***Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (9th Edition)**

**Part VI Summary: Existential Issues**

**Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”**

The life of Sisyphus is often taken to be the paradigm of a meaningless existence. In this selection, Camus describes Sisyphus’s life and offers some ruminations about how Sisyphus can overcome the absurdity of his punishment.

Camus begins by telling us the story of Sisyphus: how he ended up in the underworld, how he obtained permission from Pluto to go back up to yell at his wife (because she had obeyed him too readily), how he had stayed up in the world once he returned because he loved it so much, and how the gods had to come retrieve him and gave him his rock as punishment, to be pushed up a hill day after day for no reason.

The part of the myth that Camus is interested in, he tells us, is the part where Sisyphus walks back down the hill to begin pushing his rock again. At that moment, what is Sisyphus thinking? He is a conscious being, and this is what makes his punishment so bad. He is able to realize how absurd his task is, and it is his consciousness of the absurdity that makes the punishment so awful.

However, it is precisely in this fact that Sisyphus beats his punishment. He realizes the absurdity of his plight, and he can be scornful toward it. It is in this attitude of scorn that Camus thinks Sisyphus can rest contented. In fact, Sisyphus is perhaps in an even better situation than most of us, because at least he realizes that his life is absurd. And better to realize this, and be scornful of it, than to be ignorant of it or have a false sense of hope. So perhaps Sisyphus has been able to beat his punishment after all.

It is worth asking whether and why Sisyphus leads a meaningless life, to what extent our lives resemble the life of Sisyphus, and what we might do (if anything) to overcome such absurdity.

**Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd”**

Thomas Nagel here attempts to articulate a widespread feeling that humans get when they consider whether their lives are significant “in the grand scheme of things,” so to speak. He begins by pointing out that although many people feel that life is absurd in a certain sense, most of the reasons they give for thinking this are bad reasons. For example, some people say that our lives are absurd because nothing we do now will matter in a million years. But Nagel points out that if that’s true, then the fact that nothing we do now will matter in a million years shouldn’t matter either unless what we do now matters, period. Others try to articulate the feeling by saying that we are just tiny specks in an infinite universe, but Nagel expresses confusion as to how it would help if we were much larger or even lived forever. Still others say that because we die, all chains of justification must stop somewhere. But many chains of justification stop even during our lifetime, and in any case to look for a chain of justification that never stops is to admit an infinite regress. So, all of the typical arguments for the absurdity of life seem faulty.

Nevertheless, Nagel thinks that those who put forth these arguments are attempting to express something fundamental that is, in fact, correct. Nagel agrees that our lives are absurd in that there is “a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality.” In other words, what makes our lives absurd is the conflict between how seriously we take our lives and the fact that everything about which we are serious seems, when viewed from another perspective, arbitrary and open to doubt. The absurdity of life, according to Nagel, results when these two points of view conflict inside of us.

This account of the absurdity of life cries out for explanation in two places: the claim that taking our lives seriously is unavoidable and the claim that the possibility of doubt is inescapable. As to the first, Nagel simply points us toward the way most humans actually do live their lives. Think here about how much people worry about where they work, what friends they have, what they buy, and so on. As Nagel puts it, “Leading a human life is a full-time occupation.” As to the second claim, Nagel points out that because we are self-reflective creatures, there is always the possibility that we can view our lives *sub specie aeternitatis*, or from the point of view of eternity. And from this point of view, the only justifications that can be given for the way we live our lives are circular.

Oddly, however, taking up the view from eternity does not cause us to give up our beliefs, although Nagel claims that it does cause us to return to our lives with a sense of irony and resignation. In a sense, we continue to take our lives seriously even while we watch ourselves take our lives seriously and laugh at ourselves.

But is the absurdity of life a problem? Nagel doesn’t think so. After all, he points out that we are in this curious situation precisely because of those characteristics about us that make us the most human—self-consciousness and self-transcendence. Moreover, as he puts it, “If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.”

**Richard Taylor, “The Meaning of Human Existence”**

In this selection, Richard Taylor attempts to figure out what elements a life would need to include for it to be considered meaningful, and he asks whether our own lives fit this picture. His conclusion is that most people’s lives are meaningless, but they nevertheless have the capacity to change that fact.

Taylor starts with a quote from Schopenhauer that expresses the utter meaninglessness of human life. Human life is like a clock, according to Schopenhauer. It gets wound up, it runs for a while, and then it gets wound up again (in the next generation), only to run for a while and be wound up again, and so on. There is no point to the process—we live and then we die. Taylor partly agrees with this characterization. Our lives are not meaningful just because we are alive, and they aren’t meaningful just because we are human. Indeed, if we look at our lives, we will be able to see that they do have the character of meaninglessness.

The first part of the essay is an attempt to get a clear picture of what constitutes a meaningless life. As a paradigm of meaninglessness, Taylor has us consider Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to roll a rock up a hill, only to watch it roll back down again and have to roll it back up again. Sisyphus was condemned to repeat this purposeless task forever. Surely, if any life is meaningless, Sisyphus’s is. But what is it about Sisyphus’s life that makes it so meaningless? There are two things, according to Taylor: (1) purposelessness, and (2) repetition.

Do our lives have the same meaningless character of Sisyphus’s? Taylor thinks that they do, and he says, “The person you meet after a year is the same, doing what he or she was doing then, responding to the same things in the same ways, saying much the same things, and thinking much the same things, most of them unworthy of thought to begin with.”

We naturally recoil from such a conclusion, and Taylor urges us to guard against two misunderstandings that might cause this. First, we must be careful not to switch the subject from meaningfulness to happiness. A meaningless life can be a happy one, and vice versa. Second, we must be careful not to think our lives have meaning just because we are able to escape boredom. So, long as the purposelessness and the endless repetition remain, meaningfulness is lacking.

But does all this mean that it’s not *possible* to lead a meaningful life? Taylor thinks not. He pinpoints three characteristics that are necessary for one’s life to be meaningful. First, it must be directed to goals of one’s own creation and choice. Second, these goals must be genuinely noble, beautiful, or otherwise lastingly worthwhile. And third, these goals must be attained. As a matter of fact, Taylor thinks, most of our lives do not meet these conditions.

But the conclusion is not entirely pessimistic. We can work toward satisfying these three conditions, and to the extent that we do, we have lived meaningfully. Taylor ends on an optimistic note: “A person who does actually succeed in creating something genuinely good, perhaps even beautiful or noble, has lived meaningfully.” Although most human life is in fact meaningless, it need not be so.

**Susan Wolf, “The Meanings of Lives”**

Susan Wolf begins by noting that the stereotypical philosophical question, “What is the meaning of life?” doesn’t get much attention from philosophers these days. There are a number of things wrong with it, but the main thing is that it is utterly obscure. Without a particular context in which to interpret the question, it becomes almost meaningless (no pun intended). Despite the obscurity, though, Wolf thinks there is something in people’s heads when they ask this question and it would be wrong for us to just dismiss it altogether. She thinks she can put her finger on at least one aspect of what people are interested in when they ask this question, and she puts it as follows: “It is a request to find out why we are here (that is, why we exist at all), with the hope that an answer to this question will also tell us something about what we should be doing with our lives.”

But Wolf is inclined to accept the standard philosophical view that there is no way of ascribing Meaning to Life (note the capitals) without bringing in some specific religious worldview. Nevertheless, Wolf thinks it is intelligible to ask whether a particular life is meaningful, and it is this project that she takes up in the bulk of the paper.

Wolf begins her inquiry into what makes a particular life meaningful by noting that there is a subjective aspect to meaning—a meaningful life is at least somewhat rewarding or fulfilling to the person living it. However, that can’t be all there is. For example, look at Einstein and Mother Teresa. Surely their lives were meaningful in some more robust sense than just that they felt fulfilled. What is this further sense?

It will help to first look at what makes a life meaningless. By examining three cases that Wolf takes to be obviously meaningless lives, she attempts to extract the characteristics that make a life meaningful. What she comes up with is as follows: First, a meaningful life must involve active engagement in something. Second, the engagement must be in projects that have some positive value. And third, it must be engaged in projects that are successful to a certain degree.

There are a number of qualifications Wolf makes to these suggestions. First, she notes that “projects” should be taken very broadly to include, especially, relationships. Second, being engaged in a project must involve some sort of identification—it can’t just be a matter of being active. You must somehow enjoy or identify with the project you are undertaking. Third, “positive value” must be given more than a subjective interpretation. And fourth, objective good must not be mistaken for moral good. Morally bad people might live meaningful lives, and morally good people might live meaningless lives.

In the end, it’s the very thought that we are tiny specks in a vast universe that Wolf thinks connects up the question of the Meaning of Life with the question of the meaningfulness of lives. That thought should give rise to two different responses. On the one hand, it should help us realize the meaninglessness of human existence in general. But on the other hand, it should help urge us to stop focusing on ourselves so that we can connect with objectively valuable things and, hence, live meaningful lives. Individual lives can still be meaningful even in an ultimately meaningless world.

**Thomas Nagel, “Death”**

In this piece, Nagel considers the classic questions of “whether death is in itself an evil; and how great an evil, and of what kind.” He begins by laying out some working assumptions and presuppositions, such as that he is using the word “death” to mean a permanent cessation of consciousness and that when he speaks of the value of life, he means the value *for the subject*, as opposed to the value for others or any sort of objective value. He then raises three difficulties for the commonsense view that death is bad for the person who dies.

The first problem is one of explaining how mere deprivation can be a bad thing when there is no one around to mind being deprived. The second problem is a worry about how it even makes sense to say that death is bad *for the person*, as there is no longer any person to speak about. The final problem is one of explaining why we should have a different attitude toward nonexistence after death than we do toward our nonexistence prior to birth.

In response to these worries, Nagel develops the view that “most good and ill fortune has as its subject a person identified by his history and his possibilities, rather than merely by his categorical state of the moment.” Once we move to a more sophisticated understanding of the relational nature of goods and ills in a person’s life, Nagel argues, we can begin to make sense of and vindicate the commonsense view that death is bad for the person who dies, even though he or she is no longer around to suffer.

**James Baillie, “Existential Shock”**

In this piece, as the title *We Die, So Why Do We Struggle to Believe It?* suggests, James Baillie searches for an explanation of so many of us refuse to acknowledge our own mortality. Baillie starts by distinguishing between the “inside” and “outside” views we take with respect to ourselves. The outside view is roughly that of a disinterested third-party. From such a perspective, our eventual death is old news. But from the inside view—the first-personal view of our lives—our eventual death is unthinkable. The thought of our first-person experience coming to an end is foreign and terrifying.

How might we come to acknowledge our mortality from the inside view? Baillie suggests that dwelling on the “no-self” account, derived from both Hume and strands of Buddhism, can help. According to such accounts, we are insubstantial things—that talk of the “self” is a convenient way of describing causally linked networks of mental states and nothing more. By seeing ourselves in such a way, we can start to grasp, from the inside view, how we will cease to be some day. And when we do, this brings with it an existential shock, a visceral experience of that allows us to appreciate our own mortality.

**John Martin Fischer, “Excerpt from *Death, Immortality and Meaning in Life*”**

John Martin Fischer explores two vexing issues in this piece, the Timing Problem and the Symmetry Problem. Assuming death is bad for the deceased, when is it bad? For typical harms, it is relatively easy to identify when the harm is bad for the harmed, namely, when the harm takes place and possibly after. But death seems different since when death is, the deceased is not. How, then, could death harm the deceased at the time of death or thereafter? The alternatives, that death harms the deceased prior to death or at no time at all, seem even more implausible, or so argues Fischer. This is the Timing Problem and Fischer ultimately defends Subsequentism—the view that death is bad for the deceased at the time of death and after—from possible objections.

Next, suppose that death is bad for the deceased and that this is primarily because death deprives the deceased of the good things of life. If this is so, it would also seem that one’s prenatal nonexistence is also bad. After all, one’s prenatal nonexistence seems to deprive one of the good things of life just as much as one’s postmortem nonexistence does. Why would one be bad but not the other, as common sense seems to suggest? This is one version of the Symmetry Problem. Fischer considers previous responses to the problem, such as the one given by Nagel in his piece “Death,” and raises potential problems.

Finally, Fischer considers an importantly different version of the Symmetry Problem, one not focused on the badness of death, but instead on the fear of death. Why would it be rational to fear death but not one’s prenatal nonexistence, especially if both deprive us of the good things of life? Fischer answers by appealing to a general temporal symmetry in our attitudes, namely, that we generally prefer good things to lie in our future and bad things to lie in our past. If this preference is rational, then that would explain why it would be rational to fear death but not one’s prenatal nonexistence.

**Amy Olberding, “Sorrow and the Sage: Grief in the *Zhuangzi*”**

In this article, Amy Olberding explores death and grief in the *Zhuangzi*. Specifically, she tries to make sense of two competing models for thinking about bereavement. Sometimes Zhuangzi suggests that one should greet loss with equanimity. But his response to his own wife’s death reflects a sorrow and grief that is at odds with such equanimity. Olberding argues that the second model, reflected in Zhuangzi’s own grief, better fits with the larger vision of the *Zhuangzi*. Achieving the equanimity of the first model means foregoing the investment in one’s immediate relationships and life that is necessary for both grief and joy.

Olberding begins, in section one, by drawing a comparison between Seneca and Zhuangzi, highlighting the seeming tension between Zhuangzi’s thoughts about death and his own response to his wife’s death. She then begins resolving this tension by considering a distinction between natural norms and social norms. Zhuangzi, she argues, seems to reject the social norms surrounding how to grieve his death, but he seems to accept the “natural norm” that one grieves the loss of loved ones. Still, this distinction doesn’t entirely resolve the tension in Zhuangzi’s response, since grief still involves the judgment that death is bad, and this seems to run counter to Zhuangzi’s view that death is simply a natural event that occurs within the context of a larger natural ordering of things.

In section 3, then, Olberding considers Zhuangzi’s discussion of sages who respond to death with equanimity and no grief. This puts her in a position to better understand a contrast between nature understood from a local level and nature understood from a global—macrocosmic—level. She then, in section 4, returns to Zhuangzi’s grief. She argues that his grief cannot be a result of his still learning. Moreover, she doesn’t think that it is an instance of akrasia, since he doesn’t regret his grief in anyway. And finally, she doesn’t think that Zhuangzi has a moderate position, like Seneca, who admits that ideally one wouldn’t feel grief but recognizes that we’re only human. Zhuangzi’s grief, Olberding thinks, signals an argument for grief’s value as part of our participating in genuine, identify-defining relationships. This, she argues, in section 5, is something that the sages from section 3 cannot countenance. And it is a limitation of only engaging with nature from a macrocosmic level. In section 6, she then applies this line of thought to humor, arguing that the sages who engage with nature only from a macrocosmic level cannot experience the kind of humor, joy, or cheer of Zhuangzi.

In sections 6 and 7, Olberding considers Zhuangzi’s views about the value or disvalue of death. While Zhuangzi grieves his wife’s death, he doesn’t grieve her death for very long. This is partly out of a recognition that, in the grand scheme of things, death isn’t bad. Zhuangzi, Olberding explains, values death for the same reason he values life. And he worries about his society’s grieving practices, which focus on the disvalue of death, and prevent one to reflect on how death fits into the larger natural order. Veering too far towards seeing death as only a natural event, then, which shouldn’t be grieved, prevents one from participating in the particular relationships that make life so valuable; but focusing too much on these particular relationships can also detract from one’s appreciation of their value.

**Jenann Ismael, “The Ethical Importance of Death”**

In this article, Jenann Ismael discusses various philosophical questions surrounding death. Most centrally, Ismael addresses two issues. First, she provides an answer to the Epicurean challenge: what is so bad about death? For Ismael, death is bad for two reasons. First, it involves the loss of something we value—“the accumulated psychological legacy of a lifetime.” And second, it prevents one from being able to accomplish plans in which one is invested.

Even though death is bad, though, for Ismael, it is also important for giving our lives meaning. The second issue Ismael addresses, then, is Leo Tolstoy’s claim that death makes life meaningless. Tolstoy thought that a finite life was meaningless, and his solution was to deny that life is finite, which, for him, meant accepting certain religious convictions on faith. Others—hedonists—have tried to deny that a finite life is meaningless by pointing to the pleasurable experiences that fill it. Ismael argues that neither of these solutions is a good one. Instead, she argues against Tolstoy’s claim by pointing out that life gets its meaning precisely by being finite. Our finitude provides a frame; it allows our lives to have a narrative dimension.

This leads Ismael, in conclusion, to reflect on Bernard Williams’ famous claim that an immortal life would be tedious. Ismael agrees. So, while death is bad, according to Ismael, it is also what allows us to live meaningful lives; and not dying, living forever, seems like it wouldn’t be good.

**Samuel Scheffler, “The Afterlife”**

This piece centers around Scheffler’s novel “doomsday” thought experiment: suppose that you come to learn that, while you will go on to live a full and otherwise normal life, everyone else will die thirty days after your death. Samuel Scheffler invites us to consider how this information would change the way we live our lives. Scheffler claims this news would be deeply disturbing to us and would change what kinds of projects we adopt in substantive ways. Thus, by reflecting on this morbid thought experiment, we can glean insight into the way we think about value and the way we structure our lives.

Scheffler starts by pointing out that this thought experiment shows that we care about more than just our own experiences. Since one’s own lifespan is not affected, the experiences available are roughly the same, and yet something we value is still lost. So what we value must outstrip what we can experience. Scheffler also suggests that few of us would take a consequentialist approach to the situation either: we would not add up all of the positives and negatives of the eventual destruction of humanity to determine our own attitudes toward that destruction. But Scheffler also offers some positive lessons from the doomsday thought experiment. He suggests that it highlights a conservative attitude in us, that we want the things that matter to us most to endure and flourish.

Next, Scheffler considers how our motivation would change in the doomsday scenario. Some projects, such as finding a cure for cancer, would seem to immediately become uninteresting. But what about artistic, scholarly, or creative projects, projects that might lack instrumental value? Scheffler claims it is not obvious whether we would still remain motivated to engage in such projects. Regardless, Scheffler claims that the doomsday scenario shows us something surprising, namely, that many of us are motivated to undertake projects knowing that the completion of those projects likely will be long after our deaths.

Later in the essay, Scheffler further develops these themes, applying to related issues such as the relation between parents and their offspring, how we personalize the future, and the ways in which we would try to find meanings in our lives.