PHILIP GOODCHILD
University of Nottingham

ENGAGED PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

We owe it to G.W.F Hegel, who coined the term 'philosophy of religion' for his eponymous lectures, that in truly dialectical fashion he inspired those successors who were to forge an anti-idealist thought in opposition to his work: engaged philosophy of religion. Karl Marx changed the image of thought from reflection to production: to think is to engage with life, to reproduce the conditions of existence, to participate in the social construction of reality. Philosophy is no longer a matter of thinking about reality: it is a matter of making reality. The characteristic fault it seeks to correct is no longer false belief but false consciousness or ideology, when the content of thought is entirely separate from the effects of its practice. Likewise, Søren Kierkegaard changed the image of thought from one of deferring to an external, critical perspective to a matter of inwardness, of authenticity, where the hidden life of thought is judged by one who sees into the heart. Philosophy is no longer a matter of making thought conform to external reality: it is a matter of making internal reality conform to thought. The characteristic faults it seeks to correct are no longer false beliefs but hypocrisy and triviality: treating matters of great existential importance as though they were trivial, or treating matters of little existential importance as though they demanded the most careful consideration. Finally, Friedrich Nietzsche changed the image of thought from one that seeks to master life to one that is mastered and gripped by life. Philosophy is no longer a matter of bringing life before thought: it is a matter of living in and through thought. The characteristic fault it seeks to correct is no longer false belief but the projection of the contents of thought outside of life in order to limit and control life. These are the three dimensions of engaged philosophy: to engage with the social and material conditions of existence, to engage with what matters within the heart, and to be engaged by the highest possibilities of life. Such engaged philosophy is not simply a critique of religion: its practice is itself a religious task. It may be a participant in a religion, an ally of a religion, or a rival to a religion, yet it has no place to stand above and beyond religion.

For many, such engagement may be seen as a loss: a loss of ultimate criteria, a loss of objectivity, and even a loss of reason itself. For in our contemporary age, public discourse is as lacking in reason as ever. We are surrounded by partiality, a lack of due proportion and order, wilful ignorance of pertinent information, immodesty, lack of self-censorship,

selective interpretation, and narcissistic defence of identities and investments. Speech is constructed to serve the passions rather than serve the truth. If this passes for engagement, then in such a context the need for reason, objectivity, and ultimate criteria seems as strong as ever. So, for many, to seek a thinking that is engaged risks losing reason itself, and all the gains of courtesy and civilization based on a moderation of the passions. The aim of philosophy has always been repression of the emotions, seeking an idea that is transferable without the emotion that gave rise to it. Yet it is not such criticisms I propose to deal with here. For, in truth, engaged philosophy likewise participates in this repression of emotions that spring from personal investments and collective interests. But it does seek to cultivate another kind of emotion, one drawn from actual relations and interactions with life. It seeks to respond to reality rather than a concept of reality. For an engaged thought, the conscious content of the mind, including its memories, images and ideas, are merely the surface of reality: the valuable and meaningful dimensions of psychic life include its sensibility and emotions.[1] These express the actual truth of the soul. A person's demeanour discloses far more about the reality of their thought than either their beliefs or their reasoning. A lack of automatic emotional reaction, an entrusting of one's thinking to habits of reasoning that will convert an offensive stimulus into a problem: these are signs of a cultivated mind. On this, idealists and engaged philosophers can largely agree. Where they differ is over the role of meaning in the cultivation of thought: idealists seek to make thought participate in the elevated and universal meaning they conceive, while engaged philosophers regard conscious meaning as temporary and local, a means for the engagement between thought and life that takes place through thought but outside of thought.

This initial formulation of the characteristic difference of engaged philosophy—as engagement through meaning rather than participation in meaning—remains an idealist one. For an engaged philosopher, the difference is a matter of *how* one thinks, not *what* one thinks. The difference has to be enacted. Engagement takes place with matters that are alive and pertinent. To respond to an idealist critique of engaged philosophy is already to frame a debate in idealist terms, as though one should formulate what one would have to do if one ever had cause to think. What is actually more thought-provoking, and capable of disclosing the characteristic difference of engaged philosophy more fully, is a charge levelled against philosophy as a whole: that it represses emotions and interpersonal relations, yet it is subject to a return of the repressed, conducting interpersonal relations in a neurotic fashion.[2] It is this accusation that I propose to engage with here in order to demonstrate a characteristic performance of engaged philosophy of religion. To present the personal force of this accusation, I reproduce a direct critique of my own work:[3]

> There is nothing more charming than a highly-animated person. – Each living moment is a spectacle upon which to feed: the knowing eyes, the smile that extends each vibration of the lips, the eloquent posture – even the feet proclaim, "Enjoy life with me, for I am wonderful and free." With such a person, even

[1] See especially William Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005) and Michael McGhee, *Transformations of Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[2] Perhaps typical of this critical approach to philosophy is Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

[3] This critique, originally sent in an email, is reproduced with permission yet anonymously.

the still moments grow fat on the anticipation of the next spontaneous deed … or even thought …

But what of philosophy? When did you last see an animated philosopher? How often does philosophy liberate thought? How often is philosophy bound by the heavy chains of reasoning and necessity? How often does philosophy say to a thought that starts to run wild and free, "Have you any grounds for such disgraceful conduct? Should you not bear the weightiest of reasons to anchor you in reality, lest unencumbered you should be carried away with any passing breeze?" But I say to you, is not philosophy the antithesis of all liberation? Is not the "free thinker" a contradiction in terms?

But no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, you say, I have it all wrong: philosophy does not animate persons – it breathes life into thought itself. Only at dusk when the house is laid to rest, and the imagination and the body seek repose in each other's embrace, does the owl of Minerva take flight and insomniac reason pursue its solitary, haunting patrol. Or, at least, you might say that if you spoke like me. But you might point out that the ephemeral charisma of an animated person is mere entertainment, while the steady labour of reason builds a life that endures. You might point out that life is not mere vitality but endurance, growth, investment. You might point out that the ever-tiresome accumulation of stock, invention of form, assembly of parts, distribution of energy, investment of desire and promise of credit does not take place without reason. Yet already my imagination is enticing my body towards the bedroom: such reasoning puts me to sleep. But you continue to lecture undeterred, unaware of the comatose audience:

> "Where human imagination is spontaneous and self-indulgent, human reason is self-disciplined and ascetic. For reason may be distinguished from imagination in this regard: it follows the connections of ideas. Where images are juxtaposed out of personal taste, desire and interest, ideas manifest their own connections, momentum and resistance … Reason is a gentle yet forceful governor.
>
> In imagination we are separate individuals. What interest do the extravagances of your imagination hold for me? … In reasoning, by contrast, we stand in solidarity. Your reasoning may be just as impressive as my own, for by following your reasoning it becomes my own. Whatever empowers you may also empower me. You can take me by the hand and lead me through a landscape of ideas, and because this landscape is real and belongs to the ideas themselves, I will follow you …"[4]

[4] This quoted extract within the email is taken from a draft of a symposium on philosophy as a spiritual exercise that I am involved in editing.

> At this moment I wake up. Landscape? What landscape? You were talking about ideas. Does reason patrol its territory of ideas … or do ideas patrol the territory of our brains? Is the aim of philosophy to escape into the eternal sunlight of ideas, or is it to entertain these angelic souls in our flesh? Do we become immortal by thinking these ideas or do ideas become mortal by ordering the connections of our brains?
>
> It makes no difference, in any case, for have you not heard what you are saying? You say it is not we who are animated, but reason itself that is all soul and substance. You will quote Simone Weil's formulation of the philosopher's creed: "Truth and beauty are impersonal … Our personality is the part of us that belongs to error and sin."[5] When you reason correctly, your personality does not enter at all. Like Spinoza, you say that reason is its own internal animating principle, unfolding whenever it finds body and brain to haunt and possess. And behold, in the night I see visions of reason like the offspring of man, a messianic reason coming on the clouds of heaven, sweeping us up as though it were a whirlwind at our backs taking us on a witch's ride, transporting us into completely new climates and strange environments, constructing new paradigms for thought and existence. For this animating principle of reason is truth itself, the self-affirmation of thought, its will to come into existence, to self-expression, or even its will to power. You say that reason itself is the next stage in creative evolution, the higher being that comes over man, the germinal life that disseminates the seeds of its wisdom into our mouths, untouched by what we say or do. You say that man is something that must be overcome, a bridge and not a goal, a shaky foundation for the inhuman and posthuman, mere flesh for the thought that feeds upon us. You say that all life is born posthumously.
>
> Well, to be honest, I preferred it when philosophers remained dull. But tell me this – is not every bland philosopher, whether continental or analytic, a secret initiate into this cult of pure reason? Does not every philosopher drink from this same toxic wine? Beneath the mask of sobriety and solemnity, is not each philosopher a traitor to humanity, slave to an alien Dionysiac god? Is it not philosophers above all others who need liberation?

This accusation is directed against idealist and engaged philosophy alike: it is essentially a charge of hypocrisy. For whatever is said about the democratic force of objective reason, the aristocratic force of participation in the Good, or the revolutionary force of philosophical engagement, what is suspected of taking power through such reasoning is a blind logic that is inattentive to actual ecological, economic, social and psychological experience. What we call 'reason,' or 'the Good,' or 'truth' may in reality be something subhuman, in practice far less responsive, understanding, and capable than a poorly educated person.

[5] Simone Weil, "Human Personality" in Sîan Miles ed. *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 75.

Yet where an idealist philosopher can tackle this directly at the level of argument—and is therefore at risk of manifesting a will to dominate and be dominated by a particular conception of reason—, an engaged philosopher has to treat this as a challenge: it is not sufficient to establish the mere possibility that philosophy may be innocent of such idolatry; it is necessary to perform a thinking that is at once liberated and engaged. It is necessary to perform a demonstration of how to orient oneself within thought, avoiding participation in a cult of pure reason at the same time as avoiding participation in a transcendent meaning. In order to demonstrate the three dimensions of engaged philosophy, I propose to juxtapose brief considerations of three classic problems in philosophy of religion concerned with transcendence, suffering and cosmology. I will consider first the problem of how it is possible to think transcendence with only the tools of mundane thought. This will demonstrate how to practice a Nietzschean engagement with the life of thought, while differentiating my engagement from that of a notable Nietzschean, Gilles Deleuze. Second, I will consider the existential problem of the reality of meaningless suffering. This will demonstrate a Kierkegaardian engagement with what matters, while differentiating my engagement from that of a notable Kierkegaardian existentialist, Ernest Becker. Third, I will consider the possibility of 'design' or meaning in the cosmos from the evidence of its fine-tuning. This is to demonstrate an engagement with material reality, yet one that is differentiated from common materialist reduction.

There are three underlying aims of this somewhat strange juxtaposition of brief discussions. I aim to show a reasoning that is not committed to any messianic arrival of pure reason that will offer salvation. I aim to think through philosophical problems without committing myself to participating in a transcendent meaning. Yet, most significantly, I hope that the juxtaposition of the discussions will enable these to shed some light on each other. In each case, what is really at stake is how to orient oneself within thought, and how to engage with life. Insight, an elevated practice of reason, is to be found in the process of mutual illumination. It is such insight which illuminates the mind and engages it: the mind does not possess insight, but insight may at times possess and move the mind. The practice of engaged philosophy of religion is an attention to insight, wherever it may occur.

IMMANENCE AS PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

What is life? I only have to raise the question and you are trapped in a dilemma. Either you venture an answer—whether materialist, metaphysical, theological—and immediately you have claimed a God's eye-view, a position outside life, by which you claim to judge what is life and what is not, a position you cannot justify by your own partial place within life. Or else you invent a transcendent rule: "There is nothing outside the given, no God, no place outside life from which to judge it"—and immediately you have broken your own rule in stating it. Both options are transcendent philosophies of representation, and each is locked in perpetual combat with the other.

Yet there is an escape through chiasmic inversion. As Gilles Deleuze wrote:

> 'Give me a body then': this is the formula of philosophical reversal. The body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or

> must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life. Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life. Life will no longer be made to appear before the categories of thought; thought will be thrown into the categories of life.[6]

This is a philosophy of immanence—to make thought live, to bring it to life, to live in thinking. This has nothing to do with a rejection of God or the meaning and profundity of life, and there is nothing anti-theological here; it is merely a change in orientation and practice of thinking, an *ascesis* that liberates the force of thought. One gives up the pretention of a God's eye point of view or transcendent rule—thinking is an intervention in life rather than a survey or obligation from above. All philosophers, insofar as they think, enact the life and force of reason, however much they return to the representation and combat of opinions—even Plato traces a plane of immanence.[7] Yet just as Deleuze was emphatic that to trace immanence consistently means ceasing to raise the question of representing what is outside life, he was also emphatic that when philosophers were continuously talking about God it was in order to break with representation and reach abstraction, to make the swerve that frees concepts from representation in order to allow them to live and think.[8] What is the life of thought? It is the force of thinking, what is implied, what it makes us think and do. This is why immanence is 'a life,'[9] unlike the transcendent representation of 'life itself': the force of thought is expressed in a particular life, a particular philosopher. Yet Deleuze also discovered a process of fine-tuning or mutual catalysis between living thoughts in relation: each is a particular life that may express the thought of the other, in a moment of creation and mutual enhancement that is the emergence of life, where each brings life to the other.[10]

So a philosophy of immanence is not a position or viewpoint; it consists in three movements or practices: a chiasmic inversion whereby thinking is placed on the same plane as the life it thinks; a swerve from representation towards abstraction where thinking follows implications; and a crystallisation of a newly created life in relation. And if one were to raise the question, "What is philosophy," without appealing to a place outside thought, then one repeats these operations on philosophy itself. Philosophy becomes engaged. Could one not create, through fractalisation and infinite recurrence, an unlimited life of thinking? I was rather dismayed when Deleuze did not perform this operation in his 1991 book, *What is Philosophy?*; thus, I put this to him in writing. He wrote back with extraordinary graciousness and perspicacity:

---

[6] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 189.

[7] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Graham Burchill and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994), 57.

[8] See Deleuze, Seminar 25 November 1980. Available at: http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/sommaire.html.

[9] Deleuze, "Immanence: A Life . . .", *Theory, Culture and Society* 14, no. 2 (1997): 3-7.

[10] For a reading of Deleuze that regards his concept of 'crystallisation' as a technique of reasoning present throughout his work but especially thematized in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, see Philip Goodchild, *Gilles Deleuze and the Question of Philosophy* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1996).

> Your letter touched me a lot, it was full of delicacy and sympathy, and bears witness to a philosophical force that is your own, which appears already in the originality of your conceptual division: plane of immanence, line of transcendence, volume-crystal. Of course I don't think that one can reintroduce transcendence as you have done and in the *sense* in which you have done. You have a general tendency to relativise notions like immanence or chaos which only come to life when absolute (*qui seulement vive que l'absolu*, alternatively: which only lives (at) the absolute). I therefore have a great difference from you . . .[11]

The phrase "*ce qui vive que l'absolu,*" that which lives the absolute, amounts to a definition of God—absolute immanence is beatitude, for Deleuze. So Deleuze has a philosophy of absolute immanence, of beatific vision; I have one of relative immanence, a movement of thinking. Where Deleuze seeks an absolute thought, a metaphysics, beyond the relative moments of thinking, I am content to spend time in thinking. What this difference amounts to is that for Deleuze philosophy only lives in material encounters with art and science—it is relational. It creates concepts, yet it does not quite create a way of living, a life of affects and percepts. It lays out a plane of pure, abstract thought. By contrast, I turn philosophy into a spiritual exercise: an experiment where the aim is to discern what is possible, not what is the case; an ordeal where the aim is to produce a transformation, not a conclusion; and a performance, where the aim is to encounter, not expound.[12] To think is not merely to follow an abstract line of reasoning that arrives as a practical absolute or beatific vision; it is to spend time.

Suspending claims to know from outside thought or life, such a philosophy of immanence may aspire to enact within thinking itself the virtues of humility, sincerity, and openness. Yet this leaves a question: how can thought acquire force from what lies outside thought? I have to address this by engaging thought from within my own particular life, which leads me to my second consideration.

MEANINGLESS SUFFERING

Whatever the accomplishments of science, philosophy and theology, the human condition bears an excess over all intelligibility: meaningless suffering. Such suffering may be expressed in a cry or a song, and yet it remains bodily and temporal: it falls short of meaning. Of course, suffering can be explained as a by-product of natural causes such as tsunamis, or human carelessness such as inconstant lovers, yet even with such explanations on hand, the experience of suffering exceeds our reasoning. Why me? How could I ever desire this? As Theodor Adorno famously put it:

---

[11] Personal correspondence, February 1993.

[12] This is the practice of thinking developed in *Gilles Deleuze and the Question of Philosophy*, as well as my subsequent *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (London: Routledge, 2002), *Theology of Money* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), and the forthcoming *Symposium on Philosophy as a Spiritual Exercise.*

> In face of the experiences we have had, not only through Auschwitz but through the introduction of torture as a permanent institution and through the atomic bomb – all these things form a kind of coherence, a hellish unity – in face of these experiences the assertion that what is has meaning, and the affirmative character which has been attributed to metaphysics almost without exception, become a mockery; and in face of the victims it becomes downright immoral. For anyone who allows himself to be fobbed off with such meaning moderates in some way the unspeakable and irreparable things which have happened by conceding that somehow, in a secret order of being, all this will have had some kind of purpose. In other words, it might be said that in view of what we have experienced – and let me say that it is also experienced by those on whom it was not directly perpetrated – there can be no one, whose organ of experience has not entirely atrophied, for whom the world after Auschwitz, that is, the world in which Auschwitz was possible, is the same world as it was before. And I believe that if one observes and analyses oneself closely, one will find that the awareness of living in a world in which that is possible – is possible again and is possible for the first time—plays a quite crucial role even in one's most secret reactions.[13]

Such suffering exposes the poverty of reason: it cannot be redeemed by thought. By meaningless suffering, I intend a suffering that is not desired in and of itself, an experience that can never be chosen or affirmed for its own sake alone, even if one might bear it for the sake of a greater good. One might accept pain in childbirth, or after surgery, or during hard labour when a greater goal is in mind, but meaningless suffering frustrates one's most fundamental drives and desires. It is also pervasive, as the Buddhists say: life is unsatisfactory, even alongside its most glorious moments.

If suffering cannot be explained or redeemed by reason then it is temporal, and ended by death. While death itself is not suffering, mortality and especially the death of others frustrate our desires. The existentialist Ernest Becker, heavily influenced by Søren Kierkegaard and Otto Rank, explained the human condition thus:

> What does it mean to be a *self-conscious animal*? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression – and with all this yet to die.[14]

Becker is a dualist: he describes the human condition as one of yearning to participate in the immortality of symbolic meaning, while only being able to sustain ourselves through mortal bodies. We have risen far above our animal nature, and yet we shall fall far beneath it. The excruciating element of this description lies in the conflict between yearning and knowledge: my efforts in life may all be geared towards the future, to escape animality into the realm of

[13] Theodor Adorno, *Metaphysics*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 104.

[14] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (London: The Souvenir Press, 2011), 87.

enduring meaning, to achieve a lasting influence, whether through wealth, fame, friendship, teaching, books, or children, and yet at some point my posthumous influence will fade into insignificance, the people whose lives I have touched will die, my contribution to the gene pool will be diluted, and my immortality projects and attempts at self-redemption will fail. The time will come when no one reads Goodchild any more. I know this, and if I still have an "excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression," my other, more philosophical yearning, to affirm life as it really is, remains in conflict. For knowledge too is a yearning, an affirmation, a positing, and a desire, and it conflicts with the inner yearning it frustrates. My nature is in conflict with my world. Meaningless suffering is precisely this inner conflict, and it remains meaningless to the extent that such conflict is not reconciled in a higher intelligibility that could explain and affirm my frustrations. The accidents that befall me produce meaningless suffering to the extent that I have an inner yearning that is frustrated, that I remain a mystery to myself, that I have desires I cannot understand, that like Socrates I am either a beast with a hundred different animal heads or else perhaps I share in a simple, unknown divine nature.[15]

Then could the cure for meaningless suffering be the Socratic project of self-knowledge? For Becker, most of us live out of our desires, our immortality projects, in a denial of death, animality, and meaningless suffering. The essence of normality is a refusal of reality.[16] If to see the world as it really is devastating and terrifying,[17] then human character becomes a defence, a vital lie, a necessary and basic dishonesty about oneself.[18] In spending our entire lives in pursuit of heroic immortality projects in denial of death and meaningless suffering, we are maladapted to our actual conditions of existence, and we kill off much of ourselves and our possible spheres of action.[19] We produce unnecessary and meaningless suffering for ourselves and others. For Becker, by contrast, full humanness involves consciousness of what we really are without sham or disguise, and it means "full fear and trembling, at least some of the waking day."[20] For at least a little fear and trembling may reduce the unnecessary suffering we produce for others.

This existential approach to matters of life and death complicates the vocation of the philosopher: on the one hand, the Platonic connection between pursuit of truth and preparation for death is affirmed, for the philosopher has the courage to leave the cave of illusions, to accept death, to strip aside the vital lies of normality and self-deception; on the other hand, the heroic pursuit of truth in fear and trembling becomes one more immortality project, for one seeks to merge the mind with a truth that endures beyond death. Even though I will die, the truth that I have grasped and taught to others will still endure. Is such philosophy yet another illusory denial of death? The test, here, is to determine whether such a Platonic truth can effect a full reconciliation that redeems suffering—that is, whether one's "excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression," is, at bottom, ultimately a yearning for truth that will be reconciled with knowledge in an enlightenment or beatific vision. One can certainly believe in such a future reconciliation, as indeed a long tradition of

[15] Cf Plato, *Phaedrus* 230a.
[16] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 178.
[17] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 60.
[18] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 55.
[19] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 181.
[20] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 59.

Christian metaphysicians have done. Are we only mysteries and accidents to ourselves to the extent that we do not know God? Would the human who knows God be freed from the burden of frustrated desire and meaningless suffering? Could such Platonism conform with a Christian revelation of God in Christ crucified? In any case, the test of whether a reconciliation of yearnings can take place in knowledge remains a practical one: it is a task to be achieved. And even if I discover that my true yearning is to know, affirm, and love the real world as it is and as God affirms it, and even if I discover that the real world, as it is, is not merely a biofriendly cosmos but a cosmos than which no greater cosmos can be conceived, the fulfilment of all our true desires, fully worthy of love, admiration, and complete affirmation, and even if I discover that my meaningless suffering falls away along with my last illusion, so that I cry out "da capo – is this life? Then, once more …" in a fantastic practical reconciliation of Augustinianism, Sufism, Vedanta, Buddhism, Spinozism, and Nietzscheanism—my compassion will still continue to stub its toe on the illusions and meaningless suffering of others.[21] To the extent that I yearn for an ultimate reconciliation, an eternal cosmos without meaningless suffering, then I cannot be reconciled to a temporal cosmos where meaningless suffering still occurs. My enlightenment or beatific vision, even if eternally true, remains in practical terms an illusion, a vital lie, a defence against meaningless suffering. No, I would rather abandon eternity itself for a single moment of meaningless suffering.

It soon becomes apparent that dread of meaningless suffering like that of death expresses consciousness of the precariousness of life: 'to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression'—all this is to have a life, and the fear of death is the fear that this life end in the failure of its absence. What is striking here, is that all meaningful intention, all meaningful action, all meaningful affirmation of the simplest of views, even if these views are the metaphysics of a reductionist biology, are a binding of oneself towards the future. Through naming, consciousness, feeling, and yearning we gather up the continuity of our past for the sake of expressing a future. We live our lives through projects. Even to think is to project. And in such projection, we renounce alternate possibilities of life so that our actual lives may be judged by their outcome, as though we merge our identities with our goals, make a gift of ourselves to the higher reality of the desired future, and judge our present by achievement of this future. The fact that we will die makes such a conduct of life meaningful, for each precious moment must be spent wisely insofar as we must complete our projects before our time runs out—it matters what we do to ourselves and others because we are all temporary. Yet death also makes our lives meaningless, insofar as feeding worms is not usually chosen as a life-project. Death is ambivalent, and our response to it more so: the alternative of fight or flight introduces internal conflict. To live as an individual, to merge with a higher good, to despair, what is one to do?

The existential subject may then oscillate between two poles of meaning: on the one hand there is self-surrender to a wider framework of orientation, whether this is given by the laws of physics, genetic and biological determinism, consumption of mass-media, physical or virtual sports and games, institutional roles and responsibilities, personal projects, or

[21] Note the discussion of eternal recurrence in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 99.

religious devotion. In all of these cases, an orientation through the course of one's life is given from without. On the other hand, the existential subject, by contemplating the terrors of death and absurdity in fear and trembling for a little each day, can individuate itself from collective consciousness, determining itself in freedom to be what it is. At best this is only an oscillation, since one cannot face the terrors of reality continuously. And in both situations, the subject comports itself towards a meaningful existence. The life drives, whether those of merging or self-expression, desire life as a meaningful whole.

What has no place in either stance, except as a means toward a greater end, is suffering. Suffering is not desired in and of itself, and so it lacks investment with meaning. While suffering may be an occasion for awakening from forgetfulness, it has no useful function on its own account. Meaningless suffering cannot be chosen as a project. The theological problem of the existence of suffering, of how a good God could create a world with so much meaningless suffering, effectively dramatizes an existential problem: how can I desire a life that includes meaningless suffering? How can I reconcile myself to affirming this existence? All profound theological problems are also problems of life and living: how can I live with meaningless suffering? Many efforts in theodicy are directed towards showing that all suffering has a reason as to why it is better that it should be permitted. The problem, given such a reason, would then be essentially one of human sinfulness, of the human inability to renounce itself and reconcile itself with the greater good. One may even see the higher reason, and yet suffering remains suffering: it is hard to accept that it should happen to me. In fact, while pain may either induce fear or be met with acceptance, it is the psychological component of suffering, the inner conflict that is often the hardest element to bear. Even the highest levels of renunciation and self-surrender, however much bliss they evoke in handing over responsibility for one's fate to another, are merely temporary resolutions of internal conflict, for the life-affirming drives will take up their task once more. While meaningless suffering befalls us as an accident from without, it is always incorporated within as internal, psychological conflict.

The reality of life is internal tension and conflict: it is felt as a kind of discomfort, a meaningless suffering that cannot be resolved for longer than a moment. In this case, both the defences of normality and the courage of individuation are refusals of reality, temporary and partial attempts to deny chaos. We remain caught in our own imagination and projection of a meaningful existence until we undergo the experience of meaningless suffering. In seeking our own flourishing, or even in seeking the flourishing of another, what we imagine and desire for self or another is a simple, unconflicted life—one that lacks the thickness of reality, the reality of a life that is itself tension. In this respect, for a philosopher who seeks life as it really is, meaningless suffering is a mark of reality. It stands outside of any desired illusions. Life has meaning beyond human projections only insofar as it is meaningless.

For meaningless suffering matters. It matters to me and to you, even if it does not matter in the grand scheme of things. But perhaps the grand scheme of things does not matter in the same kind of way. There are two distinct dimensions of significance: there is the intelligible universe, where everything is essential and has a reason, whether it can be explained by the principles of science, metaphysics, or providence; and there is also meaningless suffering, where everything is accidental, and explanation and desire fail to redeem or reconcile

reality. If meaningless suffering is the effect of a conflict between incompatible yearnings, then it is not at all fundamental but a mere surface effect. It explains nothing. It lacks an intelligible essence. It is without meaning, yet it does not lack significance. For in mattering, it bears witness to a frustrated desire, a desire in excess over reality that cannot be fulfilled by affirming reality as it is, should that be comprehensible. Simone Weil once described such yearning thus:

> At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being.[22]

And what of non-human beings, do they also experience meaningless suffering? If Weil's description is more specific than our knowledge warrants, she has at least seen that there is a source of illumination in relation to which meaningless suffering matters: it is a yearning that is life, but not 'life' in a universal, biological sense. Let us call it "moral life." Such moral life does not gain its meaning from its intelligibility, meaning, reason, or order. It is disclosed in contingency. But neither does it depend on the contingency of a meaningless or chaotic cosmos.

If this is the case, there is another way of conducting oneself in and through time that is not simply a matter of projection. It is a matter of paying attention to suffering, or simply undergoing experience. This involves a conversion of philosophy: normally, a philosophy aiming at knowing reality seeks to affirm the truth, to make an affirmation, to escape partiality and discover conditions under which life can be fully affirmed. Such philosophy has to practice a kind of implicit theodicy—the truth has to be justified, even though our access to it may be partial. It renounces partial thinking, merging itself with knowledge of reality. In other words, it flees death and meaningless suffering, and paradoxically restricts its experience of life.

Yet what if truth is to be felt rather than affirmed? What if truth acts on thought, rather than thought possessing truth? What if all our thoughts are only partial? Meaningless suffering is that which exceeds rational explanation, yet it is that which imposes itself on the mind. It is that which cannot be thought, while itself provoking thinking: What is happening to me? It is a kind of singularity, like those of physics or history, which becomes a point of orientation in relation to which one takes a stance, and in relation to which one gains a meaning: what do you do about meaningless suffering? In fact, it might be better to say that it does not lack meaning so much as exceed the meanings we construct to channel and contain it. For rationalisation is an attempt to produce affirmation and acceptance, to relieve inner suffering by resolving inner conflict, leaving the relatively manageable physical pain. Such rationalisations fail when some element of experience continues to impress itself upon us in spite of our attempts at reconciliation. An alternative conception of philosophy seeks to become aware of our inner conflicts. Inner tension causes us to think, to wonder, to

[22] Simone Weil, "Human Personality" in Sîan Miles ed. *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (London: Penguin, 2005), 71.

experience life beyond our existing thoughts and projections. It energizes life and experience. It is an entropic release of energy that gives rise to the emergence of complex forms. It gives us life even as it kills us. It makes the experience of thinking exceed the content of thought.

If life were perfect, if there were no death or meaningless suffering, then we would only have to pay attention to reasons, to natural processes, to institutions that resolve tension. Yet we would have no occasion to pay attention to each other's lives. In a perfect marriage, for example, the partners could safely ignore each other's feelings since these would be resolved by the relationship; in other words, a perfect marriage would be a sham marriage. It is only when life does not work that we have a reason to pay attention to each other's experience. It is only because our experience exceeds what we can think that we can enter into real, living bonds of mutual attention and sympathy. It is only by attending to what is false that a philosopher can feel the truth. And it is only from the creative experience of mutual attention that all joy, all love, all expression and understanding springs.

So this is my theodicy for meaningless suffering, the way I justify tension, or life, or God—whatever you wish to call it—this is unbearable as well as unknowable. Life is insufferable, and cannot be rationalized or affirmed, but only protested. Yet this very experience of protest, of inner tension, is the substance of our experience, and what makes living beings capable of joy, love, and creativity. If life were simply the product of biological laws or of a benevolent creator, if everything were ordered and reasonable, then all our suffering would be meaningless. But because we experience meaningless suffering, because we are mortal, then we are not merely food for worms, but become thinking, living, self-conscious animals.

FINE-TUNING

Yet such meaninglessness is not the last word on moral life. For what is truly remarkable is that the intelligible cosmos is constituted so that it is hospitable for moral life. The twenty-three constants of physical laws and the initial quantities of energy and motion in the universe are tightly fine-tuned to enable the formation of carbon, planets, water (with its remarkable properties of thermal conductivity, thermal capacity, solvent properties, viscosity, surface tension, and interaction with cell membranes), as well as genetic codes.[23] Some estimates place the tuning to an accuracy of 1 in 10^{27},[24] others suggest that the order of magnitude of the amount of dark energy in the quantum vacuum is correct to 1 in 10^{120}—any slight variation and our universe could not have sustained life. This defies coincidence and cries out for explanation. What is remarkable is not simply that scientific laws are coordinated, as though our universe were selected from a group that shared the same physical laws but varied in their constants. For this tuning is not merely of apparently independent physical laws and their constants, but also of the actual quantities in this universe such as its amount of dark energy.[25] Moreover, this is not merely a selection of values of constants and conditions to find the ones that give life and so lead to our

[23] Paul Davies, "Fitness and the Cosmic Environment," in *Fitness of the Cosmos for Life,* eds. John D. Barrow et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 104.
[24] Lee Smolin cited in Stuart A. Kauffman, *Reinventing the Sacred* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 28.
[25] Paul Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma* (London: Penguin, 2007), 164.

awareness of the problem, but what is remarkable is that there should be any values at all which make the diverse life-enabling properties such as those of water possible. If anything demands explanation, it is this. And yet we do not have such an explanation. There is an intelligibility, a reason and order in the universe, that exceeds our existing powers of comprehension. We can no longer be pure Kantians, imposing our own intelligible order on the cosmos, for the intelligible order we postulate is beyond our understanding. A new integration of scientific laws will hardly explain why our actual world has the qualities it does; it will not explain why its values are correlated with the existence of bearers of complexity such as carbon and water. Such intelligibility beyond our mathematical or poetical reasoning must at least imply truly temporal relations in the cosmos such as anticipation, anxiety, promise—perhaps even messianicity—formerly rejected by science under the heading of the "teleological."

The so-called anthropic principle observes a correlation between the way in which the universe has been fine-tuned and something of significance: the emergence of planets; or carbon-based life forms; or consciousness; or humanity; or the comprehension of physical laws; or meaningless suffering; or some far more intelligent and/or morally significant alien life-forms that will probably arise millions of years from now. The suggestion is that the moral significance of Copernicus' revolution is undone: instead of the Earth being a peripheral planet in a far-flung galaxy of a meaningless cosmos, the design of the entire cosmos is for the sake, if not simply of life itself, of some hidden and future characteristic which finds a precursor or instantiation in human life. Let us call this "moral life"—we can call it what we like, it is merely a name. Given that the human brain contains as many neurons as there are stars in the Milky Way, with far more complex interactions, then it becomes reasonable once more to regard some form of complexity as the *telos* or centre of the cosmos. The silence of those infinite spaces may have disquieted Pascal, but it no longer needs to disturb those who await moral life.

There are two prominent strategies for evading this anti-Copernican turn, adding the equivalent of Ptolemaic epicycles to preserve an existing paradigm. The 'multiverse' hypothesis, according to which a universe exists for each possible value of the physical constants and conditions (surely impossible under Gödel's incompleteness theorem), so that we happen to observe the universe that makes us possible, preserves the explanatory paradigm that complexity arises from variation and selection. This paradigm has a vital role in evolution, yet to apply it to explain the entire cosmos is itself a metaphysical gesture: meaningless variation is taken as paramount. Order is explained from disorder. Just as the only reason we observe the planet that we do is because it is one capable of supporting conscious life, so also the only reason we observe the cosmos that we do is because it is one capable of supporting conscious life. A mode of behaviour encountered within the universe is used to explain the whole.

At its heart, the multiverse explanation of fine-tuning remains anthropomorphic in spite of its intentions: a feature of human intellectual activity, the positing of possibilities irrespective of their moral significance, is now elevated to the matrix of the multiverse—an operation that lacks any rational explanation. It is rather like expecting a group of monkeys sat at typewriters for an infinite period of time to eventually produce the complete works of Shakespeare: while the *n*th product may be identical to the letter of what is required, it has

no meaning because it is not read and is discarded along with the others. For meaning, and even for possibility, an observer is required. For when it comes to the universe as a whole, as Paul Davies has pointed out, time itself loses its meaning, for there is nothing else relative to which the universe may be said to change.[26] The universe generated by a multiverse may be identical to ours in every respect, with replicas of you and I, and yet it remains ideal rather than material for it lacks time, lacks yearning, lacks meaning and mattering, since it has no observers, not even internal ones. As a hypothetical world, it cannot solve the problem of how physical law generates actual existence. It explains nothing.

The alternative prominent hypothesis to explain fine-tuning is intelligent design, and it is often conceived in a similar manner: a demiurge contemplates a shopping list of possible universes, calculates which will contain life, and breathes actual existence into it. Time now apparently has meaning because the demiurge is the observer that contemplates the universe. Since the form of this possible universe has no significance without the divine inspiration of actuality, human consciousness has no moral meaning itself except insofar as it is observed by the demiurge. My meaningless suffering only matters to me if it matters to a loving demiurge (there's an ontological argument buried here). In this anthropomorphic alternative, then, features of human intellectual activity, technological calculation, and the making of actualities by conscious decision, are now elevated to the matrix of the universe—an operation that lacks any rational explanation.

At its heart, the intelligent design hypothesis remains mechanistic in spite of its intentions: the cosmos has no purpose in itself, but only functions for the sake of some extrinsic end. This is evident above all in the extravagant wastage or Darwinian debris involved in the construction of the universe,[27] whether in the form of the dark matter and dark energy that together constitute 96% of the universe, the millions of years prior to the evolution of conscious life, the profligate wastage of diverse life-forms in the course of evolution, the excess human births that have died from want of resources so keeping the human population largely stable until five centuries ago, the countless birth defects, diseases and stunted potentials of the living population, the vast majority of human ova and spermatozoa that fail to achieve fertilization—none of this extravagant wastage and meaningless suffering counts if the purpose of the cosmos is extrinsic.

An engaged philosophy of religion requires not merely the construction of intelligible forms but also an actualization of this moral life: to think and to explain is no longer to extract an immortal intelligibility and value, but to awaken a temporary awareness of intelligibility and value, to live out a mortal moral life. This is a temporal life, involving uncertainty, emergence, suffering, promising, compassion, courage, sacrifice, fear and trembling, at least some of the waking day. And yet this moral dimension of life is set aside by purely physical hypotheses concerning the origins of the universe. Despite this, what emerges from relativity, quantum physics, and cosmology is the persistent trace of moral life in the form of a required observer—even in physics, the notion of a thought without thinking, a

[26] Paul Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma*, 204.

[27] As pointed out by John F. Haught, "Is fine-tuning remarkable?," in *Fitness of the Cosmos for Life,* eds. John D. Barrow et al., 34.

'physical law' or 'objective truth,' remains an ideal abstraction.[28] It would appear that the independence of variables in physical laws, as well as the independence of physical law itself from the actual values of the world that enacts it, remain local illusions, an effect of scientific method, an attempt to reach eternity in denial of death. If, by contrast, there are intrinsic relations between physical constants, initial conditions, meaningless suffering and moral life, then such intrinsic relations cannot be stated in any mathematical formulae, yet nor can they be stated in any humanoid intentions. Our familiar strategies of reasoning and explanation have their poverty exposed.

For in both kinds of transcendent explanation a dualism is imposed upon experience: one of cause and effect, absolute ground and actual instance, without any account being given of how particles know how to obey physical laws or the demiurge's commands. 'Explanation' is assumed to be linear, a reduction to a more fundamental level, in spite of the fact that the matrix of cosmic possibilities as well as the demiurge cannot be described simply without appealing to the multiplicity of human experience they are introduced to explain. Nevertheless, there are strong physical and mathematical reasons for supposing that the world in general does not operate according to simple linear processes of cause and effect. Stuart Kauffmann has collected three arguments against physical reductionism proposed by Nobel prize-winning physicists: there are phenomena of symmetry-breaking where information is created, when the actual outcome is not completely determined by initial conditions, rather like a pencil balanced on its point that may fall in any direction; there are processes of computation that are independent of their physical instantiations, where the same process can be achieved on an abacus or an electronic computer; there are also diverse abstract models that can be used to describe the behaviour of the same physical systems.[29] What actually happens, therefore, escapes both physical and computational determinism. In the real world, independent linear processes are the exception. Then why assume that the cosmos as a whole should be simple?

Instead of linear processes of causation, there are complex intrinsic relations between empirical phenomena and moral life—for moral life, far from being epiphenomenal or transcendent to the cosmos, dwells within the physical cosmos itself. Such intrinsic relations are manifested in those experiences that are beyond rationalization in terms of scientific laws or purposeful designs. Even if inconceivable, these relations are not remote, abstract, or imperceptible: they constitute the very life of meaningless suffering itself.

CONCLUSION

On the one hand, the intrinsic relations in the cosmos exemplified by fine-tuning indicate an excess intelligibility in the cosmos over our current powers of reasoning; on the other hand, the deficit in our ability to explain and affirm meaningless suffering indicates a lack of intelligibility in the cosmos. Yet both this excess and this lack bear witness to the poverty of our reason—while, for a moment, one may fool oneself with the illusion that we live in a materialist or designed universe, at heart we do not truly believe our own theories insofar

[28] David A. Grandy, *Everyday Quantum Reality* (Bloomingtom, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 28.

[29] Kauffmann, *Reinventing the Sacred* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 19-25.

as we feel the protest against meaningless suffering. Riven by internal conflict, we cannot fully commit ourselves to any belief whose truth we dream. No one can wholeheartedly believe a perspective outside life. At heart, there are no nihilists nor theologians, but only maladapted philosophers. The human condition is internal conflict, maladaptation, and to the extent that we feel that we are not at home in the universe, we know that we are alive. For the excess intelligibility of the cosmos impacts upon us each and every moment: what happens to us is too much for us to bear. The ordered universe beyond our desire and understanding is simply that which generates the Darwinian debris of our individual lives, including our frustrated yearnings. There is an intelligible, vital, moral life in the cosmos that for us remains incomprehensible, unliveable, and destructive. We encounter this in meaningless suffering. Yet our protest against this experience bears witness to an inner yearning, a longing for redemption, our own sacred or moral life.

To conclude: such cosmology is of interest because it concerns our attitude to life as a whole, our orientation to existence, our characteristic ethos of thinking. It is absurd to expect temporal and local beings to achieve some eternal or cosmic reconciliation with existence. And yet there is some truth in the hope for the inner unity of self-knowledge: there are extraordinary occasions when our inner yearning, itself a product and expression of the intelligible cosmos, discovers itself expressed also in what happens to us. In a moment of intuition, one sees, affirms, desires and understands a fragment of experience. Instead of the conflict between a thought that attempts to master nature and a nature that continually baffles thought, there are moments of fine-tuning when experience fits desire and raises it to consciousness. In such moments, we actualize the moral significance of life by adding a dimension of meaning and value. While we may never understand or explain the fine-tuning of the whole cosmos, we may understand the fine-tuning of ourselves and our experience. Thinking is then nothing more than being finely tuned, attentive to ourselves, to others, to actual experience, and discerning the clash of 'inner yearnings' without and within that compose moral life. Such is the task of engaged philosophy of religion.

PHILIP GOODCHILD is Professor of Religion and Philosophy in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Nottingham, UK. He is the author of *Gilles Deleuze and the Question of Philosophy (*1996), *Deleuze and Guattari: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire* (1996), *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (2002), and *Theology of Money* (2007). He is also currently a Senior Fellow of the Rethinking Capitalism Initiative at The University of California, Santa Cruz.

Goodchild, Philip. "Engaged Philosophy of Religion," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 12 no. 2 (Fall 2012): 52-68.