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**AUTHENTICITY, INDIVIDUALITY, AND MORALITY: AN EXISTENTIALIST
INVESTIGATION INTO THE POSSIBILITY OF A MEANINGFUL EXISTENCE**

by

Ella Lorraine Boyd

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

PROFESSOR THIELKE

PROFESSOR WEINBERG

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CONTENTS

Abstract	3
Chapter One: While Searching for Meaning We Must Not Rely on Religion, Turning Away from Kierkegaard and, Instead, to Nietzsche	4
Chapter Two: The Dangers of Solely Pursuing Morality	22
Chapter Three: Splitting the Difference: If Not Moral Perfection, What Then, Do We Owe to Society?	
Conclusion	39
Bibliography	40

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the tension between individuality and morality with the goal of maximizing meaning in one's own life. Drawing from Nietzschean ideas of authenticity and flourishing as they relate to the individual, the Categorical Imperative is then introduced as a way to ensure one's own moral goodness within society. After accepting Sartre's theory of existentialism, and, with it, the idea that existence precedes essence, one can begin an investigation into this creation of meaning in their own life. First drawing from *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard's three life models are presented and, ultimately, dismissed in favor of Nietzsche's idea that the key to a meaningful existence is the pursuit of personal passions and the cultivation of authentic values. But, because self-development can be criticized as being selfish, one's moral duties to society are considered. By analyzing Susan Wolf's arguments in her essay, "Moral Saints," it is established that moral perfection is not worth striving for. Then, with Nietzsche's ideas of individuality still in mind, the two leading moral theories, Utilitarianism and Kantian theory, are examined in order to provide a more useful moral framework than striving for moral perfection. Ultimately, Kant's Categorical Imperative is chosen as the ideal principle through which to govern one's actions in life because it allows for moral goodness while still allowing for flourishing through the pursuit of personal passions.

CHAPTER ONE

While Searching for Meaning We Must Not Rely on Religion, Turning Away from Kierkegaard and, Instead, to Nietzsche

“They disgust me, the way they wait for death with as much passion as a traffic signal.”

-- Charles Bukowski

If you are alive, you may be interested in living life in a meaningful way. But determining what constitutes a meaningful life is a tricky matter, and, as such, this question has historically been at the forefront of philosophical investigation. However, life often appears meaningless. Suffering exists in abundance. There are no ultimate justifications for doing, well, anything, and the universe does little to provide answers. Existentialism can be defined as “the ethical theory that we ought to treat the freedom at the core of human existence as intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values,” (Webber). Thus, accepting existentialism provides a framework for further investigation into the question of what makes for a meaningful existence, and so, if one accepts existentialist philosophy, they can begin to explore and craft their own answer to this question.

I define my primary investigation question as follows: what constitutes a meaningful existence? And, what must, if anything, be considered other than living for ourselves? But here lies the existential dilemma which plagues humankind: if there is no inherent meaning, must we attempt to give our lives meaning ourselves, or do we turn to nihilists, believing in nothing at all? Or, like Kierkegaard, do we turn to God, and ideas of faith to lead us through existence? This essay negates Kierkegaard’s offer of faith as the ideal life model, and, instead, turns to

Nietzsche, who affirms that individuality, creative expression, and deviation from the herd are the values through which we ought to live. Nietzsche theorizes that in order to live a meaningful life, humans must pursue their deepest passions and fashion their own unique, meaningful existence. Though this manifests differently for every living person, and never existing in some people at all, setting personal goals and creating meaning through pursuing the highest version of oneself is a far superior model to that of faith, as proposed by Kierkegaard. Well, one may ask, why do we care if our lives are meaningful? Because, as Nietzsche points out, there may be much about life that is unknown. But what we do know is that we are alive. Through focusing on the here and now, and the one life we know we have, humans have an immense amount of freedom and agency over their own existences. And, to deny that is to deny life itself.

Existentialism is chosen as a starting point for this exploration because, unlike nihilism, which denies any possibility for meaning in life, or essentialism, which affirms that there is meaning, but meaning is given to us and is not chosen, existentialism affirms that there is meaning without producing a fixed answer to what this meaning may be. If, like existentialism theorizes, existence precedes essence, it is up to the free agent to create meaning in their own lives. If one does not accept existentialism, they also do not accept that a search for meaning is important or relevant to them at all, and this question is, therefore, completely useless to them.

This investigation will examine, firstly, Kierkegaard's life models, and then analyze and ultimately negate the model of faith as a complete solution to a meaningful existence. Because Kierkegaard's model of faith has usable aspects, it simply needs to be fleshed out. In doing so, Nietzsche's ideals on successful personhood will be offered to bolster those of Kierkegaard's, which necessarily involves interpreting, exploring, and analyzing Nietzsche's ideas on individuality, authenticity, progression, and the idea of the eternal return. But, because Nietzsche is categorized as a nihilist, his ideas are accepted only after accepting those of Jean Paul Sartre,

who also does not believe in the existence of God, but asserts that what makes humans capable of a meaningful existence is their ability to exercise choice and to have free will. Without choice, humans are like any other natural entity, which are solely subject to their environment and their lives are completely dependent on luck. If humans lives were determined solely by luck, again, there would be no investigation into a meaningful human existence.

In *Existentialism as Humanism*, Sartre states that humans are “condemned” to be free, and the only constraint on this freedom is humans' inability to escape from choice and freedom. This idea is expanded upon when Sartre explains that humans are conscious beings, and consciousness can never be without some sort of thought. Humans cannot escape consciousness, and so, necessarily, the act of thinking, which involves choosing. Therefore, humans cannot escape their freedom to exercise choice. Though this act of thinking is, overall, an enhancement to the human condition, as Sartre states that “contemplation is a luxury” (Sartre 17), Sartre spends much of his book, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, defending existentialism against its critics. These critics come from communists and Christians, and these groups share certain concerns about the reality of existentialism as a fact of human life. Interestingly, arguments against the Christian negation of existentialism often parallel arguments against Kierkegaard’s faith model as an ideal way to live, since both arguments rely on premises of the free agent making decisions about their own life as opposed to an omnipotent being choosing for them.

Since it is impossible to analyze every argument put forth in an entire book in one paper, one particular argument from *Existentialism is a Humanism* will be examined. The argument here is chosen as a means of confirming existentialism to skeptics, and, since Sartre has many, this argument also serves as a general assertion of existentialism itself. Sartre asserts that any opposition to existentialism comes from a place of misunderstanding and not a genuine opposition to the idea itself. Yes, existentialism forces individuals to take responsibility for their

lives, and this may be, at least initially, quite daunting. The meat of Sartre's argument is this: deniers of existentialism are simply avoiding taking responsibility for their own lives. If someone is free to make their own choices, they are then blameworthy and responsible for their choices, because they made them of their own free will. If one denies existentialism, they assert that they are not free to make their own choices and are therefore not responsible for their choices.

Avoiding responsibility may initially appear appealing, however, I argue that, ultimately, it is much more attractive and satisfactory to accept responsibility over one's life and one's choices, which necessarily involves accepting existentialism.

Specifically, some determinists, who Sartre would label as attempting to avoid personal responsibility, argue that man cannot be completely free due to current mental states being caused by previous mental states. However, this paper operates on the premise that man is free and the ability to exercise choice in situations is what gives him freedom. Because this paper is concerned with which choices are right in regards to maximizing satisfaction within one's life, it is essential we operate under the assumption that humans are able to choose, giving them freedom in their existence.

First, though, it seems that in order to begin defining a meaningful existence, one can begin by examining the life models offered by philosopher Soren Kierkegaard in his book, *Either/Or*. Then, by accepting or rejecting these models, one can decide if these values are ones they wish to keep or discard. These models are relevant to this investigation because they provide broad ways of categorizing how most people live their lives. Kierkegaard presents three models: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the faithful. The aesthetic lifestyle, as Kierkegaard writes in *Either/Or*, can be defined as valuing novelty and pleasure above all else. This lifestyle is set up to be the pig in Socrates' example of higher and lower pleasures: the aesthetic is the gluttonous consumption of pleasurable, sensual experiences. It is not concerned with any deeper

meaning or position within a web of community or larger society. Living aesthetically involves selfish pursuit of any and all distractions to avoid boredom. The aesthete values entertainment over all else, even the pursuit of knowledge or committed relationships. One who lives aesthetically entertains themselves by any means necessary, and someone living aesthetically always concerns themselves first and foremost with their own avoidance of boredom. It is important to make the distinction between aestheticism and hedonism, however, and Kierkegaard makes sure to provide this distinction by drawing comparisons between living aesthetically and living lazily. To Kierkegaard, there is an art to living aesthetically, and one must “have control over one’s moods,” (Kierkegaard 298). In this way, the aesthete is not simply interested in pursuing pleasure, like a hedonist, but rather in entertaining themselves against all odds. To live aesthetically is to avoid boredom at all costs, because, as the seducer pens in *Either/Or*, “boredom is the root of all evil,” (Kierkegaard 285). Kierkegaard writes that one living aesthetically must “attach great importance to all the pursuits that are compatible with aimlessness; all kinds of unprofitable pursuits may be carried on,” (298).

In order to live aesthetically, individuals are also advised to avoid traditional careers, and the seducer even states that one must “never take any official post. If one does that, one becomes... a tiny little cog in the machine of the body politic,” (Kierkegaard 298). Nietzsche would likely agree with this aspect of the aesthetic lifestyle, as Nietzsche is concerned with living an interesting life, but this lifestyle of purely chasing entertainment is devoid of a greater meaning and therefore cannot answer the question of life’s importance. The aesthetic lifestyle is primarily concerned with matters of oneself and living aesthetically necessarily requires individual thought stemming from caring about the state of one’s own mind and individually selected values. In this way, living aesthetically carries immense meaning to the individuals who choose to live this way, even if aesthetic values are very different from ethical ones. But,

Kierkegaard himself even disregards this model because of its inability to relate to others and its fascination with oneself, and so no argument must be made to convince anyone that this model cannot provide meaning to human existence.

Since Kierkegaard disregards this first model, or the aesthetic, the ethical lifestyle is introduced as a sort of natural progression in maturity for an individual. When people get older and transition from child to adult, their priorities change. Socializing and pursuing enjoyment may fall behind keeping up with responsibilities like having a family, getting a job that does good for the world, paying taxes. When an individual can perform these duties and look beyond themselves to examine how they contribute and fit into a community, they have reached the ethical lifestyle. Caring about others is important for meaning, because much of life's meaning is derived from humans interactions with each other. Ethical models rarely speak to individual's actions as they relate to themselves—no, ethical models exist to provide rules on how people interact with each other and society as a whole. With Kierkegaard's ethical mode, the individual adheres to a strict, pre-existing moral code. Thus, the individuality found in the aesthetic model may be sacrificed, but, ultimately, as the Judge character states in *Either/Or*, meaning may be gained from helping and understanding those around them and connecting with and relating to others. Happiness is still very much a factor: in fact, happiness is even more present than in the aesthetic lifestyle, the Judge claims. The aesthetic lifestyle may be pleasurable, but it is devoid of the lasting satisfaction that is necessarily accompanied by happiness. Ultimately, though, both of these choices are deemed unsatisfactory and “wrong” by Kierkegaard, and they are analyzed to be missing some key component of a life well lived, and thus, the model of faith is introduced.

The faith model, as presented by Kierkegaard, is the highest and last stage of human existence. It is important to note that Kierkegaard believes that in order for life to be lived meaningfully, one must believe in God. As it follows, the faith model is not so much just the

habit or practice of being religious, but rather a turn away from analyzation of religion or the intellectual questioning of a belief in the existence of God. Kierkegaard urges people to take a leap of faith and believe in God for its benefits to their lives as opposed to for any logical reason. There is no need to treat religion the same way one treats science. Believing in God will not result in some later proof of God's existence, but it will enhance the individual's life by believing in something outside of reason. Also, the religious mode of life offers an escape from choosing to live in pursuit of entertainment or virtue. Now, the model of faith has redeeming qualities. Pursuing something that may not be certain is an attribute that lends itself to success. The only change that needs to be made is the topic one puts their belief into: here, we shift from the religious to the individual, or a belief in oneself and one's goals.

In presenting the religious model of living, Kierkegaard writes that God is always right, so the ideal life is to follow God's will. But this hardly seems like exercising free will. And, acting in accordance with God's beliefs seems to require the assumption that God exists at all. Now this, to Nietzsche, is not only wrong, but pointless. If one cannot be sure that God even exists, why should one live an inauthentic life, sacrificing their own goals and passions to live out a life of someone who may not even exist? The famous words written by Nietzsche, "God is dead," are far less literal than they appear. But, here, they are important: Nietzsche rejects any sort of life that requires adopting someone else's values. Finding one's own values is far more important, and believing in things for a reason is superior to believing in them because they provide comfort, the way religion does. So, we take the optimism of Kierkegaard and combine it with the values Nietzsche presents for a potential answer to a meaningful existence.

Now that Kierkegaard's models for what an ideal life ought to look like have been rejected, for the next part of my investigation into what defines a meaningful existence using philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas, I use Alexander Nehamas's book, *Nietzsche, Life as*

Literature, as an entry point into the ideas expressed by Friedrich Nietzsche. I am choosing an interpretation and carefully chosen selection of Nietzsche's primary writings to begin my exploration for two main reasons: one, Nietzsche's writings are, by their poetic and stylized nature, easily misinterpreted, and therefore, it is of utmost importance to seek out reliable interpretations of Nietzsche's ideas. Secondly, because of Nietzsche's aphoristic writing style, his ideas cannot be condensed concisely into just one or two books, and it is far more valuable to examine different writings of his across the years and across different books, thus, the importance of reading a book where the writer has selected choice sections already. Nietzsche's primary writings are considered later in this investigation as well, but not before considering a respected interpretation by Nehamas to base the following conclusions off, going forward.

Nietzsche's claims are chosen as a suitable answer to finding meaning in life because, to Nietzsche, life has no inherent meaning, and this is exactly what makes life so great. This is also precisely where Nietzsche differs from Kierkegaard. Where Kierkegaard draws on faith, Nietzsche sees reliance on religion or religious beliefs as weak and conformist, even comparing a priest to a fake doctor in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, (Nietzsche 95). Though religion may provide comfort, freedom provides the ability to develop and better oneself while seeing one's highest potential actualized. Though the realization of this complete and utter freedom may terrify us, really, Nietzsche argues, it should excite us. The total and utter lack of meaning allows everyone to do, well, whatever they want. And because we have one life, what else should be done but what one wants? While this seems like a simple, and plausible, answer, it opens a floodgate of new questions. Which activities are worth doing? Are there right and wrong ways to express oneself? How do we know what we really think or who we really are if we decide not to draw on popular beliefs, opinions, and morals? To answer these questions, we turn to Nietzsche and his many aphoristic writings on human flourishing and the individual. Because Nietzsche's

ideas are more of a constellation than a linear path, ideas from many different books of his will be utilized. Ultimately, to Nietzsche, what matters in life is a commitment to the self, and unapologetic self expression despite what anyone thinks. Creating one's own moral code, values, and artistic creations is the truest, and most meaningful, form of existence. Rising above the herd and being an individual in the most literal sense of the word is what is most important. But what does this actually look like? How does one become an individual and create their ideal life?

Before delving into Nietzsche's claims, however, one must understand the way in which those claims are presented. Nietzsche has a unique writing style, and it is vital to understand its structure before evaluating the claims found within the writing. So, in taking a step out and looking at his work more broadly before moving forwards, this sprawling, yet highly interconnected nature of Nietzsche's work is best explained by Nehamas in the opening of *Life as Literature*, as Nehamas explains that "Nietzsche is the most writerly of philosophers," (Nehamas 26) and thus, understanding Nietzsche's style is essential to understanding, and correctly interpreting, his philosophical ideas, of which there are many. In fact, Nehamas claims that Nietzsche's "style is essential to understanding him at all." (13). Nehamas draws on Arthur Danto's claim of how best to interpret Nietzsche's works, stating that "Nietzsche's works can be read in almost any order without making a great difference to what one learns from them," (Nehamas 17). Furthermore, Danto specifically states that "Nietzsche's books... are made up, in the main, of short, pointed aphorisms, and of essays seldom more than a few pages long... And any given aphorism or essay might as easily have been placed in one volume as in another without much affecting the unity or structure of either," (Danto). This may seem odd, or even impractical, but this style is precisely what lends itself to power and self expression. To existentialists, meaning is something to be created. Life is open to interpretation. To Nietzsche, aphorisms provide a structure so open to interpretation people bicker if there is any meaning of

all. What perfect irony! Perhaps Nietzsche knows more about life than, at times, he seems to let on. Though some may claim Nietzsche's style is too experimental to convey any sort of concrete views at all or make a solid claim, I would argue that this fragmented, poetic style Nietzsche utilizes is incredibly effective. His work has even been compared to Socrates, as "Nietzsche's project is essentially similar to and overlaps the projects of Socrates, so described. Both Nietzsche and Socrates are intensely personal figures, actively engaged in changing, in one way or another, the moral quality of the life of the people around them." (Nehemas 25).

Furthermore, Nietzsche transcends categorization. His work has been reviewed by notable poet, T.S. Eliot, (Eliot 1916) and Nietzsche himself is both a poet and a philosopher. Any less from Nietzsche would be a dismissal of his own beliefs: individuals must do what they believe without concern for how their work is perceived. Critics may cast disdain on Nietzsche's refusal to solidly stand in one camp or the other, as a philosopher or poet alone, but Nietzsche himself is acting precisely how he believes the individual should: boldly, authentically, and unapologetically. But more on that later.

In defense of Nietzsche's reputation, I would like to draw attention to the history of Nietzsche's publications and their negative interpretations. Though Nietzsche may be considered a controversial philosopher, this is mainly because of his book, *The Will to Power*, which was actually composed not by Nietzsche at all, but by his sister, who was a problematic, hateful, and starkly different sort of individual than Nietzsche himself. Thus, *The Will to Power* does not accurately reflect Nietzsche's ideals, and should not be taken seriously into consideration when evaluating Nietzsche's credibility with regards to philosophy and philosophical ideals.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche attempts to define what constitutes a human, which is important for later questions regarding individual's roles and duties within larger societal groups. What role do humans play to themselves? What sorts of concerns do individuals have over their own lives, since they are responsible for freely choosing their own paths? In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes that everyone wants to assert their own individual power—but this is not such a negative thing; this is how humankind survives. Asserting power is not necessarily literal. Art, for example, comes from a desire to express oneself and put something tangible into the world which was not there before. Art is not necessarily a violent act, although, it certainly can be. But Nietzsche expands on this idea of individual will to power in his book, *The Will to Power*, which has been largely misinterpreted throughout history. Here, Nietzsche writes that “even the body within which individuals treat each other as equals ... will have to be an incarnate will to power, it will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant – not from any morality or immorality but because it is living and because life simply is will to power.” Nietzsche sees power as a central value to meaningful existence. Everyone wants to grow their power, in Nietzsche's eyes. Now, this view initially appears blunt, maybe even shallow or violent. But power and force are two separate things. Moreover, power can be directed inwards just as much as it can be inflicted outwards. Power over one's own mind is perhaps the most powerful skill an individual can possess because most people live as victims of their own desires. Nietzsche's words can be interpreted as selfish, coming from a writer with ego, or his words can be interpreted as a message urging everyone to pursue self-mastery, and in this way, promote equality through individuals seeking to understand their own desire to assert power over others instead of fighting it. But there is also another way of looking at this view that humans all desire to grow their power.

Asserting oneself is a basic human tendency, like most other animals. To deny basic human tendencies is not only difficult, but pointless. If living meaningfully necessarily meant living in a way that contradicted our instinctual intuition on how to live, which, to Nietzsche, meant asserting one's power, it is better to work that insight into a possible solution instead of fight against it. Surely, there is the possibility for a meaningful existence without denying our basic animalistic tendencies. Nietzsche is able to combine animalistic tendencies with the higher reasoning abilities of humans. This cultivation and aim of a higher existence, which comes through self-expression, the cultivation of self-discipline, and the pursuit of authentic values, is unique to humans. How fitting that a core aspect of human existence is also unique to us.

However, Nietzsche also writes about perspectivism, or the idea that all that can be known of existence comes from one's own, individual, and limited perspective. Humans do not always know their own motivations, Nietzsche states, but he also believes that, often, it is better that we don't. Every individual, then, is trying to get through life asserting power, only knowing life through their own individual experience, and often not knowing the reasons behind their desires. But, like Sartre defending existentialism and urging people to take responsibility for their own lives, Nietzsche similarly asserts that there is no singular, right way to live. The idea that one can only know their own experience in life may paint a grim pic of humanity to some, but Nietzsche provides a response to quell this idea. Individual experience is all we can know about life. The quest for meaning within life is often approached by attempting to understand life and then attach meaning upon figuring out these other aspects. But Nietzsche, although interested in this quest of understanding life, asserts that we will never be able to, at least not fully and not outside of our own lived experience. This, however, frees up the individual to care about the things that matter to them without needing to examine these things further, since no explanation is right or wrong. It is just perception. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche seems to

criticize humankind's willing ignorance, writing, "how we have managed from the beginning to cling to our ignorance, in order to enjoy a life of almost inconceivable freedom, thoughtlessness, carelessness, heartiness, cheerfulness—to enjoy life," (Nietzsche, 25). Here, Nietzsche points to the idea that ignorance is bliss. However, he takes this idea in a different direction, spinning this normally negative statement into a positive one. Ignorance, surely, is less desirable than the pursuit of knowledge. But the knowledge that one does not know everything is more desirable than the false belief that one knows everything. In other words, the idea that one understands life is more ignorant than knowing one's limits of knowledge, and even commonly accepted ideas of truth can be misleading, as "science loves error whether it will or not, because science, being alive, loves life," (Nietzsche, 25). Life necessarily includes many unknowns, and, like primal instincts, one is better off embracing this head on than fighting it and denying both the beauty and struggle of existence. To face the unknown comes with feelings and change, both of which are often uncomfortable. But feelings and change can be positive, too. Ultimately, what provides individuals with meaning is up to the individual themselves. Life may not hold unwavering meaning that can be found, but meaning can, however, be created.

Since meaning can be created, let us first examine individuality as one possible indicator of a meaningful existence. Individuality necessarily requires a certain amount of ego and personal creation. But this is not necessarily a negative thing. All we can know in life is how we feel, and ultimately, everything else is subjective. This is seen especially with creatives. The artists, the visionaries, and the greats seem to share something in common; they lead unique lives. They are, perhaps ironically, all individuals. Unfortunately, though, interpreting Nietzsche's definition of an individual proves to be tricky business. It is important to define what constitutes an individual, because Nietzsche believes "that admirable people are one and all what he calls 'individuals'. But the very notion of an individual is one that essentially refuses to be

spelled out in informative terms. To give general directions for becoming an individual is surely as self-defeating as is offering general views when one believes general views are all simply interpretations,” (Nehamas 8). As stated prior, all we can know about life is our own lived experience. Since defining an individual is a tricky task, let us explore what it is about being an individual that is desirable. Plus, all people are individual. An attempt to define one individual is silly. There is no indicator of what makes someone more or less individual besides the degree to which their beliefs are unique, however, harboring more radical beliefs is not necessarily more individual than believing in commonly accepted ideas. In fact, the person with common beliefs could be more authentic than the person who believes in extremely radical ideas. The question, then, becomes one concerning authenticity.

I offer a solution to this seemingly muddy area of interpretation in Nietzsche’s writings. Although this may appear to be a dichotomy because being an individual implies difference from others, there are a few shared traits. For one thing, individuals place immense value on their own existence. They are intentional with their existence. They are passionate, they are creative, and they deviate from tradition. Drawing explicitly from Nietzsche’s writings, recognizing the self and acting as if life is “something to be fashioned” is one important aspect of being an individual. Fashioning one’s life involves the understanding that life can be changed depending on one’s actions. Also, individuals are not afraid to be alone. In fact, they would rather live in solitude than be one of the many in the masses. Nietzsche often refers to the masses as “the herd” in his writings. In other words, the individuals who are more likely to find meaning in life embody Nietzsche’s expressed ideals towards a life well lived. These individuals believe that being an individual and thinking for oneself is of utmost importance. Individual expression and human flourishing, then, are more important, even, than being moral or being happy. But more

investigation into what defines an individual is necessary for attempting to provide the framework for a meaningful existence.

Since explicitly defining the individual is difficult, let us table this for now and explore, for a moment, the idea of the self. Tangentially related to the idea of the individual is the idea of the self, for the self must be known before one can act as an individual at all. Moreover, the idea of the self is important for measuring meaning within one's life, for a sense of what matters to an individual can then be compared to the content of that individual's life. With the idea of the self comes the theory of the eternal recurrence. Using Heine and Schopenhauer's interpretation of Nietzsche's writings, "the eternal recurrence is not a theory of the world but a view of the self," (Nehamas 150). For the purpose of this investigation, the eternal recurrence can be defined as "a practical *thought experiment* designed to test whether one's life has been good. The broad idea is that one *imagines* the endless return of life, and one's emotional reaction to the prospect reveals something about how valuable one's life has been," (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). This thought experiment is spelled out in Nietzsche's book, *The Gay Science*, as Nietzsche writes "what, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence... would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.'" (GS, 341; cf. KGW, V2 394). It is important to note that here, Nietzsche is not actually postulating about the possibility of life recurring eternally. The idea of the eternal recurrence is no more a thought experiment than Robert Nozick's experience machine. It is

designed to provide structure for people to think about the way they lead their lives, much like the conversations of Socrates. Nietzsche “does not presuppose that this idea is at all credible. Nietzsche is simply not interested in this question. What he is interested in is the attitude one must have toward oneself in order to react with joy and not with despair to the possibility the demon raises, to the thought that one’s life will occur, the very same in every single detail, again and again and again for all eternity,” (Nehamas 151).

What anyone chooses to do with this idea put forth by Nietzsche is not as important as the idea that one may think about their life and choose *something* to pursue. There exists certain actions in life that necessarily require an individual’s attention to survive, however, the only true necessities in life revolve around sustaining oneself. Any action performed with the intent of bettering one’s life is ultimately up to the individual: receiving an education, providing for oneself or one’s family, or cultivating an impressive career are all examples of life choices many people choose to make. But these choices in and of themselves cannot be evaluated as being good or bad. They can only be evaluated as good as they are true to the individual’s desires: if one chooses to go to college because they want to pursue higher education and learn more about philosophy, which they hold a genuine interest in and would study whether or not they are at school, then this action is good. But if one goes to college because they feel pressured to, even if this does ultimately benefit them through opening more career options and higher salaries down the road, this action can be judged as being bad because it is not authentic to the individual.

Now, in accepting this claim that actions are good so far as they are genuinely desired to be done by the individual, and bad so far as they are not genuinely desired to be done by the individual, we can allow for one further conclusion with regards to an individual’s choices allowing for meaning in life so long as they are authentically chosen. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche speaks to his hope for people to make choices for themselves and themselves alone.

Nietzsche refers to individuals holding authentic beliefs, especially beliefs that are not commonly accepted by the masses, as “new philosophers” and “free spirits” and he writes that these individuals “will teach humans that their future is their will, that the future depends on their human will,” (Nietzsche 90). This sentence points to an important aspect of fashioning a meaningful existence: one must believe their pursuits have meaning, and one must work to develop these pursuits. There exists a distinct difference between indulging and pursuing, though, often, the two may seem so close in action that it is difficult to discern between the two. This statement, that indulging and pursuing are different and lead to different amounts of satisfaction from an individual, may sound simple or obvious, but there are many actions individuals take that are genuinely desirable to that individual, and may even succeed in providing the individual with their desired ends, however, the action may not feel meaningful to the individual and therefore cannot be counted as being good.

To elaborate, here is an example. Many people enjoy eating desserts. But while a life spent eating desserts may be enjoyable and genuinely desired by an individual, there exists no strong belief or reasoning behind why this decision is being made. In fact, there may even be reasoning as to why this decision should not be made. Falling prey to one’s desires is different than pursuing one’s interests, though, again, often it is hard to differentiate between the two. This then falls on the individual to properly assess the reason behind their actions and pursuits in their own life. Similar to the idea of primal instincts, desires can be worked into a meaningful existence, however, they should not be the primary reason for pursuing a certain lifestyle or cultivating certain habits. One should choose elements of their life because they feel strongly that those aspects of their life matter, but there should exist some explanation besides the action being enjoyable to the individual in that moment. Otherwise, allowing addiction in one’s life could fall into the category of being a good action if it is genuinely believed to be good by the individual

with the addiction. The distinction lies in the reasoning, which, as Sartre stated, is a luxury all humans have, and, like Nietzsche stated, is a powerful tool one can use to fashion their life exactly as they want it to be. Furthermore, the benefit to a strong belief in one's choices comes with the reward of influencing others for the better. Nietzsche writes that the ideal individuals who truly believe in the actions they take are more easily able to know what they think, because they are compelled to pursue their projects. Nietzsche writes that "a soul would grow so great and so powerful that it would feel compelled to accomplish these projects; a reevaluation of values," (Nietzsche 91). And this dedication to one's own, authentic values is precisely what constitutes meaning within not only one's own life, but in impacting other people's lives, as well.

In sum, passionately pursuing one's own goals will surely lead to higher rates of satisfaction with one's life than had that same individual chosen not to pursue their goals. But, the caveat is that pursuing one's goals conflict with their duties to others. In order to pursue one's goals to the fullest extent possible, one must use most of their time on themselves and their own ends. So, in order to properly evaluate the idea of pursuing one's own interests to the fullest is a model for a meaningful existence, let us explore what occurs when one does the opposite and does not pursue their goals in order to benefit others.

CHAPTER TWO

The Dangers of Solely Pursuing Morality

Since it has been established that pursuing one's goals will lead to a more satisfactory life, let us judge a sole focus on individuality and one's own ends as bad, for a moment. In order to pose a fair claim that individuality is positive, not only for ourselves, but for the world at large, we must consider the ways in which it is not so. In this chapter, I highlight the exact opposite situation: a world where everyone is concerned with only their morals and not their personal, individual ends. In other words, the question at hand is concerned with the idea: would society be better off if people were selfless all the time?

Susan Wolf considers this question in an essay aptly titled "Moral Saints" where Wolf considers the benefits and drawbacks of aiming for moral perfection. The parallels between moral saints and those living life under Kierkegaard's ethical model are strong. Wolf even writes that "it is shared by the conception of the pure aesthete, by a certain kind of religious ideal," (Wolf 424), two of Kierkegaard's models: the ethical and the aesthetic.

Furthermore, Wolf's writing is considered here because the act of aiming for moral perfection is the exact opposite of Nietzsche's advice to aim for personal authenticity and strive for individual power. A sense of personal identity and a sense of moral perfection are necessarily at odds, so it is logical to compare these two against each other. Specifically, when pointing to this stark binary, Wolf writes that "the way in which morality, unlike other possible goals, is apt to dominate is particularly disturbing, for it seems to require either the lack or the denial of the existence of an identifiable, personal self," (Wolf 424). Here is where personal identity and moral goodness are at odds. The more time one commits to being morally perfect, the less sense

of self that individual then has. Furthermore, Wolf fleshes out what exactly makes moral perfection so unappealing, opening with the admission that “this will strike many as an obvious point,” (Wolf 419) but “it is generally assumed that one ought to be as morally good as possible,” (Wolf 419).

Wolf begins with the premise that an individual concerned with the constitution of a moral saint is a member of Western society, which parallels Nietzsche’s writings. “A necessary condition of moral sainthood would be that one’s life be dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or to society as a whole,” (Wolf 420). Wolf also, importantly, defines a moral saint as someone who genuinely gains satisfaction and happiness from helping others, the way people do from acquiring material objects or wealth, or pursuing their own ends. This seems to fit with Nietzsche’s ideas of authenticity: if someone is genuinely happy helping others, and this fulfills their time in a satisfactory way, what is the problem? Well, the caveat is that the moral saint pays *no* attention to their own ends at all. The moral saint has no self interest, because they give all of their time away to others and other people’s ends.

Also important is the distinction between the motives of different moral saints. There exists the Loving Saint and the Rational Saint. The loving saint is a saint out of love. The Rational Saint is a saint because they value morals and wish to uphold them. But, as you, the reader, may guess, this distinction does not greatly impact the effect each of these saints has on the world around them. Any type of saint is one most concerned with the way they treat those in the world around them. Now, this likely does not sound so bad! To live in a world where everyone is concerned about everyone else’s wellbeing appears heavenly, at least initially. But the issue lies in the excess of time spent doing good deeds. As Wolf points out, “if the moral saint is devoting all his time to feeding the hungry or healing the sick or raising money for Oxfam, then necessarily he is not reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving his

backhand,” (Wolf 421). Put simply, the moral saint is boring because their time is spent improving the conditions of other people’s lives instead of furthering their own.

Now, one may argue, this is a straw man fallacy. One can do good deeds and still enjoy a little bit of personal time. Plenty of people raise money for Oxfam and also have time for oboe lessons. But this is not the point. The point is that anyone wanting the best for the world would not be selfish enough to pursue their own interests. Furthermore, the world would lose the greats. Yo-Yo Ma, the world famous cellist, for example, has spent an estimated 50,000 hours of his life to date practicing the Bach Cello Suites. A moral saint would not dedicate 50,000 hours to doing anything for themselves, even if it could be justified by the fact that the hours allowed for the later production of beautiful music that other people can enjoy. Furthermore, the resources used to produce Yo-Yo Ma’s successful career, including a very expensive instrument, recording sessions at luxurious studios, large concerts and the use of concert venues, could not be enjoyed because, to moral saints, these benefits would pale “against possible beneficial ends to which these resources could be put out,” (Wolf 422). Lastly, Yo-Yo Ma benefits personally from his mastery, and a moral saint does not benefit from their own time, they exist solely to help others.

Moreover, it is often the case that projects of passion lend themselves to improving the state of the world more than a direct effort to be morally good would on its own. People dedicated to being morally good all the time, or moral fanatics, as Wolf calls them, are less useful to the world than those who strive to create change and are, also, morally good on their journey. Wolf writes that “perhaps the cultivation of one’s exceptional artistic talent will turn out to be the way one can make one’s greatest contribution to society,” (Wolf 425). Art has the power to move many people at once, whereas a morally good act can help one person at a time. Even the donation of a large sum of money to charity is arguable not as beneficial as a piece of art or activist effort to urge many people to donate to charity. Additionally, with regards to what

is lost when people strive for moral perfection, Wolf brings up the example of humor. Because moral saints have to be nice and treat people well, they are not going to make jokes at anyone's expense. Moral saints will, necessarily, be "dull-witted" and "bland," (Wolf 422). This may not strike one as being important to the state of the world, but comedy produces enjoyment to those who listen, and without it, the world would be, at the very least, less enjoyable to exist in.

Now, by this point, the reader is hopefully convinced that a complete and utter dedication to moral perfection is not something to aim for. In the words of Susan Wolf, there seems to be "a limit to how much morality we can stand," (Wolf 423). The issue is that there is a limit to how much commitment to any one value we can stand, let alone moral goodness. But the underlying reason for suspicion of ultimate moral goodness is because a personal quest to be as morally perfect as possible seems incompatible with caring for other things in life, or, that is to say, incompatible with having personal meaning in life. When searching for meaning in life, it is necessary that one cares about their own life and cares, at least to some extent, their own satisfaction with their life. And while one could argue that one cares about morality and simply chooses to pursue it, Wolf counters with the statement that "morality itself does not seem to be a suitable object of passion," (Wolf 424). It is easy to imagine someone who will not lie or is dedicated to telling the truth, but it is wholly different, and quite difficult, to imagine someone who is *passionate* about being honest. Perhaps most importantly, it is difficult to pursue morality with any sort of tangible benchmark for improvement. The pursuit of a project or passion looks much different than the pursuit of moral goodness. Progression and flourishing are easy to document when one is learning photography, for example. There are both technical and stylistic aspects that can be judged, and, although the stylistic elements may be subjective, there are still ways an individual can measure their own progress in terms of their own desire to improve. However, while progression may be able to be captured with the pursuit of moral goodness, at

least to the individual themselves, it is certainly not measurable in the same way. And flourishing, in terms of moral goodness, is out of the picture altogether.

So, putting other people's enjoyment above one's own is a reliable way to enjoy one's own life less. With less focus on one's own ends comes less pleasure from achieving those ends. Moral saints are so concerned with other people's wellbeing that their own falls into second place, and Wolf writes that these moral saints have "a pathological fear of damnation, perhaps, or an extreme form of self-hatred that interferes with [their] ability to enjoy the enjoyable in life," (Wolf 424). When a morally good individual gives up their own pleasure, for whatever reason, this individual appears to be lacking desire. Moreover, "there seems to be a kind of joy which the Loving Saint, either by nature or by practice, is incapable of experiencing," (Wolf 424).

One potential response to Wolf's claim that it is not best for individuals to be perfectly good is that it is rather obvious that it is not best for individuals to be perfectly good. But this response is ignoring the real meat of Wolf's claim. Morality is important, however, there are other aspects of life that are important, too, like mastering an instrument or simply making time to enjoy being outside. Life is short, and moral perfection is not only difficult, but often unfulfilling, even to those who benefit. Moreover, an excess of moral goodness is not something worth striving for. Moral goodness is valuable, but no more so than cultivating an interesting personality and dedicating time towards hobbies one is genuinely passionate about. And, from pursuing these, every individual will find more satisfaction in their own life than they would pursuing moral perfection, or even something close to it.

CHAPTER THREE

Splitting the Difference: If Not Moral Perfection, What Then, Do We Owe to Society?

In Chapter One, the importance of the individual was illuminated. Finding authentic values and pursuing one's interests to the fullest is, surely, one answer to finding meaning within one's own life. This answer necessarily requires individuals to define what they care about and then to act on it. But, while this answer may solve, or at least direct, individual searches for meaning, it also leaves out the larger picture and larger societal debts. In order to be able to search for meaning in life, one's life must be comfortable enough to enjoy the "luxury" of contemplation, as Sartre puts it.

Individuality is a wonderful avenue for carving out what matters in life. But what comes with this is the implication of what doing something that matters to you has on those around you. After all, the world is shared between billions of people. If everyone were to do what they wanted with abandon, the world would no longer be the kind of place anyone could do what they wanted. The question of meaning is important, but it cannot exist independently of some sort of ethical consideration.

Wolf's essay "Moral Saints" highlights the problematic nature of pursuing moral perfection. Now, this may seem obvious. But this problem poses a serious set of concerns. What about people who live their lives with their own direction and do not directly harm others, but also do not contribute to society? For example, say an individual, let us call him Dave, has carved out a path for himself. Dave wants to live in a van, work as little as he can, and live his life as a surfer. To him, this allows for flourishing: mentally, he is at peace, physically, he is challenging himself every day, and socially, he enjoys the solitude and the people he meets on

the road. He leads an interesting life and he is happy with his choices. He may not be contributing a whole lot to society intellectually, and he may not be advancing technology or spending his time doing charity work or activism, but he isn't directly hurting anyone, either. This, then, leads to the issue of how our choices affect others, for better, for worse, or not at all. Should we consider our impact on other people when choosing how to spend our time? And, what if our values conflict with or harm the lives of others... are they still worth pursuing if they limit other people's abilities to live their own flourishing lives? While Nietzsche would likely argue that every individual must live for themselves and themselves alone, because this makes them strong and unlike the weak herd, two leading moral theories, Utilitarianism and Kantianism, can be considered when thinking about this problem. Neither directly conflict with the ideas put forth by Nietzsche, however, Kantian moral theory is ultimately more useful and applicable to individuals pursuing their own passions in life, as Kantian theory allows people to simply respect others and still spend their time pursuing their own ends. Moreover, like Nietzsche, who urges individuals to create their own authentic values, Kant saw religion and morality as being at odds, and necessarily separate from one another. Chris L. Firestone, who writes on Kant's understanding of the philosophy of religion in a journal article published to the Cambridge University *Journal of Religious Studies*, writes that "interpreters emphasizing the phenomenal/noumenal distinction of his first *Critique* often declare Kant to be an agnostic, or even worse, the all-destroyer of metaphysics itself," (Firestone 151). This fits with Nietzsche's negation of Kierkegaard's faith model as the ideal model to base one's life around, and, similarly, fits with Wolf's negation of moral sainthood as something to aspire to.

Furthermore, perhaps Kant's ideas could even appeal to Nietzsche for another reason beyond a distrust in God when providing moral standards. Kant also appeals to Nietzsche's ideals by reason of avoiding guilt. It is hardly satisfying or meaningful to live a life persistent

with the constant, nagging thoughts that your choices are negatively impacting other people's lives. Even surfing becomes a little less joyful when one begins to probe themselves on the environmental impacts of their surfboard or their lack of political activism because they lived their life dedicated to spending as much time in the ocean as they possibly can. Here, we turn to Kant's principle, the Categorical Imperative. If Nietzsche provides us with the model to base individual life goals around, Kant provides us with a model to think about our own morality.

But before elaborating more on the Categorical Imperative, let the other leading moral theory, Utilitarianism, be examined, and then dismissed in favor of Kantian theory to be used for guiding one's life choices. I argue that the Categorical Imperative is more straightforward to use in day to day life than utilitarianism ideals, and so, I must present and compare both against each other. Utilitarianism may be initially appealing when considering moral theories because, as it can be considered a hedonistic moral theory, it asserts that pleasure is to be pursued, but not just for the individual, but for the greatest number of people possible. Mill explains the principle of utility to be a way to judge actions, writing that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. (Mill 77). This fits in nicely with the aforementioned values of self discovery and individuality. These values are important when looking for meaning, and though happiness is certainly a vital component of a meaningful existence, happiness necessarily comes from the satisfaction of pursuing one's true passions in life. Through developing skills and cultivating lifelong projects, happiness follows. There is no need to pursue happiness directly, similarly to the way there is no need to pursue moral goodness directly. Both follow from an understanding of inner values and the desire to act authentically on these values.

Many people who accept existentialism still understand physical and mental sensations to be very much real to them and their existence, so happiness is still worth considering when defining what meaning there is in life. But where it appears that Nietzsche believes individuality is of utmost importance, Mill believes that happiness is most important. So important, in fact, that it is worth working towards an existence where happiness is possible for everyone, and, at the very least, a value that is able to be considered by everyone. In fact, Mill asserts that happiness is the sole basis of morality. However, this is negated by both Nietzsche and Wolf. Moral sainthood does not bring true happiness, and it definitely does not bring about individual satisfaction, nor does moral sainthood benefit the greatest number of people. Utilitarianism considers the happiness for the greatest number of people and does not prioritize any individual over another. Nietzsche argues that everyone should prioritize themselves, and through doing so, the greatest amount of happiness is achieved. But this is the flaw of utilitarianism. One cannot prioritize themselves all the time and be a utilitarian. Hence, why one turns to Kant for moral guidelines.

Kant's Categorical Imperative is ultimately chosen as the ideal method of self-governing one's decisions in life because, it is vital to note that, with utilitarianism, the consequences of actions are more important than the reasoning behind the action. While "utilitarianism does not set moral limits on what we can do, it only says to maximize the social good by performing cost benefit analyses on decisions," (Bennett 58). This requires foresight, however, and there are many situations in life where one cannot possibly predict the outcome of their actions. Furthermore, the Categorical Imperative is chosen as a logical way to evaluate one's actions because rationality transcends religious ideals: no matter what religious beliefs one subscribes to, certain truths about the world remain and can be used to provide framing for one's decisions in life. Therefore, using reason to determine which actions are right is more logical than relying on

religion to provide these actions and moral standards for us. This falls under Nietzsche's idea urging individuals to believe in right and wrong as they genuinely see things and not because a religion tells them to see things as God does or as contained in a piece of holy writing.

Unfortunately, Utilitarianism is not a realistic model for most people to live their lives under. Utilitarianism can be considered as a way to work through what gives individuals meaning in life, but it is virtually impossible for everyone to be a true utilitarian. Dedicating one's life to utilitarianism means lots of personal sacrifice, selfless behavior, and donating most if not all of one's disposable income to charity. This shares similarities with moral sainthood, which brings neither happiness to the individual nor to society. Moreover, this strict adherence to moral rules is simply not realistic in the sense that most people will reject this idea that operating for the good of the many can provide them more meaning than they could achieve through doing what they want. Individuals are in control of their own lives and it is a feasible task to find something that gives one meaning in the here and now. However, finding something that satisfies the individual and also provides society with the maximum amount of happiness is not only daunting, but arguably impossible. Who is to say what provides society with the most happiness? In other words, one could argue that living as a utilitarian is challenging, but the real issue is that this challenge is a specific ethical challenge very few will want to face. At the very least, let us assume that not everyone is up for this challenge. Wolf even points to this specific issue in *Moral Saints*, writing that "utilitarianism requires him to want to achieve the greatest general happiness, and this would seem to commit him to the idea of the moral saint," (Wolf 428). All in all, utilitarianism is too demanding and requires foresight into one's actions that simply cannot be predicted by the individual performing them, and therefore, utilitarianism is not the best moral theory to govern one's life by.

What *is* important to the theory of utilitarianism, however, is the idea of creating harm, and one's ability to avoid creating harm. Let us define "harm" as an action that reduces pleasure or causes pain to another individual. Utilitarianism, though rejected as a theory, does introduce the idea of non-action as being harmful, which is a useful framework for evaluating one's life in an ethical sense. In *On Liberty*, Mill writes that "a person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury." This is a highly useful concept, because it is simple to question one's own actions as either causing harm or not causing harm. Taking this method one step further, one can ask, "is my not doing something in a situation causing harm?" Both of these methods of evaluation should, ideally, direct one to perform harmless actions, and maybe even beneficial ones. Now, how does this method of evaluation to one's actions translate to finding meaning in life? It is established, through the writings of Nietzsche and Mill, that everyone seeks pleasure, individuality, and authenticity. These things can give us a sense of meaning. But everyone requires these things for meaning, no one is more important than anyone else. Unfortunately, it is often misconstrued that pursuing individual goals and living authentically comes, necessarily, at the expense of others, because this allows for the most growth. But, Mill provides a counterargument to this idea. He asks, at what lengths are individuals willing to go to be an individual at the expense of others? At what lengths will individuals go for their own happiness with no regard for that of others? To some extent, harm of the second variety, the inaction variety, is inevitable. Utilitarians are consequentialists, which means they see actively doing harm and doing nothing, which then results in harm, as being equal if the results are equally negative. All that matters is the outcome. I negate this claim, hence turning to Kant for a more holistic and doable moral theory to live one's life by. However, there is something useful in the utilitarian idea that inaction can be potentially harmful: when evaluating one's life, perhaps, one may consider what they could use

their time for as well as what they wish to spend their time on. Dave, for example, may realize he receives pleasure and lives most authentically while surfing every day and enjoying the natural world. But he also begins to realize that while he may be living a seemingly harmless lifestyle, he is performing inaction. There are many environmental issues threatening the area he enjoys. Not everyone has access to the ocean. There are conservationists and environmentalists protecting these areas, spending their time less pleasurably, so he can individually enjoy them. Dave may choose, then, to spend a little bit of his time donating money to environmental organizations or cleaning up the beach and the water he enjoys. Interestingly, Dave begins to feel happier, more fulfilled—is this what a meaningful life feels like?

It is true that not everyone's life can be as neat and simple as Dave's. But what can be examined is the extent to which one's individual privilege is being used to achieve their happiness, and individuals can certainly examine their actions and inactions. Of course, it would be an immense waste of time to evaluate every single action before an individual does anything. "Humans use patterns of behavior, called habits, to help do most of the 'calculations' instead of starting from the beginning each time. The goal, then, is to 'always assess the consequences of your actions and try to act optimally' (Bennett 65). This is a practical way to apply these ethical ideals to real life. What is there to spend more time on so others can be happy, too? What could individuals do a little less of to lessen their harmful actions and impact on the greater population? For a small amount of sacrifice, there is the potential for a lot of reward, and perhaps an increase in meaning in their own lives.

Nietzsche's ideals, while they may initially seem to be in opposition with utilitarianism, do not fully negate the idea of living one's life with regards to its effects on others. Though many have debated Nietzsche's meanings and intentions in *The Will to Power*, Angel Cooper writes that Nietzsche "clearly inspires humanity to direct the will to power towards individual inner

growth, and not as a form of domination.” This, then, does not conflict with the idea that one should aim to live their life while minimizing their harmful impact on others. To Cooper’s point, Nietzsche writes in *The Will to Power* that “the will to power is a positive motive which would make us strive for something” (1974, 190). I accept Cooper’s translation of Nietzsche’s ideas in *The Will to Power*: that the ideal human does not dominate others, but rather seeks to coexist with other people. Furthermore, Cooper writes that Nietzsche’s words “inspire us to become overmen, who are individuals which have such attributes as strength, bravery, and manners, and who aspire to live in a society in which there may be mercy for others, not domination of them.” So, in this way, personal growth can occur alongside ethical growth: compassion for others cannot be considered weakness. It must be considered, like all intellectual pursuits, an area for learning and growth. Cooper notes that the societal implications of challenging individuals to pursue independence is not necessarily producing a more chaotic society. Cooper writes that “Nietzsche here is advocating a society that is not chaotic or psychotic, but instead strong, merciful and always overcoming itself so as to advance its laws and its people. Its members will reach beyond revenge and punishment, and be able to have healthy conflict with one another. This is Nietzsche’s ideal society. It is formed by overmen, and therefore does not fall into the problem of moral chaos.”

The Categorical Imperative is introduced because while it is similar to the utilitarian idea of weighing outcomes against each other to choose the most morally good action, Kant’s Categorical Imperative does not require the free agent to try to predict the outcomes of their actions. In *The Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, Kant writes that “if the action is thought of as good in itself and hence as necessary in a will that conforms to reason, which it has as its principle, the imperative is categorical,” (Kant, 19). In other words, actions can be judged for their function of supporting the will of the individual performing them, but also as being

“good in itself,” which is to say morally good and treating people as ends in themselves and not as means to an end. Kant’s moral theory is much like the golden rule: treat others as you want to be treated. The Categorical Imperative simply takes this idea one step further and seeks to universalize individual actions as a way of judging actions as being right or wrong.

Thus, Kant’s Categorical Imperative, also known as the Universalizability Principle, can be defined as the idea that one “ought never to act except in such a way that [one] could also will that [their] maxim should become a universal law” (G 4:402). A maxim can be defined as a rule or principle of action, and a law can be defined as something that should always be done in similar situations to the one at hand. What this means, in simplest terms, is that one’s actions are good so long as they would still be good if done by everyone in the world, and bad so long as they could not be done by everyone and still be harmless to society. This provides a straightforward way of evaluating personal actions, and it is definitely simpler than attempting to predict the future with every decision one makes, as is the case with utilitarian moral theory. The Categorical Imperative is titled as such because, as Kant states, it is the fundamental principle of our moral duties. In other words, if one cares about morality and chooses one principle to follow, the Categorical Imperative is a good one to pick. For the sake of this exploration in particular, the Categorical Imperative provides a simple, viable structure through which to evaluate one’s choices and maximize meaning in their own life while still adhering to some moral structure.

Moreover, Kant states that when one performs an action, they are also simultaneously approving of that action because they are doing it. Therefore, in performing an action, one can be said to be universalizing that action. Though this may be initially daunting, it is far simpler than weighing out each and every decision one makes by attempting to predict its effect on the happiness of society as a whole. Using the Categorical Imperative, one can simply ask themselves, “do I approve of the action I am taking?” The Categorical Imperative requires only a

judgement of oneself and not of others, and through this self-evaluation, the hope is that people will act in not only their own, but society's, best interest. Let us assume the majority of people have high moral standards, or, at least, respectable and rational ones. Allowing for the occasional slip in judgement, it still follows that most people, then, will be fair judges of their own actions, and so most actions done by most people will be right most of the time. And when people hold themselves to a high standard and do not allow for personal exceptions, the world will be a more moral place for everyone. Perhaps most importantly, the Categorical Imperative treats everyone as equal, because "the categorical imperative isn't restricted by or made dependent on any condition," (Kant, 20). Therefore, the Categorical Imperative provides a not only useful, but applicable, method for all individuals to promote moral goodness in society without requiring an excess of effort from any one individual.

CONCLUSION

This concludes our investigation into what constitutes a meaningful existence: through Nietzsche, we learn that the personal pursuit of living authentically and individually through challenging oneself and seeking personal growth are key values to a meaningful life. Cultivating personal interests and pursuing them is satisfying, and with this pursuit of one's passions necessarily comes a re-evaluation of personal values, both of which are important when aiming at living a meaningful life. But because this does not yet answer the question of how best to live within society and with regards to others, we turn to Kant, who offers us the model of the Categorical Imperative through which to examine our actions and desires with some compassion and understanding of their impact on other people and their lives. By using the Categorical Imperative as a framework through which to judge one's actions by, it is not only possible, but beneficial, to consider ourselves as both individuals and, simultaneously, people with some duties to humanity. Through the Categorical Imperative, we can ask ourselves if our actions are right or wrong by weighing what would happen if they were performed by everyone. Using this kind of inner questioning, we are free to pursue any type of existence we want, from banker to surfer to artist—and we are free from the guilt that normally accompanies the sole pursuit of personal desires. Living a harmless and meaningful life does not necessarily mean spending every waking second pursuing activist work, but it does involve a bit of thought instead of the sole pursuit of personal gain and pleasure. This, then, leaves everyone with the opportunity to not only pursue what matters to them, but to pursue what matters to society, too, at least a little bit. Individuality and morality are not at odds, rather, it is through the cultivation of individuality and authentic pursuits that people are able to invoke change in the world. And that is a meaningful way to live.

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