

Meaningful Life¹

JOHN COTTINGHAM

1. *The secularist challenge*

What difference does a theistic, and more specifically a Christian, worldview make to the idea of a meaningful life? In our increasingly secularized culture, many (including, probably, the majority of philosophers) will be inclined to answer, to both the general and to the more specific question, ‘none whatsoever’. An increasingly popular view is that any meaning that life may have must be found entirely from our own chosen activities and projects. Meaning is something we have to create for ourselves. For what (so runs the view under discussion) could *God* have to do with it? How could his purposes and plans for us (even assuming he exists) generate meaning *for us*? Suppose we found that our origins derived from an alien intelligence, who injected some early version of DNA into some molecules in the primordial terrestrial soup, in order that, over time, humans would emerge on this planet, whose struggles and setbacks and temporary triumphs would serve as entertainment when viewed on celestial television by the denizens of a distant galaxy. Would we, if we discovered these facts, be the slightest bit inclined to say our lives were more meaningful as a result? If anything, surely, we might be inclined to conclude the reverse. We might be inclined to think that discovering we were the puppets of these aliens — or, if not that, then at the very least fodder for their entertainment industry — had the effect of making our lives even more absurd, even more futile, than they were in danger of being already.

The word ‘aliens’, of course, has a rather nasty ring to it, suggesting salivating jaws and metallic mandibles. But even if we uncovered evidence that the beings in question were a rather benign race, who genuinely wanted us to succeed in our little projects and endeavours, who rejoiced at our successes and grieved at our frequent tendency to mess up our own and other people’s lives, we might still be inclined to think that their role in the origin of our species detracted, rather than added to, our ability to see our lives as meaningful. For might it not seem rather humiliating, rather demeaning, to realize that we are not the grand, autonomous beings we like to think we are, but the creatures of a superior race who were on the stage long before we were, and who planned our very existence as something that would play a role in *their* purposes?²

Notice that not much difference is made to this disquieting line of thought by bringing in the idea of an ‘after-life’. For suppose these aliens had a mysterious technology, far beyond our ken, which enabled them to make a complete informational scan of the unique set of total contents of each human being’s mind, and to preserve it after the death of the body, only to reactivate it on some distant world, either in a new body, or in a body recreated from a rescued single cell from the old body, but purified or reengineered in such a way that it would no longer be subject to decay or mortality. Would that suddenly make sense of things and render human life after all meaningful? It seems by no means clear that it would. For, to begin with, there would still seem to be something disturbingly manipulative about the imagined scenario. Suppose these aliens greet us, on our post-mortem arrival at the delightful decay-free planet they have prepared for us, and smilingly say: “You see now! All that pain, all

¹ This is a draft of a paper the definitive version of which appeared in Paul K. Moser and Michael T. McFall (eds), *The Wisdom of the Christian Faith* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 175-196.

² This is perhaps one way to interpret the rationale for Thomas Nagel’s at first sight bizarre observation that he hopes there isn’t a God because, as he puts it, “I wouldn’t want the universe to be like that.” His thought may be that being a *creature* (a created being) is just too demeaning for his liking. T. Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 130.

those diseases, those terrible earthquakes and tsunamis, those terrifying crop-failures, those centuries upon centuries of grinding relentless toil and premature death — all the time we knew we had *this* place ready for you: doesn't that make you happy? Doesn't that now make sense of it all?" In the words of Ivan Karamazov, we might be only too aptly inclined to answer: "we respectfully return the ticket."³ And even if we suppose this post-mortem world to have a more traditionally 'moral' character, and imagine that the aliens have planned to dish out punishments to those who have behaved badly on earth, reserving the rewards of a blissful new existence for those who have behaved well, would this really improve matters? The additional feature of the story might gratify those of us who have strongly retributive instincts, and are piqued that the present distribution of welfare on earth does not appear to match desert,⁴ but it does not succeed in dispelling the residual feeling that we have somehow been *used*. Nothing appears more corrosive of meaning than supposing that our struggles and endeavours are being *watched* by a secret agent who is assessing us from a superior vantage point, smiling at our successes and frowning at our failures.

The plight of the central character in the 1998 film *The Truman Show*, illustrates this nicely.⁵ Although the hero (played by Jim Carrey) leads a comfortable life in a secure and stable town, where the streets are always clean, the neighbours are always friendly, and the sun always seems to be shining, it turns out that all the people he meets, even his closest friends, are in fact, unbeknownst to him, actors: the entire town is a giant film set with concealed cameras, and his whole life has been used as the raw material for a successful soap opera, watched by millions. To be sure, the character representing the show's creator and director is portrayed in the film as having a benevolent concern for the unwitting star of the show, and no doubt wishes him to live well, within the terms of the story, and to succeed in his various projects; but we all sympathize with the horror the hero feels when he eventually discovers the true meaning of his life: to be the central player in a drama conceived and devised by someone else.

Part of this, of course, is a horror at the deception involved — something that arouses deep fears that may go back to early childhood. Think of the trusting child, encouraged to leave the mince pie and the glass of brandy by the fire for Santa, who wakes at night and creeps downstairs to find mummy slumped in the armchair by the fire with her feet up, munching and sipping and chuckling. There is sudden shift of perspective here, which, as in the Truman case, produces a sense of vertigo as the solid floor of meaning gives way beneath our feet. In the terms explored by Jacques Lacan, the child's former ideal of his life as nourished and harmonious now carries a charge of terror he cannot fully understand — he is plunged into a world in which "the good itself appears as a grimace of the real."⁶ But even if the mother is a genuinely loving parent, who had planned to find a tactful way of praising and rewarding the little one's thoughtful action in providing for Santa's visit, misgivings remain. In adult terms, none of us wants the meaning of our lives to depend on a superior agent

³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* [*Brat'ya Karamazovy*, 1880], Bk 5, ch. 4.

⁴ As David Hume apparently was: "such is the disorder and confusion in human affairs, that no perfect or regular distribution of happiness and misery is ever, in this life, to be expected. Not only are the goods of fortune, and the endowments of the body ... unequally divided between the virtuous and the vicious, but even the mind itself partakes, in some degree, of this disorder ... In a word, human life is more governed by fortune than by reason." From "The Sceptic", in *Essays Moral and Political*, Vol. 2 [1742], last four paragraphs; repr. in Hume, *Selected Essays*, ed. S. Copley and A. Edgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 111-2. The passage is cited, with interesting further reflections, in John Kekes, *The Human Condition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 14.

⁵ Directed by Peter Weir and written by Andrew Niccol, Paramount Pictures, 1998.

⁶ J. Rajchman, *Truth and Eros: Foucault, Lacan, and the question of ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 55. See further J. Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 4, § 7.

whose purposes are at least partly opaque to us. For better or worse, we want to determine our own conditions for meaning; we want the right to map out the direction of our lives by reference to our own “conception of the good”,⁷ not someone else’s, however benign they may be.

The challenge, in short, is that the kind of world picture presupposed in Christian theism not only fails to support the meaningfulness of human life, but actually erodes it. By making our ultimate goals subordinate to another’s purposes, it alienates us from our own autonomous human sources of meaning. Let us, for short, call this the *alienation* objection. How might a defender of a theistic, or more specifically a Christian, world-picture respond to it? One might perhaps tackle the problem ‘from the theistic end’, as it were, by underlining the characteristics that distinguish God from our imagined alien gene manipulators, or from the morally ambiguous Director in *The Truman Show*. One could reflect on the surpassing love and graciousness of God as conceived in traditional Christian theism, and endeavour to show that the purposes of such a God, properly understood, will not be threatening to our authentic human aspirations to live free and meaningful lives. But while I have no principled objections to such a ‘top-down’ strategy, I propose, in the context of the secularist challenge we are considering, that it may be more productive to start from the ‘bottom up’, or from the human end, as it were, by looking at the Christian paradigm of a meaningful human life, exemplified in the life of Jesus of Nazareth as portrayed in the New Testament, and asking how the life so described actually matches up when measured against secular conceptions of meaningfulness. The emerging contrasts between Christian and secularist models of what makes for a meaningful life will, I hope, help us to see why the Christian model is not after all as alienating as the secularist challenge suggests.

2. *Human models of meaning and the resources of Christianity*

A brief word about methodology may be in order at this point. Large numbers of contemporary philosophers will no doubt be resistant to the very idea of investigating the question a meaningful life by drawing on scriptural and other resources stemming from the Christian tradition. Yet given that the writings and traditions relating to the life of Christ offer, on any showing, an ethically rich set of materials that have been highly influential in the development of Western thinking about meaning and morality, it is surely hard to deny that they qualify as a legitimate resource for reflection on the question of good and meaningful life. To ignore such materials, or treat them as off-limits, as is increasingly done by moral philosophers in large swathes of the anglophone academic world, risks looking like an arbitrary impoverishment of the debate.

For (apart from mere conformity to prevailing academic fashion) what reason could there be for such blanket exclusion of Christian materials from discussion of issues such as the meaning of life? One possible explanation might be the growing influence of the naturalist paradigm that leads many philosophers to regard anything stemming from the Christian worldview as irredeemably tainted with “spooky” or supernaturalist assumptions.⁸ But even an unconditional allegiance to the naturalist paradigm would not justify the blanket exclusion of the sources in question. For even if the theistic worldview that underlies these materials is regarded as false, that cannot in itself be a decisive reason for inferring that they have nothing

⁷ Cf. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), §24.

⁸ For this typical (in our contemporary philosophical culture) aversion to theism as “spooky”, see for example O. Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem. Meaning in a Material World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), Ch. 1, where there is general rejection of “non-natural, occult or supernatural causes or forces.” (p. 2), and an associated claim that the study of human beings should concern itself with “the thinking and being of social animals, not collections of radically autonomous Cartesian agents, not of beings running on *Geist*— on spiritual fuel in the spooky sense.” (p. 3).

to say about the human condition— any more than it would be defensible for a modern moral philosopher to ignore the works of Aeschylus or Sophocles on the grounds that they violate the tenets of naturalism by referring to the deities of the Greek pantheon.⁹ Others may object to the use of scriptural sources on the grounds that, in so far as they claim to reflect divine revelation, they by their very nature take us outside the proper province of rational philosophical inquiry. Yet this kind of scruple does not stand up to scrutiny, since it is clearly possible to refer to biblical sources without assuming that they are divinely inspired, or that the events they record are the product of divine influence or intervention.¹⁰

With this preamble, let us now turn to the protagonist of the gospel narratives. Considered in purely human terms, did this man have a good and meaningful life? Part of the answer to this is straightforward, and can be readily taken on board by many secularists. He ‘went about doing good’;¹¹ he had compassion on his fellow-men;¹² he healed the sick;¹³ he reached out to pariahs and those who were ostracised;¹⁴ he preached forgiveness and love.¹⁵ Now meaningfulness is an inescapably evaluative notion: to describe a life as meaningful is at the very least to commend it as a good life, though precisely what are the requisite ingredients of such a life may be unclear. But at least one aspect of a life that is widely accepted as centrally important in this context is its moral worth;¹⁶ and once this is granted, it would be difficult or impossible to deny that much of what Jesus did and achieved in these respects adds to the case for saying his life counts as a meaningful, even a deeply meaningful, human life. If we count the life of Mother Theresa as meaningful, if we count the life of Albert Schweitzer or William Wilberforce as meaningful, then it would be absurd to deny at the very least an equal measure of meaningfulness to the life of Jesus.

Moral worth, however, while it is widely regarded as an important ingredient in a meaningful human life, does not generally appear to be considered a sufficient condition for meaningfulness. At least according to one prevalent idea, some measure of success in one’s projects is also necessary. If someone devotes his life, however nobly and devotedly, to erecting a building (a hospital perhaps), which promptly collapses as soon as it is completed, then we might be inclined to say that his labour was futile, or that, as far as this project was concerned, he lived in vain.¹⁷ Sisyphus, Albert Camus’s symbol of futility, was condemned to a

⁹ See further J. Cottingham, ‘Impartiality and Ethical Formation,’ in B. Feltham and J. Cottingham (eds), *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships and the Wider World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 65-83, esp. p. 67, note 4.

¹⁰ In this sort of context, Eleonore Stump’s observation that one may examine biblical narratives without begging any questions about whether they are divinely revealed seems to me obviously correct. See E. Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. xx. The New Testament writers, to be sure, portray Jesus as the Son of God, which some philosophers may immediately feel is enough to disqualify the stories about him from the status of legitimate sources for philosophical discussion. But here it may be just worth reminding ourselves that the characteristic orientation of Christianity is precisely and distinctively human; for the figure who is at the centre of the story is someone whom the vast majority of Christians (however elaborate their theology may be in other respects, and however ‘high’ a Christological stance they may take) all acknowledge to have been fully and completely human (cf. Hebrews 4:15).

¹¹ Acts 10:38

¹² Mark 6:34

¹³ Matthew 14:14

¹⁴ See for example Luke 19:2-9 (Zacchaeus); John 4:7-22 (the Samaritan woman).

¹⁵ Matthew 18:22 (forgiveness until seventy times seven); John 13:34 (the love commandment).

¹⁶ For a defence of the view that moral worth is a vital ingredient of the meaningful life, see J. Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), ch.1, penultimate section. For the opposing view, see John Kekes, *Pluralism in Philosophy: Changing the Subject* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 102.

¹⁷ See further Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, ch. 3, second section.

repetitive task that was so designed that it could never be successful. And although Camus himself famously declared that, as Sisyphus turns to walk downhill to resume his pointless labour, “we must imagine him as happy”,¹⁸ this seems to be a piece of absurdism, or a declaration of defiance in the face of futility, rather than an affirmation of the true meaningfulness of Sisyphus’ situation.

Success appears to be a signal bestower of meaning; it is something to look back on as one reviews one’s life and asks if it makes any sense; and it is something that obituary writers advert to when they evaluate the meaning of a life as a whole. It is striking, moreover, that success in one’s projects is bound up, at least in many people’s eyes, with *esteem* — the kind of admiring recognition from one’s peers or fellow-citizens that characteristically follows in the wake of success. In the Aristotelian blueprint for a fulfilled and worthwhile life, esteem is central. The type whom Aristotle upholds as an ideal, the *megalopsychos*, or ‘great-souled man’, takes a legitimate pride in his success, and enjoys the esteem and honour that are due to his status and achievements.¹⁹ Notice by the way that, despite what is sometimes alleged, the attitudes that Aristotle commends here need not be a matter of selfish pride or egoism; Aristotle observes that the *megalopsychos* is “eager to help others”²⁰ — a notion that arguably supports the case for regarding the virtue of *megalopsychia* as an authentic virtue. Similarly, the man possessed of the closely allied virtue of *megaloprepeia* or “magnificence” attracts praise, says Aristotle, not just for his lavish lifestyle and impressively furnished home, but also because of the expenditure he devotes to public works that benefit the city.²¹ Aristotle’s ideal, in short, is of a virtuous person who is esteemed and successful in what he does; and all this taken together seems to make his life a genuinely meaningful one.

The way Aristotle develops his account of the virtues of *megalopsychia* and *megaloprepeia*, and of the “grandeur and distinction”²² that follow in their wake, puts us partly in mind of the aristocratic status enjoyed by the medieval nobleman; it is bound up with occupying a public role as someone who is looked up to, someone above the ordinary, someone admired and respected for his achievements and the splendid way of life that goes with them. It follows, of course, that this status cannot be something achievable by everyone, since the very concept of this kind of excellence presupposes that only a minority could attain it. But it would be wrong to conclude that the underlying idea of achievement as an ingredient in the meaningful life is obsolete in our more democratic age. On the contrary, the Aristotelian conception seems to point us towards an important generator of meaningfulness, which might plausibly be argued to be a necessary ingredient for any meaningful life. Arguably, every human being needs to excel at something in order to be able to feel his or her life has meaning. Whatever one’s role or station in society, it seems that there must be something to take pride in, something that attracts the esteem of others. Lack of achievement, inability to succeed or distinguish oneself in any enterprise, drabness, mediocrity ... all these seem corrosive of meaning. And as for failure, serious loss of esteem, disgrace and public scorn — these all seem to be the markers of a life that has lost its title to meaningfulness, or at any rate has lost a major ingredient in the meaningful life.

How does the reported life of Jesus of Nazareth measure up against this standard? The answer seems to be that *prima facie* it falls far short of it.²³ The words of Isaiah Chapter 53,

¹⁸ “*Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux*”; Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* [*Le mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942], transl. J. O’Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955, rev. 2000), p. 111.

¹⁹ “The great-souled man is concerned with honour, because he claims it as his due, and deservedly.” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [325 BC], Bk IV, ch. 3, 1123b 23.

²⁰ *hypêretein prothumôs*; *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1124b18.

²¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk IV, ch. 2, 1122b20-24.

²² *megethos kai axioma*, 1122b33.

²³ At least if the honour and renown, understood in the standard or ‘Aristotelian’ way, are the criteria. Eleonore Stump makes an interesting distinction between two sense of ‘glory’ and ‘glorious’ – the first

widely taken to prefigure the life of Christ, declare that he was “despised and afflicted of men”. He had “had no form nor comeliness, that we should look upon him, nor appearance that we should delight in him.” Public esteem and admiration were precisely *not* Christ’s goals, nor what he actually achieved — certainly not at the culmination of his life, when he was forsaken by his closest friends, tortured, and executed as a criminal. What is more, his teaching, his conception of virtue, went radically against the Aristotelian ideal. He told his disciples that “the first shall be last, and the last first” — perhaps the most unAristotelian declaration ever uttered.²⁴ And on the night of his betrayal, he enacted a physical representation of this by washing his disciples feet — an action normally performed by slaves (and certainly something utterly unintelligible in terms of the standards cultivated by Aristotle’s *megalopsychos*). “Do you understand what I have done?”, he asked them.²⁵ How do we understand it?

It is easy to give a glib answer, and parrot something about the “lesson of humility”. But this is a million miles from coherently incorporating into our lives the idea that putting oneself last, humbling oneself in this way, could be the basis for a meaningful life. The reality, surely, is that the Aristotelian ideal, the ideal of excellence, esteem and success, is the one that still has the hold over us, and, whether we like to acknowledge it or not, holds the key to some of our strongest convictions about meaning. Academics are perhaps particularly prone to deceive themselves in this area, since they may congratulate themselves on being relatively free from the addictions to power and wealth that are found in some areas of the business and commercial world. But one only has to look at how notions like ‘distinction’ and ‘honour’ operate in academic circles to see how entrenched is the success-based ethic.²⁶ This is not just a matter of the zeal with which academics compete for titles and honours, or the enthusiasm with which they bestow on each other honorific titles such as “distinguished Chair of X”. At a deeper ethical and psychological level, we find it very hard to let go of excellence and esteem as the basic framework for meaning. Morality, to be sure, also enters into the picture (as noted above), and functions as an important constraint on how far success is allowed to determine meaning (so that someone who used their success to persecute or abuse colleagues would probably be judged to have a less integrated and meaningful life than someone who behaved decently and honourably). But abasing oneself, putting oneself last, and anything radically self-sacrificial enough to put one’s health or wellbeing seriously at risk for the sake of others — these are simply not notions that practically enter into our conceptions of a valuable and meaningful life (by ‘practically’ I mean in such a way as to make a difference to conduct, as opposed to in a purely verbal, or ‘lip-service’ kind of way).

This last claim may seem exaggerated, and requires some qualification. The case of self-sacrifice in wartime, for example, might be cited as something we regard as contributing

being connected with this notion of having renown, the second implying that the life or action in question has “intrinsic excellence or refulgent splendor”, with no implications about public recognition or honour.

²⁴ Matthew 20:16. See also the injunction in Luke not to take the place of honour at table (14:10). Though the end of the story does indicate that such self-effacement may receive public recognition, the general moral, as with many of the recommendations of Christ (such as the advice to pray and give alms in a secret or discretely (Matthew 6:4) amounts to a strong repudiation of the Aristotelian style quest for public honour and recognition.

²⁵ John 13:12.

²⁶ The enormously expensive 2008 ‘Research Assessment Exercise’, used by the British government to determine university funding throughout the UK, required each member of each academic department, as part of their submission, to list ‘evidence of esteem’ in the form of honours and other indicators of prestige. Just how corrupting this sort of thing was for academic life in early twenty-first-century Britain will no doubt be the subject of study by future academics (unless they are too busy cataloguing their own esteem indicators to undertake any actual research).

to the meaningfulness of a life, even though it involves putting oneself seriously at risk. But military valour and self-sacrifice are still very much the subject of public esteem and honour, and are signally rewarded as such, by praise and respect and recognition award of medals and decorations. There is of course more to be said than this, and we shall need to return to the case of self-sacrifice later; but for the moment the salient point about the role of esteem in the prevailing conception of a meaningful life seems to stand. To put it very crudely, we aspire to a meaningful life, but we do *not* aspire to see others honoured before us, to take second place, to sacrifice the earned fruits of our success to others, let alone to risk being despised or scorned. We may value 'humility', but at best this normally tends to come down to not much more than a becoming and decorous modesty when accepting honours and accolades; it is certainly not something most of us would strive after to the point where it was dangerously threatening to our quest for esteem.

The images of complete "rebirth" that figure in the Gospels²⁷ say something about the yawning gulf between our ordinary secular conceptions of a worthwhile and meaningful life, and the Christian picture. Like the young man who "went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions",²⁸ we begin to see that what we are offered by the Christian message is not something that can enhance or complement or otherwise enrich our ordinary success-based conception of meaningfulness, but rather something that overturns it. And it is important to see that morality, construed in the ordinary way as common-sense morality, does not bridge that gulf. Common-sense morality enhances meaningfulness in a fairly comfortable way: it invites or requires us not to be too greedy, to respect the rights of others in enjoying our success and the fruits of our labours, to keep the basic requirements of legal and moral duty, as indeed the rich young man had done, since he reported, no doubt truthfully, that all his life he had scrupulously observed all the Commandments. His sorrowful departure at the end of the story, notwithstanding his genuine conformity to the ordinary demands of morality, signals that he cannot meet the challenge of the radically new standard of meaningfulness without being prepared to undergo a complete transformation — a Gestalt switch that will allow the whole framework of meaning to be seen afresh, in a quite different shape. During the next section we will aim to discern, albeit only in a crude and preliminary way, some of the outlines of that new shape.

3. Obedience and autonomy

In order to uncover the root of the difficulty in fitting the Christian conception of a meaningful life into our standard common-sense conception (the one, as we have seen, that goes back at least to Aristotle), we need to return to our opening theme of the repugnance we feel about finding meaning via 'alien' purposes — those envisaged or chosen not by us but by someone else. The self-sacrificial life of Christ, as characterised in the Gospels, does at first sight seem to offer hostages to just this kind of 'alienation'. The most famous of his prayers, the Lord's Prayer, designed for daily use, and clearly intended to structure the basic framework for the Christian life, contains what appears to be an essentially submissive plea "Thy Will Be Done".²⁹ And in the supreme crisis of his life, Jesus is reported by all three synoptic gospel writers to have prayed that he would be spared the coming ordeal, but to have added the crucial proviso "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."³⁰

²⁷ John 3:3. Cf. I Peter 3:23.

²⁸ Matthew 19:22

²⁹ Matthew 6:10. The Lucan version (11:2-4) omits this clause.

³⁰ Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42.

Deliberately subordinating one's will to that of another seems on the face of it a paradigm of alienation or, in Kantian terms, of heteronomy.³¹ So far from our will aspiring to be, in Kant's terminology, *selbstgesetzgebend*, giving the law itself, it appears to be asked to turn in precisely the opposite direction, and submit to the injunctions of another.³² Hence, in so far as we nowadays identify the meaningful life with the autonomous life, with the life structured around the agent's own freely chosen "projects",³³ there again seems to be a striking divergence from the Christian conception of meaningfulness. The Kantian insistence on the value of autonomy and the sovereignty of the individual will seems to be reinforced, in our contemporary culture, by a whole barrage of progressive attitudes that have emerged from these Enlightenment roots. Thus the theologian Daphne Hampson underlines, from a feminist perspective, the damaging effects of the kind of self-effacement that the Christian ideal apparently enjoins: "Within the Judaeo-Christian tradition ... the relationship to God is at least potentially heteronomous, such that the human must be obedient to what he or she conceives to be God's will, rather than obeying his or her own conscience."³⁴ And from a broadly Freudian perspective, we find Jacques Lacan arguing that even within the individual psyche, subordination to the demands of the internalised Other can lead to a radical loss of autonomy: the "gourmandisme" of the Superego, with its ever more stringent demands for obedience, is never satisfied by anything less than total submission. Like a sinister parasite, the more you feed it, the more it wants.³⁵

Someone who is alienated in this way, it is implied, is someone who is adrift in a world without meaning. Instead of seeing herself as a self-determining being, proceeding along a path that she has chosen, towards goals that are her own, she feels instead a constant pressure to conform, to submit, to bend the will in a direction dictated by another. This is indeed a sinister picture. Yet something serious has gone wrong with our interpretation of the self-sacrificial life of Christ if we are inclined to interpret the prayer 'Thy will be done' along these lines. To enable us to glimpse an alternative and more compelling interpretation, we need to look at another saying of Christ, this time not from synoptic gospels, but from John: "I and the Father are one"³⁶

³¹ 'Whenever the will seeks the law that is to determine it anywhere else than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal law, and if therefore it goes outside itself and seeks this law in a property of any of its objects— the result is always heteronomy. In that case the will does not give itself the law; rather, the object gives the law to it, in virtue of its relation to the will' *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* [*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785], Ch 2; Akademie edition (Berlin: Reimer/De Gruyter, 1900–), Vol. IV, pp. 440; transl. T. E. Hill Jr and A. Zweig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 241.

³² Autonomy, for Kant, is 'the basis of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature', according to which our will must be considered as *selbstgesetzgebend* ('giving the law to itself'). *Groundwork*, Ch 2; Akademie edition. Vol. IV, pp. 436, 431; transl. Hill and Zweig, pp. 236, 232.

³³ Compare for example Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). The term 'projects' has come, in much contemporary ethics, to signal an entirely 'endogenous' conception of a worthwhile and meaningful human life; the idea is that we determine what is worthwhile by our own decision to pursue certain projects (or even more broadly, by choosing our own "conception of the good", in Rawls's phrase (see footnote 6, above). Thus Williams in the passage referred to, and elsewhere, makes it plain that he recognizes no 'external' sources of obligation or meaning, and that the only kind of ethical necessity or normativity he acknowledges is one that arises from the authentic choices of the agent to live a certain way, and to set himself certain projects. For some problems with this notion, see J. Cottingham, 'Integrity and Fragmentation', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 27, no 1 (2010), pp. 2-14.

³⁴ Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity* (London: SCM Press 1996; 2nd edn 2002), p. 137.

³⁵ Cf. Rajchman, *Truth and Eros*, p. 58.

³⁶ *ego kai ho pater hen esmen*, John 10:30.

Jesus' declared self-identification with God the Father, according to the fourth evangelist, provoked at the time an immediate and violent reaction ("they picked up stones to stone him"); and on any interpretation it raises a host of complex theological questions, which I have neither the space nor the expertise to discuss here. Fortunately, however, the present context requires us simply to be clear about the implications of Jesus' extraordinary claim for the issue of autonomy and heteronomy that is in question at the stage our argument has reached. In the same passage where he claims union with the Father, Jesus also claims to be loved by the Father: elsewhere, he announces his own reciprocal love for the Father, and does so, moreover, in a way that connects this love with his obedience and self-sacrifice.³⁷ The concepts of union, of love, and of sacrifice are thus closely connected in Johannine moral theology.

To explicate this further, it will be helpful to refer to the account of love found in Thomas Aquinas, according to which love requires two interconnected desires: the desire for the good of the beloved, and the desire for union with the beloved (here I draw heavily on the persuasive interpretation of Eleonore Stump).³⁸ To enjoy union with someone, as Stump explicates it, involves "significant personal presence and mutual closeness",³⁹ and this in turn implies a certain mutual openness, where the parties involved are ready to stand before each other, as they are, with nothing concealed, dissimulated or hidden. Such complex personal openness and closeness is difficult or impossible for the conflicted person, who has parts of himself that he would prefer to conceal from the other (and perhaps even from himself). So for two people to be truly and deeply united they must each be possessed of a certain wholeheartedness and integrity; and this, in the Thomistic way of thinking, entails a further connection with the good, since internal integration is ultimately possible only for someone who wholeheartedly desires the good.⁴⁰ From all this it follows that Aquinas's conception of love is radically at odds with some popular conceptions of love, where one may be passionately attracted to someone, or desire to possess them or be near them, without necessarily sharing their values, and without necessarily desiring their ultimate good. For Aquinas, love has a profoundly moral dimension: it has a deep connection with the good (and hence, ultimately with God). On this Thomistic view, as Stump construes it, people can be "ultimately and deeply united with each other only if they are united in goodness."⁴¹ Read in that light, claim of Jesus to enjoy a reciprocal loving union with the Father is not just a 'psychological' (in the sense of a merely affective) claim about mutual desire or caring, but has additional inherently moral implications about the goodness of the participants in the union, and the resulting convergence of ends. The picture that emerges from this is already one that is incompatible with the kind of tension or alienation envisaged in the model of bending one's desires to those of another, or submitting to an alien will. In loving the Father, and praying for his will to be fulfilled, Christ is orienting himself towards, and seeking to unite himself with, what is his own truest and deepest good.

³⁷ John 10:17 and 14:31.

³⁸ Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, Ch. 5, p. 91. Stump's account is based on various theses of Aquinas: that the ultimate proper object of love is God (*Summa theologiae* [1266-73, hereafter 'ST'], Ia IIae, qu. 26, art. 1; that God is identical with his goodness (ST, Ia, qu. 3-6); and hence that the ultimate proper object of love is goodness (cf. ST Ia IIae, qu. 27).

³⁹ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, p. 127.

⁴⁰ Can one be integrated in the wholehearted pursuit of evil? This is a complex question which cannot be examined here; but there are good reasons (implicitly explored for example in Milton's portrayal of Satan (in *Paradise Lost*, 1668) or by C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* (1942)) for supposing that the pursuit of evil inherently carries with it a certain tension or internal dissonance. For Stump's arguments on this score, see *Wandering in Darkness*, pp. 125-6

⁴¹ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, p. 95.

The feature of the Aquinas-Stump account that is worth underlining as most salient and relevant for present purposes is the idea that *internal integration* is a vital requirement for two parties truly to love each other. If you desire union with someone, you desire to be intimately close and personally present to them; but such closeness is undermined if one of the parties suffers from internal conflict or psychic dissonance.⁴² This is connected with the fact that love, on this Thomistic conception, cannot achieve its ends unless the good of the beloved person is realised; yet the good for a person requires internal integration, a wholehearted and unconflicted desire for the good.⁴³ (This latter claim is one which in any case has a strong inherent plausibility, since to be internally divided or conflicted, or to be in doubt about what one truly and deeply wants, is self-evidently damaging to the equilibrium and tranquillity necessary for a fulfilled life.) The bearing of these points on the question of autonomy versus heteronomy should now be clear. Heteronomy is always the result external force or manipulation, or internal conflict. The sense the agent has of not being in control arises from the fact that his rational perception of the good is counterbalanced or overridden either by an external power or, from the inside, by some sensual passion or contingent desire that is at odds with his rational perception. Hence, so far from rationally ‘giving the law to himself’, he is dictated to by the recalcitrant or disordered passion that draws him in an opposite direction to reason.⁴⁴ By contrast, the loving ‘submission’ to God, or the good, envisaged in the Johannine picture is Christ’s self-orientation towards that wherein his own deepest good lies and that which he has supreme and unequivocal reason to seek; so he is able to say, even at the moment of his trial where he will be handed over to torture and death, “for this I came into the world.”⁴⁵

In the light of this we can see that the self-sacrificial actions of Christ are the very opposite of heteronomous or self-alienated, but are rather the actions of someone whose internal life is fully integrated around a wholehearted desire for, and union with, the good. None of this, of course, means that self-orientation towards the good is easy. The desperate struggle of Christ at Gethsemane tells us, what we knew already, that for human beings — even for one whom we take to be a paradigm of goodness — pain and humiliation and death are things we instinctively dread and struggle to avoid. But can a life that is, in spite of these heavy costs, resolutely oriented to the good, still be a meaningful life? The declaration of Jesus before Pilate just quoted (“for this I came into the world”) is suggestive of a strong sense of purpose; and on any showing there is a strong link between a sense of purpose in life and a sense of its meaningfulness. Yet we cannot stop there without considering further the terrible costs that this particular purpose, namely that of witnessing to the truth and uniting oneself with the good, may carry in its wake. Do such costs count against the overall meaningfulness of a life? To clarify the answer to this question, our next and penultimate section will compare the case of Jesus with two other figures, one fictional, the other from real life, whose reported lives and deaths afford ample scope for reflecting on what makes human existence meaningful.

4. *Dignity, Esteem and Meaning*

Our first example is that of Macbeth in Shakespeare’s famous tragedy. In the final act of the drama, Macbeth feels, as the net closes in on him, a horrible sense that his life is wholly meaningless. It has become

⁴² Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, p. 130.

⁴³ Compare Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, p. 100.

⁴⁴ See the references to Kant at notes 30 and 31, above.

⁴⁵ John 18:37. The verse continues “... to bear witness to the truth”; but I take it that the kind of witness to the truth envisaged is not mere allegiance to certain correct propositional claims, but implies a wholehearted orientation towards the goodness and truth that is at the heart of reality.

a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
signifying nothing.⁴⁶

It is striking that this sense of futility is bound up with the severe loss of esteem that dogs Macbeth as his power slips away. As he complains to his paid servant Seyton, one of the few people who will now willingly talk to him,

I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have, but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not.⁴⁷

As this speech shows, Macbeth is firmly wedded to the 'Aristotelian' or success-oriented conception of a worthwhile and meaningful life, which (as suggested earlier) we all to some extent share. What depresses him above all is that the esteem and other rewards of success, which he had looked to in his struggle for the crown, will now not after all be forthcoming.

But, as so often with Shakespeare, there is a more complex point to be discerned. Suppose Macbeth had succeeded in defeating his enemies, and ended up (as no doubt many tyrants have done in history) surrounded by a burgeoning family, bevvies of admiring courtiers, and all the trappings of power. Could he have looked back on his life as meaningful? The answer, based on Shakespeare's text, is a resounding "no". For as the play progresses it has been made abundantly clear that, long before his final plunge into depression and defeat, Macbeth's chance for a meaningful life has been destroyed by the corruption of evil. By allowing his ambition to turn him down the path towards treachery and murder, Macbeth has alienated himself from the goodness that is the true source of human wellbeing. And hence, as he himself vividly glimpses, in a famous speech after the killing of Duncan, not only has he murdered another human being, but he has destroyed his own tranquillity — "Macbeth hath murdered sleep."⁴⁸

It is instructive to compare what happens to Macbeth with the more dignified death of a morally far superior character, that of Socrates. Plato presents Socrates' calm acceptance of the end in a very noble light;⁴⁹ and it is a story that has impressed many as an exemplar of an unjust death stoically endured. The death was self-evidently a courageous one; but it is interesting to see how far it falls short of the model of submission to the good laid down by Christ. There is nothing in Socrates' demeanour as portrayed by Plato that suggests humility; indeed, quite the reverse is implied by the humorous but deliberately goading proposal Socrates makes at his trial (when asked to propose an alternative to the death penalty demanded by the prosecution), namely that he should be fed and clothed at the state's expense.⁵⁰ Essentially, Socrates remains the 'superior' intellectual, displaying his own cleverness, tying up his opponents in logical knots, calmly confident of his own self-sufficient worth and merit. So although he is quite free from the corruption that erodes Macbeth's sense of meaning, and although his death clearly manifests great virtue — wisdom, resolution,

⁴⁶ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* [c. 1605], Act 5, scene 5.

⁴⁷ *Macbeth*, Act 5, scene 2.

⁴⁸ *Macbeth*, Act 2, scene 2.

⁴⁹ See Socrates closing speech in Plato, *Crito* [c. 390 BC], 52e-54d.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Apology* [c. 390 BC], 36e1-3.

courage — it is still plausible to conjecture that his sense of his life as meaningful remains, at least in part, linked to the esteem-oriented values of the kind later to be expounded by Aristotle. And although he suffers the grave harm of unjust conviction and execution, it is a significant point in the Platonic narrative that his end is accompanied by just those marks of esteem that Macbeth had vainly longed for — the admiring respect of ‘troops of friends’, or at least a group of respected friends, whose admiration he values, who remain with him to support his last hours.

The self-sacrifice of Christ as described in the gospel narratives takes us onto a wholly different plane. While there is nothing about Socrates’ death that suggests a particularly loving or compassionate person,⁵¹ for Christ the identification with goodness and love is the supreme generator of meaning: “for this I came into the world.” That this identification is complete and perfect is shown by the fact that he holds fast to it in the face of betrayal, total humiliation, utter loneliness, desertion by his closest friends, and the most terrible physical agony.

Tying some of these threads together, what can be learnt from these examples about the Christian conception of a meaningful life, or, in the terms of this volume’s title, how the “cross-shaped life” can be regarded as an exemplar of meaningfulness? If we honestly interrogate our own aspirations for our own lives, then it seems we will find that almost every natural human instinct encourages us to cling on to the success-oriented conception of meaning, and to its associated goods of comfort, dignity, recognition and esteem. We want our lives to be crowned by success, by the favourable outcome of our chosen projects, and when we finally have to die, we want our deaths to be dignified, like that of Socrates, enabling us to preserve till the last moment our sense of ourselves as of being in charge of our lives, and as enjoying the respect and admiration of others.⁵² If the achievements we look back on are recognised to be significant, always with the proviso that we have been able in the main to conduct ourselves virtuously and decently, then we may be inclined to say, that the overall result is about as meaningful as a human life can get.

Such a picture, it must honestly be admitted, has very considerable attractions. What about the diametrically opposed picture, that of the self-sacrificial suffering of Christ? One would certainly not want to claim that failure in the eyes of men, humiliation, degradation and scorn are candidates for bestowers of meaning that can rival the esteem-oriented candidates just enumerated — nor is it any part of this argument to suggest as much. That would be a grotesque and perverse interpretation of what the Christian message is saying about the sacrifice of Christ. But what these terrible features of Christ’s last hours do underline is that his self-sacrificial death gives us a conception of a meaningful human existence that is wholly orthogonal to the values associated with worldly success and esteem.⁵³ The essence of what makes his life a meaningful one is that it is a manifestation of

⁵¹ Many of the concerns Socrates cites when considering whether to avoid death by leaving Athens are in self-oriented ones connected with esteem and honour: “what a life should I lead, at my age, wandering from city to city, living in ever-changing exile, and always being driven out!” (*Apology* 37d4-6; cf. *Crito* 53e). In fairness, however, it should be added that what appears to be his overriding concern is that in exile he might be prevented from practicing philosophy (“conversing daily about virtue”), and thereby deprived of “the greatest good of man” (*Apology* 38a2); this is arguably closer to a concern for the good for its own sake.

⁵² It is significant that Mary Warnock, in the most recent instalment of her advocacy of euthanasia or, as she prefers to term it, “assisted dying”, plainly regards the loss of autonomy and being “in charge of one’s life” as one the gravest of ills. See M. Warnock, *Dishonest to God* (London: Continuum, 2010), ch. 2, pp. 46ff; and compare her strong resistance to the use of the term “vulnerable” of elderly patients, which she regards as “oppressive” (pp. 62ff).

⁵³ The Islamic retelling of the story of the Crucifixion, according to which (Qur’an, sura 4 (An-Nisa) ayat 157-158) Jesus himself was not killed but (on one interpretation of the text) a substitute, might

the purest and most wholehearted love. For as Christ explains when he gives his disciples the command to love each other, “greater love has no man than this, to lay down his life for his friends”.⁵⁴ Love, on this picture, is the supreme bestower of meaning. And of course, on the Christian picture, it is our source and our destination: the power that made us, and the end for which we were made. But this end is not an alien or imposed goal, but is the key to our own deepest wellbeing.

Though the model of love as the source of meaning takes us onto a different plane from the values associated with worldly success and esteem, it does not follow that success and esteem are completely repudiated, or wholly disallowed as human goods. They may bring their rewards — as Christ actually says of those who earn esteem from their fellows;⁵⁵ and although the point of the passage in question is to denounce the hypocrites whose concern for externals is not matched by inner purity, it is arguably left open whether the relevant goals, if not pursued hypocritically or vaingloriously, can be life-enhancing. Christ’s own parable of the talents strongly suggests that it is perfectly proper, indeed required of us, that we make the best use of the talents we have been given, and endeavour to achieve something with them – something that, as in the parable, will fittingly attract approval and indeed tangible rewards.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the readiness of Christ to sacrifice honour and esteem completely, and endure their complete opposite, shame and scorn, in the name of love, tells us that they are not, and cannot be, the ultimate bestowers of meaning. This is surely part of what is implied in Christ’s saying “what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul.”⁵⁷ What the Christian message is telling us is that Christ’s life is meaningful precisely and exactly because it is a life of perfect humility and love; and that this (however imperfectly we may be able to pursue it) must be the key to meaningfulness in the lives of each of us. The other success-oriented goods referred to may be, as far as they go, authentic goods; but in the absence of love, as St Paul’s celebrated and masterful analysis tells us, they simply lose their significance. However magnificent a person’s gifts and achievements, if he lacks love, his life is just meaningless noise: he becomes merely a “sounding gong”, or a “tinkling symbol”.⁵⁸

be construed as one way of ensuring that the dignity and esteem due the Messiah is not sullied by his enduring an ignominious death. From a Christian perspective (as the argument of the present essay implies), this retelling completely misses the meaning of the events as recounted in the Gospels.

⁵⁴ The ‘love commandment’ (“a new commandment give I unto you: love one another as I have loved you” John 13:34) comes immediately after the foot-washing episode at the Last Supper; the dictum about no greater love (15:13) comes in the Johannine account Jesus’s long final discourse at the same event.

⁵⁵ “Truly I say to you, they have their reward.” Matthew 6:2.

⁵⁶ Matthew 25:14-30.

⁵⁷ Mark 8:36.

⁵⁸ I Corinthians 13:1. Why it may be asked, should love and self-sacrifice be the *supreme* path to meaning? Why should there not be plenty of other authentic goals that confer meaning and value on our existence? Why not go for a “pluralist” strategy, where Christian love is but one among many values that make our lives meaningful, and where following the Christian path is but one option among many routes that might claim our legitimate attention? Paul’s answer seems to be that love is the crucially necessary ingredient: without it, the other values become empty. But it need not follow that the Christian message is supposed to enjoin on us a monolithic value system, where we are simply ants in some utility hive, always required to maximize human happiness without any regard to our own welfare. As already mentioned, the parable of the talents acknowledges that legitimate value and meaning can be found in developing the talents we have been given. And it seems from other parts of the example of Christ that the demands of *agape*, selfless love for our fellow men, are not always supposed to trump more personal concerns: we know that Christ had close friends (for example Lazarus, and the ‘beloved disciple’), and it would be a negation of his humanity to turn him some kind of bloodless impartialist. For more on the connection between partial and impartial love, see Cottingham, “Impartiality and Ethical Formation.”

It is unlikely, I think, that anyone could offer a philosophical proof of these remarkable Christian claims. But they do perhaps receive some support from the way in which, on a personal and individual level, love can irradiate our lives with meaning. Parental love is perhaps the clearest and most powerful example here; and it may enable us to glimpse how every single human person could be so loved as a child of God;⁵⁹ and how one who was perfectly united to God could find supreme meaning in giving up everything for the sake of such love. The value of the humility that such love might require is, again, probably not something that could be philosophically demonstrated. But again, it receives some support from the dim sense we have, even as we pursue them, that esteem and grandeur are fleeting and deceptive prizes, dangerously linked to pride, the opposite of humility; and that pride, the desire to exalt ourselves and rise above others, is ultimately corrosive of our wellbeing.⁶⁰

5. Coda: meaning and the triumph of the good

As befits a contribution to a volume concerned with the “cross-shaped life”, a good deal of our discussion has focused on the supreme sacrifice of Christ, his death and passion. But it would be wrong to conclude our assessment of Christian conceptions of meaningfulness without facing the question of what more *by way of meaningfulness* is contributed by the Resurrection. It may be useful here to call to mind our opening parable of the benevolent aliens who observed the sufferings and tribulations of humans from a distance, but then whisked them away after death to a blissful afterlife. In the light of our intuitive reactions to this story, we may want to be very wary of saying that the Resurrection of Christ makes everything “all right”, let alone that it retrospectively confers meaning on what would, otherwise, have been a meaningless horror. An interpretation of the Resurrection as in itself meaning-bestowing seems to have appealed to those commentators who argue in effect that the point of the Resurrection is that it ensures the story has a happy ending, and that goodness finally triumphs.⁶¹ But this seems to me to risk serious problems, if it turns out to be a way of seeking to combine the unconditional love-based conception of meaning with the success-oriented one. Adapting a terminology insightfully deployed by Mark Johnston (in a slightly different context), we may say that such a solution incurs the suspicion of being motivated by what Johnston calls “spiritual materialism”: the desire to have our cake and eat it, to subscribe to the redemptive value of pure love and self-sacrifice, yet retain our allegiance to our ordinary mundane bestowers of meaning — security, comfort, esteem, success — by wheeling in the magical intervention of supernatural forces to guarantee them.⁶² This, if you like, is a way of reducing the costs of unconditional love for the good, or God, by conveniently reconciling it with of our ordinary desires for success and personal triumph.

Whatever the Resurrection may mean, it cannot mean that. The meaning of Christ’s self-sacrificial life and death surely cannot be read off, as it were, from the fact of his post-mortem victory *per se*, for that would be an all too convenient resolution, an altogether too tidy construal of the mystery of redemptive love and suffering. Rather, the meaning of Christ’s death and passion must lie somewhere in the fact that human beings are made for love, which is our greatest good; that love requires self-sacrifice; and that here lies the ultimate purpose of our lives. One way of putting this interpretation would be to say that on the Christian worldview the Cross and the Resurrection are wholly inseparable. And indeed

⁵⁹ As the Judaeo-Christian tradition asserts. See Psalm 103:13: “As a father pitieth his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;” and compare Luke 15:22-24 (the Prodigal Son).

⁶⁰ This theme is powerfully explored in the chapter on pride and humility in C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* [1942-4] (London: Harper Collins 2002), Bk 3, ch. 8.

⁶¹ For a survey and critique of such ‘triumphalism’ (combined with a theologically rich discussion of the multiple layers of meaning in the Resurrection), see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), ch. 19.

⁶² See Mark Johnston, *Saving God* (Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 123-4.

the authentic Christian picture has never been that the Resurrection is a kind of external or logically detachable compensation for the Crucifixion. The Church's annual celebration of the mystery of the Triduum gives expression to the fact that the meaning of Easter Sunday is inextricably bound up with that of Good Friday, and vice versa.⁶³ The glorification of Christ by the Father, in other words, is not that which *confers* meaning on his life *ex post facto*, but rather that which honours the meaning that is *already there*, in the perfect life he led and the loving death he endured.⁶⁴

This may be a far harder message to assimilate, and a far harder conception of meaningfulness to take on board, than that offered by any crudely triumphalist interpretation. If we take the exemplar of Christ as the highest guide to how our lives can be meaningful, then there seems no avoiding the conclusion that meaning must be sought by following the path of love to the limit. The words of Christ seem all too clear on this point: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."⁶⁵ However hard, indeed terrifying, it may be, this message is consistent with the plausible moral that emerged from our opening parable of the aliens: that external interventions or retrospective adjustments cannot in themselves confer meaning (any more than an external ordinance can confer rightness on an act just by the mere fact of its being commanded).⁶⁶ So, to bring us back full circle, one of the underlying thoughts behind our original 'alienation objection' turns out to be in one sense correct. In a certain way meaningfulness must indeed arise from our own human choices — the work cannot all be done by someone else, nor guaranteed by any external intervention, however benign. If we want our lives to be fully meaningful, we have to decide to love "to the end", as Christ himself did.⁶⁷

It is important to see, however, that this result does not in any way reduce to the view of some secularists that we can make our lives meaningful simply by exercising our own autonomous choices. Reflection shows that meaningfulness must arise from the value antecedently possessed by the objects of our choice, not merely from exercise of the choice in itself. The mere adoption of "projects" cannot by itself confer meaning;⁶⁸ nor can even the fact of our love, however powerful, bestow meaning unless it is oriented towards an objective

⁶³ In the ancient Latin wording of the Third Preface for Easter, Christ is described as *agnus qui vivit semper occisus* (literally, "the lamb who lives forever slain"). Timothy Radcliffe aptly comments: "If the risen Lord did not still bear his wounds, then he would not have much to do with us now." T. Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 75.

⁶⁴ There is an analogy (albeit a very loose one) with the case of wartime sacrifice discussed earlier: the medals and other accolades, properly understood, do not bestow meaning on the valorous acts question, but honour the meaning and value that is already there.

⁶⁵ Luke 9:23.

⁶⁶ The parallel in brackets of course refers to the so-called "Euthyphro problem" (named after a dilemma first raised in Plato's *Euthyphro* [c. 390 BC]). The problem, in essence, is that the mere 'external' fact of divine approval or command cannot be what makes an action right, since, unless it is to be arbitrary, divine approval must presumably be given in virtue of some intrinsic feature of the action that already, as it were, makes it right, antecedently to the approval. See however Robert Adams, in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Ch. 7, for a plausible and widely accepted resolution of the problem.

⁶⁷ "He loved them to the end". John 13:1.

⁶⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche seems to have imagined that humans (of an exalted type) could somehow create meaning and value for themselves by some exalted act of will or choice; *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886], transl. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), §203. I have argued elsewhere that this is a thoroughly confused notion; see J. Cottingham, "The Good Life and the 'Radical Contingency of the Ethical' ", in D. Callcut (ed.), *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge, 2008), Ch. 2, pp. 25-43.

good that is not of our making.⁶⁹ If the Christian account is right, it is only by identifying and uniting ourselves with the pure and unconditional love that is the source of our being that there can arise a meaning that is not a matter of arbitrary choice or contingent preference, or liable to fluctuate with changing priorities or purposes, but which is entirely good and a proper object of rational and fully integrated desire. In conforming our will to this perfect and untainted love we have all that could possibly be needed to make our lives meaningful.

Yet it is all too clear that we cannot fully identify ourselves with this perfect love, as Christ did, because our human imperfections inevitably make us tainted with the drives of selfishness and the deceptive allure of worldly esteem. Only by being transformed can we achieve the meaning that is our true destiny; and of course, on the Christian view, the path to that transformation is somehow laid open by the loving sacrifice of Christ. As to precisely how this works, that may be beyond the power of philosophy alone fully to analyse or explicate. But that is no reason to close our minds and hearts to the possibility of such a lifegiving change.

⁶⁹ Harry Frankfurt, in a highly influential essay, has suggested that by loving we can, as it were, create for ourselves reasons which generate meaning, producing a sense of “liberation and enhancement”; H. G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 64. But in my view there are serious problems with what I take to be Frankfurt’s claim that my own choices and projects, just by representing my conception of who I am and what I care about, can of themselves give my life value and meaning; see Cottingham, ‘Integrity and Fragmentation,’ final section. For other but related problems, see the critique of Frankfurt by J. Suikkanen in his “The Possibility of Love-Independent Reasons,” *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 12 (2011): Issue. 1, Article 4.