in a virtuous union with God and our pursuit of virtue is within our control, no circumstances, regardless of how unjust they are, can hinder our happiness unless we allow them to.

Boethius' response to Philosophia's account of goodness and happiness is something like this: "To say that we ultimately control our own happiness sounds great in theory. But what about those who have used their power to put me in prison and separate me from friends and family, and will likely kill me?" Philosophia's response is rather surprising; she says that those who have placed Boethius in this situation are actually powerless. If power is the ability to get what one wants, the unjust fail to achieve this aim because what they *ultimately* want is happiness. Those who have imprisoned him and have confiscated his possessions don't do those things as a final goal. Instead, they believe that eliminating political rivals or amassing greater wealth will bring happiness. Happiness is thus their ultimate aim, and Philosophia points out that if Boethius had been paying attention earlier in their conversation, he would understand why unjust and greedy people are powerless. Injustice and greed are vices, and if true happiness and fulfillment requires virtue, vicious (i.e., vice-filled) people cannot get what they want. Therefore, evil people are powerless (if we understand power rightly) because they cannot obtain happiness (if we understand happiness rightly).

Philosophia also reminds Boethius that those responsible for injustices rely on Fortune for their political power. But Fortune is fickle, as Boethius clearly knows; and if his persecutors stake their happiness on Fortune, they will live in constant fear of losing their status and are perpetually unsatisfied because they want more of what Fortune controls. The famous are only famous if others agree that they are. Since others control their fame, they fear its loss. Likewise, while they may achieve fame in one region, people elsewhere may have never heard their names; so they recognize fame is limited and desire more of it. In short, Boethius' oppressors cannot be happy, because they are governed by fear and insatiable desire.

Finally, Philosophia says that the capacities necessary for a virtuous life—the ability to contemplate the eternal and sublime and

up in a prominent family, had the best education available, was consul of Rome, and had two sons who were later made co-consuls. However, everything changed when, by Boethius' account, he was set up by political rivals and jailed on trumped-up treason charges. If we were in this situation, most of us would naturally feel that these conditions make a good and meaningful life impossible. In fact, that is exactly how Boethius sees things at the beginning of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a book written during his imprisonment.

As *Consolation* opens, Boethius is feeling sorry for himself, and Philosophia, in the form of a woman, comes to his jail cell to console him. However, her "consolations" are not what most grieving people would appreciate. Philosophia tells Boethius that the physical prison is not the real problem. His real prison is a moral and philosophical blind spot. Since the big issue for Boethius is the perennial "Why do bad things happen to good people?" question, Philosophia says that Boethius needs to consider the nature of goodness and the qualities possessed by good people. He certainly has lost many of the desirable things he once enjoyed—physical freedom, noble rank, wealth, and political power. However, Philosophia reminds him that these goods obviously are not under his control since, even though he desperately wants them back, they are now lost. Philosophia reminds him that these goods are bestowed on us by Fortune. Since Fortune owes nothing to anyone, she is free to give and take back at will what belongs to her. In addition, Fortune's gifts—status, riches, a beautiful home, and the like—are good in themselves, but simply having them does not make the possessor good as well; so they are among the lesser goods.

The moral of the story so far is that when Fortune gives you something pleasant, you should enjoy it responsibly; but you cannot rely on her. Philosophia also reminds Boethius that other goods, such as true friendship and good character, are not under Fortune's control. These are the goods of virtue, and nothing, not even imprisonment, can take them from us. Moreover, the virtues are the highest goods available because they make the possessor good and direct us toward God, the source of all good and genuine happiness. Philosophia's point is that others may hinder our freedom of movement, strip us of wealth, or smear our reputation. However, they cannot keep us from developing

His enthusiasm for the simplicity of life in nature, his intuitive approach to ethics and religion, and his faith in humanity's inherent goodness are all hallmarks of the romantic movement. However, while romanticism favors aesthetics and emotion over reason, Rousseau also maintains that recovering meaningful life depends on a rational stance that will reform education and politics. Finally, Rousseau's idea of the social contract as an authority that is binding on the individual is an uneasy fit with romanticism's individualist orientation.

Perhaps this motley mix is the best route to recover the goodness of a more pristine period. Nevertheless, many critics are skeptical of Rousseau's prescription for a meaningful life. One criticism is about his speculative and romanticized notion of the noble savage. While industrialized civilizations certainly suffer from envy, pride, oppression, and the other ills Rousseau enumerates, our current knowledge of primitive life reveals that early humans suffered from the same scourges found in the developed world. Rousseau's theory is also susceptible to criticism about his confidence that the majority will act justly and unselfishly in expressing the general will. Even if (and that's a big "if") the intensive educational process advocated in *Émile* would restore *amour de soi*, few could ever afford it. Thus, it is not clear how Rousseau expects the majority to escape *amour propre*, which makes it likely that the general will would result in a tyranny of the majority rather than yielding just and unselfish laws. At the root of these criticisms is doubt about Rousseau's assertion of humanity's inherent goodness and the ability of his agenda to regain that pristine innocence. Boethius, our next philosopher, had good reasons to doubt Rousseau's rosy view of human goodness.

BOETHIUS

Rousseau's statement that "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains" assumes that humans flourish only when chains are broken. However, is it possible to have a meaningful life even while in chains? For most of us, this is a hypothetical question. However, this was not idle conjecture for *Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius* (ca. 480–524), who spent the last part of his life in prison and was eventually executed. Boethius had an impressive pedigree. He grew

education also occurs during this time. However, Rousseau argues that doctrine should not be imposed on *Émile*. Instead, his religious beliefs emerge from the natural virtues of self-love and neighbor-love. As *Émile* prepares to venture into society toward the end of adolescence, the tutor introduces to him the study of history and helps him recognize its corrupting influences on our natural goodness.

The General Will

While *Émile* provides an agenda for freeing the individual from society's fallen ways, Rousseau also focuses attention on how to redeem society itself. The centerpiece of Rousseau's political reform is found in the concept of the **general will**. Because nations, economies, and communities had been established for centuries, it was impossible to escape the authority of government and return to the isolation and freedom of the state of nature. However, Rousseau argues that we can restore a large degree of freedom by reforming government as a **social contract**, the idea that citizens voluntarily join forces to work for the common good of all. Under the social contract, government does not impose laws from above. Instead, it is a participatory system in which citizens submit to laws they consent to. In other words, the laws reflect the general will of the people. When laws are made in such a manner, it expresses the equality of all and allows each citizen liberty. Rousseau argues that this type of popular sovereignty avoids the corruption of our character because political decisions are no longer conditioned by power struggles. Instead, the general will allows us to reclaim our earlier inward orientation in which our needs and desires arise naturally. Thus, Rousseau is convinced that the general will expresses the individual's rational self-interest at the same time that it also allows us to work for the good of all. Rousseau admits that the social contract does not fully recover the degree of liberty humans possessed in the state of nature. Indeed, the general will assumes that the desires of the minority are overridden by the group will. However, Rousseau says that the minority wins even when it loses, because our sympathy for others regards the general will as our own.

Rousseau's recipe for the good life includes three ingredients that are not easily combined: **romanticism**, reason, and political philosophy.

preoccupied by manufacturing products that fulfill artificial wants and cause us to seek a life of ease and gluttony. Complex political and social structures now regulate life, restrict freedom, and consolidate power in the hands of the few. As a result, *amour de soi*, our original virtuous self-love, is now twisted into pride, a perverse form of love that Rousseau calls *amour-propre*. This prideful attitude is the root of class envy, slavery, warfare, and all the other social ills that hinder the flourishing of life. Summing up his sad evaluation of the decline brought about by civil society and scientific advance, Rousseau says, "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains."

Recovering the Good Life

Rousseau wants to chart a course back to a good and meaningful life, but he does not think that we can return to the Edenic situation of the state of nature. Once governments are in place and science has made its discoveries, we cannot stuff those genies back into the bottle. However, Rousseau thinks that we can recover the purity of our earlier sympathetic impulses toward our fellow human beings and reestablish our connection with nature through rational educational and political reform. In other words, Rousseau believes that the same rational powers that led to the problems of civilized society can also restore life's goodness.

Rousseau outlines his vision for educational reform in *Émile*, a book that traces the educational process of the book's fictional namesake. (Rousseau believes that the ideal education for girls should be different.) The first stage involves isolating *Émile* from society at an early age and putting him under a tutor's care. *Émile*'s earliest educational experiences occur within nature, exploring whatever sparks his interest and learning about the world through trial and error, with some guidance from the tutor. In this return to the state of nature, *Émile* experiences the serenity and joy of the noble savage and the natural human capacities of *amour de soi*, and sympathy toward others will re-emerge. As he approaches adolescence, the boy's experiential education is supplemented with training in a manual craft. In *Émile*'s teen years, his tutor helps him acquire reading skills and suggests books that match his attributes, but he allows the adolescent to read only what captures his interest. Religious

their primitive reason allowed them to learn through trial and error which actions enhanced the chances of survival and which actions endangered life. Although they lived in relative isolation, their survival instinct was coupled with sympathetic impulses toward other humans that allowed them to coexist peacefully. Rousseau argues that sympathy arises because each individual has a natural aversion to pain. Since reason makes us capable of seeing ourselves in the other, the noble savage understood that others also will be averse to anything that brings suffering. Thus, the noble savage rose above the brutish existence of animals through reason and sympathy, enjoying a close connection with nature and embodying what Rousseau calls *amour de soi*, a virtuous self-love.

Civilization as a Problem

Alas, the idyllic existence of the original humans was too good to last. Rousseau speculates that human beings occasionally engaged in activities that required cooperation, such as hunting larger and more dangerous animals. In the course of these joint activities, individuals began to recognize the benefit of claiming property. Thus, for example, one's desire for survival might override our natural sympathies and claim the whole bear for oneself rather than giving everyone involved in the hunt an equal portion. This link between self-preservation and property began the downward spiral from sympathy to selfishness. As Rousseau puts it, "The first man who, having fenced in a piece of land, said 'This is mine,' and found people naïve enough to believe him, that man was the true founder of civil society."

We tend to assume that "civil society" is a good thing, but Rousseau views it as just the opposite. Once the desire to own property infects us, we constantly desire more. Possessions are no longer desired because they preserve life but because they allow us to wield power over others. In the race to amass social power, technology and scientific advances arise as a way of increasing the wealth of the powerful. Thus the happy isolation and simplicity of the state of nature is displaced by greed, envy, and a desire to control. The earlier connection between the noble savage and the environment is broken as technology distances us from nature and we become

that technological advances and political changes have led to generally higher standards of living, increased lifespan, greater literacy, and more popular involvement in political processes, almost two hundred years after Hegel's death there are still places on this planet where life is dismal and oppressive. Moreover, it is not obvious that computers, medical breakthroughs, and the ability to gain instantaneous access to zombie movies on multiple media platforms have rendered life more meaningful or have made us better people. Hegel's philosophy of history looked to the future as a time when we would flourish, with science and reason leading the way. However, a few decades before him, another voice questioned whether history's advances should be viewed as progress or if these changes actually made it more difficult to find our purpose in life.

ROUSSEAU

Like Hegel, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1714–1778) believed that rationality and freedom are necessary conditions for meaningful human life. Likewise, both argued that the good life depends on having participatory political structures in place. In the end, however, Rousseau's notion of the good life points us in a different direction. While Hegel views history as a movement toward progressively higher truth and goodness in the future, Rousseau is pessimistic that the developments of history should be described as progress. Instead, attaining the good life requires that we recover something from a more primitive and pristine stage of human history, although in a new form. Of particular interest to Rousseau is restoring the original goodness earlier humans enjoyed in the **state of nature**.

The state of nature (an idea we will flesh out in chapter 7) is a primitive stage in human history before laws, cities, money, or technology any more advanced than simple farming and hunting implements. In short, the state of nature precedes the structures and systems of civilization. Rousseau famously refers to the human in the state of nature as the **noble savage**. Noble savages were solitary beings who experienced a unity with nature and lived in the present, unencumbered by concerns about the future or the restrictions imposed by others. They were endowed with a desire for survival, and

in the monarchy, and chaos resulted. He believed that the Prussian constitutional monarchy of his day, which combined order with popular political rights, was the synthesis that drew together the best of monarchy and popular sovereignty.

Reading History from the End

Hegel's evolutionary dialectic offers an optimistic take on history that declares that "everything is evolving toward the higher." This view has some parallels with the Christian doctrine of providence, which refers to God's activity in preserving the world and accomplishing the divine purposes for it. For Hegel, however, the Absolute Spirit is not distinct from the world but is immanent in, and in some ways equal to, history and its processes. In a sense, history is the stage on which God writes an autobiography by drawing ideas and institutions into conformity with reason. While the story may appear muddled at any particular stage of the dialectic, Hegel believed that the pieces all fit into place when viewed from what he calls the **end of history**. The end of history is not a cataclysmic event in which the cosmos explodes in a fiery demolition. Instead, the "end" refers to history's goal, in which all things realize their divine (i.e., rational) purpose. He believed that we were on the cusp of achieving a true heaven on earth in which the social and political structures, the "objective spirit," clearly reflected and gave concrete expression of the rationality, the "subjective spirit," within the universe.

According to Hegel, life's meaning is embedded in history. In contrast to the Enlightenment, which viewed the past as an embarrassing catalog of error and superstition, Hegel sees history as an organic whole in which humankind passes through infancy, childhood, and adolescence before it matures into intellectual adulthood. With this maturation, we can look back and recognize how each stage, although often painful, was critical to the process. In Hegel's optimistic view, humanity has reached a point in history in which educational, economic, religious, and political institutions provide the framework for a free and meaningful life in which all will flourish.

In some ways, Hegel's belief that some truths are more obvious in hindsight is one that has come back to bite him. Despite the fact

structures of the world, *Geist* is called *objective spirit*. In addition, Hegel says there is an *Absolute Spirit*. Absolute Spirit is a divine, rational force that provides purpose and directs history toward unity and completion. While Hegel does not understand Absolute Spirit in exactly the way most theists think of God, there are similarities in that Absolute Spirit has a God's-eye view of the cosmos and draws all things toward a harmony of the subjective and objective spirit.

The Dialectic of (Dis)Unity

When we look back through history, Hegel's claim that all that occurs is ultimately rational and unified just doesn't seem right. After all, both past and present seem to be littered with examples of bone-headed thinking and division. How are we supposed to find a rational and harmonious world in all this? Hegel's response is that we don't see things clearly if we just examine isolated historical events. Instead, we need to see history as a process of growth in which each earlier stage contains and leads to a subsequent higher expression of truth and goodness. By analogy, neither acorn nor sapling is a mature oak, but we do not get the oak tree until it passes through the two earlier phases. The "truth" of the fully grown oak tree is present within the acorn, but it isn't apparent until much later. In the same way, what appears to be an obvious mistake or disunity within history is part of an unfolding process that draws us toward a more complete truth. Thus when Hegel says that "everything is interconnected," he has this sort of organic development in mind.

The term Hegel uses to describe this historical development is **dialectic**. An idea emerges (a thesis), and this gives rise to its opposite (an antithesis). Out of the clash of these ideas we get a synthesis, a higher truth that incorporates something from both the thesis and the antithesis. Hegel finds an example of this dialectic in events that unfolded over his life. He intensely disliked the French monarchy (thesis) because it withheld political power from the masses, and he welcomed the French Revolution (antithesis) that overthrew the monarch and empowered the masses. However, he became disillusioned with the revolution because, though it brought about individual freedom, it lacked the order and control that had been present

any solution to our basic human struggles, but Hegel argues that the true significance of our lives, and of the entire cosmos, is realized when clear-headed rational principles are embedded in political and social institutions. While Sartre proclaims that life is absurd, Hegel argues that the world is logical and reason is our savior.

Hegel's philosophy is notoriously difficult to understand, but we can get a handle on some of his basic ideas if we keep three basic principles in mind:

- (1) The universe is rational.
- (2) Everything is interconnected.
- (3) Everything is evolving toward the higher.

These principles seem simple enough, but things quickly become sticky because of two factors. First, Hegel gives words like "rational," "interconnected," and "evolving" different definitions than we anticipate. Second, Hegel's philosophy is highly systematic. Thus it is difficult to talk about any part of it without talking about the whole thing. With these warnings in place, let's start with the first principle.

When Hegel claims that "the universe is rational," he is not simply saying that the cosmos makes sense when we think clearly about the various components and understand the connections between the parts. His meaning may be more accurately stated as "the universe is rationality." The world is known by reason, but reason does more than make things known to us; reason organizes the entire universe. For Hegel, this indicates that what is known (the universe) is not ultimately different from the rational knower. In other words, science is not distinct from poetry nor is consciousness distinct from a manatee. Most importantly, God is not separate from human history. This philosophical approach is referred to as **absolute idealism** because thoughts (ideas) are identical with being (the object of thoughts). The general term Hegel uses to describe this reality is *Geist* (usually translated as "Mind" or "Spirit"). *Geist* is not something possessed only by individuals; it is also the force that organizes social structures, religious systems, and nature. When we think of *Geist* from the perspective of knowing, Hegel labels this as the *subjective spirit*. When seen from the angle of how Mind is expressed in the logic and

While Sartre provides a valuable service in raising new questions about life's meaning, this does not imply that we must accept his alternative view. As we will soon see, other philosophers reach meaning-of-life conclusions that differ significantly from his. Moreover, while he brings up important questions that we might have overlooked about life's purpose, his position is possible only because he too leaves several basic questions unanswered. For example, his analysis of human purpose is based on **atheism**, but he never provides an argument to support this position. Since most philosophers throughout history have believed that some kind of transcendent meaning maker exists and have offered reasons for this belief, Sartre has an obligation to give reasons for atheism. Also, his division of "being" into two categories only encompasses a small portion of reality. Being-for-itself refers to human beings and being-in-itself refers to the things that human beings make to satisfy their needs and wants. What is missing from this account is an explanation of how things like stars, worms, rocks, and cheetahs—nonhuman objects that are not created by human beings for a purpose—came to exist or how they fit in with his theory. Likewise, while he argues that human beings come into existence and then have to choose an essence, he doesn't explain how our existence came to be in the first place. It seems that a philosophy that is silent about such big questions has some pretty large holes to plug, because such questions are vital to how we understand life's meaning. Our next philosopher, G. F. W. Hegel, offers a philosophy of life that attempts to plug all the holes by bringing the whole universe, and a little bit more, into consideration.

HEGEL

If one is looking for Sartre's opposite, it is difficult to find anyone closer to the other end of the meaning-of-life spectrum than *Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel* (1770–1831). While Sartre's quest for meaning is highly individualistic, Hegel says that meaning is found in a corporate *salvation* that encompasses everyone and everything. Sartre's ahistorical view of the individual's quest to create meaning stands in stark contrast to Hegel's notion that meaning is discovered progressively as history unfolds. Sartre is pessimistic that **reason** provides

determining how “the other” will interpret us. We may attempt to influence how others see us by explaining motives, dressing differently, telling a joke, or buying them an iguana. However, in the endeavor to establish our identity, others have influenced our actions. Thus Sartre concludes that “Hell is other people” because they hinder our freedom.

In the end, Sartre says that life is *absurd*, or irrational. We desire completeness, but being-for-itself is an eternally unfinished project. When I opt for one choice, by default I say no to a thousand other routes I might have taken. We always remain incomplete because nothingness offers a myriad of other potentials. Moreover, Sartre’s subjectivism does not allow reason, God, or any other external standard to determine the path we should take. If we lack a predetermined essence, no one decision brings us closer to goodness and completion than others. The ultimate absurdity is that, at death, our quest for transcendence simply ends and remains forever unresolved.

Disrupting Assumptions

It is perhaps a bit odd to start a chapter on life’s meaning with a philosopher who concludes that life is absurd. However, philosophy is disruptive, and we have moved Sartre to the front of the chapter because he challenges assumptions many hold about life’s meaning and forces us to take a second look. First, we may presuppose that since humans are all the same species, we also share a common purpose. Sartre’s approach, however, questions traditional notions of human nature as an essence that implies a purpose for our *collective* lives and shifts the focus to the purpose of my *individual* life. He also questions the common idea that freedom is a means to pursue life’s purpose by saying that freedom is something we *are*. In fact, he views freedom as both our nature and our purpose. Sartre also challenges the idea that stable and loving relationships with others are a key factor in attaining life’s richness and significance. Instead, he views others as a major obstacle to our freedom and a threat to our identity. Finally, while Sartre’s rejection of God challenges theistic views of life’s meaning, he is equally disruptive for fellow atheists who deny God’s existence but still believe that what makes life meaningful is common to all humans, or that there are universal human rights.

misjudge the speed of an oncoming truck. In contrast, anguish is knowing that, at any moment, as an utterly free being, I could choose to jump into the path of an oncoming truck and no external standard can determine whether I should or should not do that.

Since freedom is a burden, we are tempted to ease our anguish by denying our freedom. Sartre calls this **bad faith**, a lie we tell ourselves. One form this lie takes is seen in the examples above. We tell ourselves that we had to choose a particular path because it is demanded by law enforcement, God, institutional rules, or some other external authority. Bad faith is also present when we claim that some physical or environmental factor determines our options. Sartre does not deny that there are certain givens in life, what he calls **facticity**. We do not determine our gender or height, the social status or nation into which we are born, our genetic predisposition to colon cancer, or other similar factors. However, while we cannot change certain facts about us, we still have complete freedom to determine how we will choose within this facticity. Finally, we exhibit bad faith when we fall back on work roles, etiquette, or other forms of social expectations to justify our actions. We *are* freedom, so when we evade responsibility for choices by claiming that we have to behave in certain ways, we are lying and we know it. When we convince ourselves that any form of **determinism** is true, we deny our identity as being-for-itself and attempt to relieve anguish by pretending that we are being-in-itself.

The Problem of Other People

As difficult as it is to embrace freedom rather than escape it through bad faith, perhaps the greatest threat to authenticity is other people. We are being-for-itself—conscious, self-determining subjects. As subjects, we have direct access to our desires, intentions, plans, aversions, and all the other things that make up our identity and shape meaning for us. However, we interact with other subjects (i.e., human beings) who do not have direct access to all that makes us who we are. Instead, they form impressions of our identity through observing us from the outside. In other words, they come to know us in the same way that they know objects. Moreover, while we have freedom to determine our own values, meaning, and identity, we are not sovereign in

freedom. Remember, though, that a lightbulb also has a planned purpose—an essence—and this is not the case for us. According to Sartre, no inventor, divine or otherwise, designed us for a predetermined reason or specific purpose. Therefore, we have to choose our purpose and, as new circumstances arise, continue to make choices. Moreover, we must decide all of this without an objective standard that measures whether our choices and, ultimately, our purposes, are good or right. Should you become a licensed nurse, a hermit in the Yukon, a homeless heroin addict, or something else? Sartre says that if we rely on something beyond ourselves to make this decision, we deny our freedom. Radical freedom makes us the sole standard of meaning and purpose.

Freedom as Responsibility

Most might think that this degree of freedom is nothing more than an excuse for complete irresponsibility. Nothing and no one has the authority to judge the rightness of my decisions, so I can do whatever I want. However, Sartre says that just the opposite is true. When I make a decision, I not only select my identity, but I am also responsible for determining the world in which others live. If I decide to turn in Uncle Bubba for selling meth, it shapes the world that he and others around him occupy. Moreover, I can't justify my actions by claiming that my mom demanded I do so, it's required by law, or I have to follow the Ten Commandments. If I'm truly being-for-itself, I own the decision. I chose to rat out Bubba and determine the future conditions of other's lives on *my* authority alone.

The level of responsibility that accompanies our radical freedom explains why Sartre states that "freedom is a burden." Usually we think of freedom as an unqualified good; the more we have, the better life is. However, Sartre says that this all changes when we acknowledge that there is no one or nothing to hide behind. The depth of our responsibility places us in a state of **anguish** (or **angst**). Although we often think of fear and anguish as synonyms, Sartre believes there is a profound difference. For him fear is what we experience as physical beings. Thus I might be fearful when dodging traffic while crossing a busy street, knowing that I might be injured or killed if I slip or

would be thrilled about my last option, but anticipating their reaction to the exhibition of medieval weaponry is another example of how my consciousness can envision something that does not yet exist.

Sartre refers to our capacity to envision future possibilities as **nothingness**. Nothingness is important because it not only indicates that we can modify our surroundings, but it also reminds us that we can change our identity or essence by adopting new beliefs or activities. Thus nothingness, our capacity to envision what is not yet but could be, is the foundation of our freedom. This brings us back to Sartre's description of human existence as one in which existence precedes essence. We are born, but that is not the end of the story. We constantly make and remake our identity, our essence, through our choices. Decisions about where I live, what values I adopt, and where I spend my money all mold my identity over time. To put it in another way, my choices determine my life's meaning for me.

Sartre's ideas above pick up several of the main themes of **existentialist philosophy**. Defining **existentialism** is a bit like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall because, as we will see shortly, the doctrines of existential philosophers can vary widely. Instead of being characterized by similar beliefs, existentialist philosophy is built around central themes. One common theme is that humans are best understood as relational beings rather than as rational beings. Our identity is not grounded in our intellect and ideas but rather is shaped by how we are related (or not related) to God, others, and one's own self. Two related themes emerge from this. First, we gain more insight into human existence if life is viewed from the perspective of will rather than reason. How we exercise our capacity for choice says more about us than the clarity of our thought. Second, instead of thinking of human beings in an abstract and generic sense, existentialism begins from the individual person in concrete situations. While we will get to Sartre's views on the relational nature of knowing later in this section, we can already see the last two existentialist themes emerging in his insistence that, in a world without God, life's meaning is subjective, freely chosen, and continually modified in response to circumstances.

Sartre's emphasis on our freedom to choose any identity may sound attractive. Most of us don't want to be a lightbulb with no

hammers and lightbulbs started with a purpose in mind and created artifacts that achieve these purposes effectively. In short, there was an idea—the idea of an object that could convert electricity into light—followed by the existence of the lightbulb that fulfilled the intended purpose. To put this in language used by *Jean Paul Sartre* (1905–1980), for the lightbulb, *essence precedes existence*. An idea about the goal of an artifact (its essence) comes prior to the object's existence, and that object is complete and good if it fulfills its essence. Sartre calls this sort of existence **being-in-itself**.

This way of seeing things seems to offer promise for helping us determine the meaning of human life. If there is an “inventor” who starts with the idea of what a human should be and then brings such a being into existence, we can know the purpose of life if we know the inventor's idea. This is the route most Christian philosophers take. To call God our Creator is to assume that God has intentions and purposes for created things, including humans. God gives human life its meaning (or essence), and our existence is complete to the extent that we live according to the divine intent.

For Sartre the problem with the idea that we have a predetermined essence starts from his denial of God's existence. Because there is no divine “meaning maker,” our existence is different from being-in-itself artifacts like lightbulbs. We are, instead, what Sartre refers to as **being-for-itself**. In being-for-itself, the relationship between essence and existence is reversed from what is the case for lightbulbs. For human beings, *existence precedes essence*. By this Sartre means that we come into being and then have to determine our meaning. Two additional related qualities distinguish human beings from lightbulbs: we are conscious, and we are free. Consciousness means that we are aware of the world around us. We respond to it, think about it, and make choices about how we might want to reshape it. Lightbulbs and other being-in-itself entities lack these capacities. However, our consciousness is not simply aware of the surrounding environment—what *is*—but it also can think about what *could be*. For example, I am conscious that the wall behind my desk is bare, but I can envision a different state of affairs for it. I could hang pictures, put up a tapestry, or display a battle-ax above my desk. I doubt that Human Resources

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?

This book is about philosophy, so let's jump into the deep end with the most basic philosophical question: What is the meaning of life? Most of us rather enjoy being alive and do some pretty basic things to maintain that status, like eating to sustain our biological existence, avoiding leaps off tall buildings, and taking cholesterol medicine to reduce our risk of heart attack. These activities imply that life has purpose and meaning. But what is that meaning?

It seems odd to have to think about the meaning of our existence. After all, when we look at other things around us, we can quickly identify the meaning of their existence. I own several hammers in the hope that I can always find at least one of them, and I use them to pound nails, flatten bent objects, and assault my thumb. I recently purchased some lightbulbs for the purpose of seeing better inside my house, and possibly finding my hammers. It is easy to explain the purpose of hammers and lightbulbs. The irony is that we use these objects to achieve our goals. However, when we stop to ponder *our* ultimate goal, it is not as simple.

SARTRE

One reason we can pinpoint the purpose of many objects is that humans create them with intention. The people who invented