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Meaning of Life: Peter Wessel Zapffe on the Human Condition

The present text deals with the question of the meaning of life in the existentialist theory of the Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899–1990). In his book *On the Tragic* (1941), Zapffe sketched a theory of the human condition where the meaning of life plays a decisive role together with the human need for justice. This paper aims to reconstruct the central elements of Zapffe's analysis and to discuss them critically by focusing on his claim that human beings need a fundamental meaning *of* life as a whole that transcends meaning *in* life. I pay particular attention to Zapffe's claim that life is meaningless, since the meaning of life is fundamentally lacking. I conclude that Zapffe's analysis is problematic for reasons both internal and external to his theory.

1 General Introduction to Zapffe: The Norwegian Context

Peter Wessel Zapffe was a Norwegian philosopher, writer, environmentalist, mountaineer, literary critic, and humorist who was born in the arctic city of Tromsø. In the first part of the interwar period (1918–25), Zapffe studied law at the University of Oslo and started pursuing mountaineering as a hobby. After having worked as a jurist in the late 1920s in Tromsø, Zapffe resumed his studies in Oslo in 1929. He originally planned to take a Magister's degree in literature, but his dissertation became a doctoral dissertation in philosophy. The 1941 PhD dissertation *On the Tragic* (*Om det tragiske*) established Zapffe as one of the most original Norwegian philosophers of the twentieth century.[1] Rather than following an established school like most other Norwegian philosophers, Zapffe constructed his own brand of pessimistic existentialism influenced by the biology of Jakob Johann von Uexküll (1864–1944), the philosophies of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860),

1 Zapffe 1941 and 1996. The 1996 edition from *Samlede verker* (*Collected Works*) utilizes the pagination of the first edition (1941), except for the three added prefaces and the brief English summary (pp. 619–622). The 1933 essay "The Last Messiah [Den sidste Messias]" has also been important in establishing Zapffe as a philosopher, although this essay is a literary work that is less argumentative than *On the Tragic* (see Zapffe 2004 and 1997, pp. 43–51).

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) – as well as the literature of Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906).[2]

After the Second World War, Zapffe was a freelancer (*hjelpelærer*; *timelærer*), teaching an introductory course in philosophy (*Examen philosophicum*) at the University of Oslo. Although Zapffe worked at the Department of Philosophy, his reputation does not primarily stem from academic philosophy (with the possible exception of *On the Tragic*). Instead, Zapffe's publications in the post-war period cover a wide range of topics, including fiction, environmentalism, mountaineering, philosophy, dramaturgy, culture, religion, and politics. Zapffe's bestselling book was *Wits and Witless* (*Vett og Uvett*), a humorist masterpiece co-written with Einar K. Aas (1901–81).[3] Zapffe's *Collected Works* (*Samlede verker*) have been published in 10 volumes by Pax publishers (1996–99), and a selection of his works has been translated and published in German (Zapffe 1999a).[4] In 1978 he was awarded a lifetime government grant by the Norwegian parliament (*Storting*).

2 Zapffe on the Meaning of Life

In *On the Tragic*, Zapffe gives an account of the human condition by analyzing human nature and the basic features of our environment. Zapffe (1941, chapter 4) distinguishes between four different types of interests that are basic to human nature, namely biological, social, autotelic, and metaphysical interests. *Biological* interests concern our need for food and nourishment, whereas social interests concern our relations to fellow human beings (that go beyond biological interests). *Autotelic* interests concern activities that are ends in themselves and pursued for their own sake, that is, activities that are (biologically or socially) useless but have intrinsic value nevertheless.[5] *Metaphysical* interests, the interests Zapffe considers most important, concern our need for justice and the meaning of life.[6] Zapffe (1941, p. 69) uses wine as an example of these four interests. Wine has a biological

2 For more details, see Hessen/Bostad 1999; Haave 1999; Fremstedal 2001, 2005 and 2012a.

3 Zapffe/Aas 1942. Reprinted many times, notably in 1999 as volume 2 of Zapffe's *Samlede verker* (*Collected Works*). This work is based on Norwegian dialects and idiosyncrasies to such an extent that it is virtually impossible to translate.

4 For an English translation, see Zapffe 2004. See also the English summary in Zapffe 1996, pp. 619–622. It should also be noted that Zapffe's *Nachlass* has not been published, except for the excerpts found in Haave 1999.

5 Zapffe 1941, pp. 58–60.

6 Zapffe 1941, pp. 63–77.

value by providing drink and nourishment. It has a social value in dinners and social gatherings, and an autotelic value by being tasty or intoxicating. Finally, wine has a metaphysical value for Christians who participate in the Eucharist, since it contributes to meaning and justification that transcend other interests.

Zapffe is mainly interested in life as a whole rather than in its different periods or parts. *On the Tragic* analyses the meaning *of* life as a metaphysical interest, and to a lesser extent meaning *in* life as an autotelic interest. Autotelic meaning in life where life – or its parts – is lived for its own sake is thus distinguished from metaphysical meaning.[7] Metaphysical meaning differs from autotelic meaning by being heterotelic, by asking for something different (heteronomous) or external from life (existence) that provides meaning from the outside so to speak.[8] This involves asking why (*hvortil*) live?; what is the point of it all?[9] Zapffe thinks that meaning *in* life is insufficient, since meaning *of* life is also necessary.[10]

There seem to be two reasons for this central claim. First, Zapffe seems to think that meaning in life is primarily local, whereas the meaning of life is necessarily global. Although some activities in life have autotelic meaning, this does not necessarily mean that life as a whole has autotelic meaning. Second, Zapffe maintains that it is not enough to say that life is lived for its own sake, that it has autotelic value, since an external justification or meaning is also needed. Zapffe argues that some activities have autotelic value only for a limited period of time, because it eventually becomes clear that these activities depend on external factors or on the environment for their meaning.[11] He concludes that life is meaningless, since our lives cannot be externally justified. The earthly environment is judged to be an inadequate object for human interests, since it is impossible to realize metaphysical interests (meaning and justice) in this world.

Nevertheless, Zapffe insists that one should seek, or even demand, meaning and justice. This provides the background for his pessimism and antinatalism (the view that birth and human life in general is of negative value). In what follows, I will try first to reconstruct Zapffe's central argument and then try to raise objections against it, partially by making use of Kant's critical philosophy.

Zapffe (1941, p. 66) argues that different human activities normally stand in need of a meaning in order to be justified or worthwhile. Different human activities are typically linked together in chains such that one activity relies on a second

7 Zapffe 1941, p. 66.
8 Bostad 1999, p. 107; Fremstedal 2001, p. 28 and 2005, p. 82.
9 Zapffe 1941, p. 66.
10 Zapffe 1941, p. 66.
11 Bostad 1999, p. 108; Zapffe 1941, p. 62.

activity for its meaning and so forth. For example, I get up to go to work, and I work in order to support my family. However, this means that local meaning tends to rely on global meaning, since global meaning, the meaning of life as a whole, lies at the end of the chain.[12] Global meaning gives continuity and coherence to life as a whole, preventing it from disintegrating into mere fragments.[13]

Zapffe then argues that our understanding of life as a whole presupposes consciousness of death. Consciousness of death shows the finite and mortal character of human existence, giving us an idea of life as a limited whole.[14] Zapffe thinks that consciousness of death normally gives rise to the question of the meaning of life,[15] presumably since it leads us to ask "why live?" or "what is the point of life?". Zapffe (1941, p. 68) says that death puts a brutal and arbitrary end to our activities and engagements, stopping our projects and plans by burying our possibilities, hopes, and dreams. Thus, for Zapffe, death shows the meaninglessness of life and that there really is no point after all.[16] This leads him (1941, p. 68) to denounce death as something that should not be.

Although Zapffe is less than explicit, he suggests that activities are meaningful insofar as they realize some end or purpose.[17] Accordingly, the question of the meaning of life can be rephrased as a question about the *final end* of life, something which is a traditional idea in Western thought.[18] However, if life is meaningless (as Zapffe thinks it is), this can be given two different interpretations. It can either mean that life has some a final end which we necessarily fail to realize *or* it can mean that life simply lacks such an end.

Like many modern philosophers, Zapffe typically avoids speaking of the final end of life.[19] This may suggest that he thinks human life lacks a final end, that the classical notions of *eudaimonia* and *summum bonum* are left behind with the result that life as a whole is pointless or meaningless. However, it is clear that

12 Zapffe 1941, pp. 65–66; Bostad 1999, p. 108; Zapffe/Tønnesen/Næss 1983, p. 44.

13 Zapffe 1941, p. 63.

14 Zapffe 1941, pp. 64–65.

15 Zapffe 1941, p. 65. Zapffe also suggests that occasions such as New Year's Eve lead to reflections on life as a whole where we ask about the meaning of life and whether our lives are part of some larger scheme or plan. See Zapffe 1941, pp. 63–64.

16 Hessen 1999, p. 100.

17 Zapffe 1941, p. 65; Markussen 1999, p. 119.

18 Cf. Wimmer 1990, pp. 2–27, 57–77.

19 Julia Annas (1993, p. 33) comments: "Modern thinkers have found the notion of a single final end [of life as a whole] uncompelling (at least without added assumptions about rationality) because they have not taken thought about one's life as a whole to be the starting point for ethical reflection. For the ancients, however, it is unproblematic that the agent thinks of her life as a whole and that [...] ethical thinking begins with this."

Zapffe (1941, pp. 66–69) himself singles out one end in particular as an adequate expression of our most essential interests, namely the idea of a *moral world order* that represents our metaphysical interests. Zapffe takes this idea to involve (knowledge of) the meaning of life as well as perfect justice, thereby representing our metaphysical interests *in toto*. He describes the moral world order as an "order where everything has order, a plan, and meaning, [an order] where suffering – if it is necessary – is applied according to an economic principle so that the outcome is in accordance with needs. In short, an order where everything happens in a just manner according to each human's judgment."[20]

A moral world order is a purposive or providential order where everything has meaning and justice is done without any exception what so ever. Justice seems to consist in a causal relation between the individual's subjective disposition, will or motivation on the one hand and happiness or pleasure on the other.[21] More specifically, justice consists in (moral) virtue causing happiness (and unhappiness being caused only by vice). Accordingly, justice enables anyone with a good will to realize his interests and intentions in a non-arbitrary way. Although Zapffe does not say so, this suggests a *deontological* notion of ethics. More specifically, Zapffe's moral world order comes very close to Kant's idea of a moral world, the highest good (*summum bonum*), Kierkegaard's concept of eternal happiness (*Evig Salighed*) or even Nietzsche's moral world order (*sittliche Weltordnung*).[22] However, Zapffe thinks that we need the knowledge that the moral world order actually exists already now, something we will see that Kant denies is necessary or even desirable.

3 Zapffe's Reply to his Critics: Falsification of Religious Belief

Given the preceding analysis, we might ask why Zapffe is so pessimistic. Why does he deny that life has a metaphysical meaning if we can speak of life as having a purpose or a final end? What would Zapffe say to Kant, Kierkegaard or those who believe in a moral world order? The interpretation sketched above suggests that Zapffe's analysis of meaning is somewhat circular. The meaning of life depends

20 Zapffe 1941, p. 67.

21 Zapffe 1941, pp. 75, 259.

22 Regarding Zapffe and Nietzsche, see Fremstedal 2001. Regarding Zapffe and Kierkegaard, see Fremstedal 2005 and 2012a. Regarding Kant and Kierkegaard, see Fremstedal 2012b.

on the moral world order, an order defined partially in terms of meaning, partially in terms of justice. This suggests that the meaning of life consists in realizing meaning and justice.

This leads, however, to the question of whether we are capable of realizing meaning and justice or whether the moral world order is fundamentally outside of our reach. It seems clear that Zapffe would argue that the moral world order cannot possibly be realized as a result of individual effort. For Zapffe, the individual is (at best) capable of having a good will, something that is likely to expose him to tragedy or catastrophe on Zapffe's view.[23] Without going into Zapffe's detailed analysis of tragedy, this basically means that justice is lacking in the sense that (moral) virtue leads to unhappiness rather than happiness in the world (something with which Kant and Kierkegaard would partially agree).[24] However, Zapffe's analysis then leads to the following problem: We need a moral world order in order to live meaningful lives, but this order is impossible to realize (as a result of individual effort), because of injustice and meaninglessness in the world. Thus, the moral world order is both necessary and impossible simultaneously. Put in Kantian terms, we have an antinomy of practical reason in which the highest good, the idea of a moral world, is both necessary and impossible at the same time.[25]

However, the antinomy is not only apparent to Zapffe as it is to Kant, but it is very much real and inescapable. Kant argues that in order to know the moral world is impossible, we would have to transcend the limits of human knowledge, notably by knowing how our (noumenal) will affects the natural world (phenomena).[26] Against this, Zapffe would argue that in order to prove there is no moral world order we only need one clear case of injustice or meaninglessness. And Zapffe thinks there are plenty of cases in human history, including his own. Thus his refutation of the belief in a moral world order takes the form of a Popperian falsification:[27] One clear case of injustice or meaninglessness suffices to show that the moral world order does not exist.[28]

To this one might object that injustice in the history of mankind does not prevent the moral world order from being possible in the future. Zapffe would reply that if this were the case, it would not help those who have suffered injustice and meaninglessness in the past. The past cannot be justified by progress in the fu-

23 Fremstedal 2001, pp. 29–31.

24 For more details, see Fremstedal 2005 and 2012b.

25 Cf. Beiser 2006, p. 601; Milz 2002, pp. 328–331.

26 Cf. Kant 1968, pp. 114–115; Beiser 2006, p. 601; Hare 2002, p. 91; Wimmer 1990, pp. 97–108.

27 Markussen 1999, pp. 118–119; Rossvær 1999, p. 145; Fremstedal 2005, pp. 83–84.

28 Zapffe 1941, p. 411.

ture, since one case of injustice and meaninglessness is one too many. A moral world order that excludes human beings born at an earlier point in time is not a real moral world order at all but rather an unjust order. Thus Zapffe insists that one case of injustice or meaninglessness suffices to falsify belief in a moral world order.

Zapffe criticizes belief in God in the same way, arguing that one case of injustice or meaninglessness is sufficient to falsify the idea of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent. He therefore thinks that the problem of evil, particularly the existence of natural evil and innocent suffering, shows the impossibility of God (in the traditional Judeo-Christian sense of the term). Unlike Kant and Kierkegaard, Zapffe does not think that religious belief can resolve the antinomy arising from the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of the moral order, since this would involve the disingenuous denial of basic empirical facts about meaninglessness and injustice in the history of mankind.[29] At this point, Zapffe suggests that religious belief in a moral world order is an act of wishful thinking in which one sacrifices one's intellect in order to satisfy the longing for meaning and justice. Zapffe (1997, pp. 45–49) interprets this as an attempt to escape the difficulties of life by succumbing to psychological defense mechanisms that involve self-deception.

Zapffe concludes then that the earthly environment is an inadequate object for our interests, since it is impossible to realize metaphysical interests in this world. Nevertheless, Zapffe insists that we should seek, or even demand, meaning and justice.[30] This provides the background for what Zapffe himself describes as pessimism. He suggests that if God exists at all, then it seems clear that he is more of an almighty tyrant than a benevolent ruler. Instead of worshipping God, we should therefore rebel against him, Zapffe (1941, pp. 478–489) suggests.

4 Critical Remarks on Zapffe's Notion of the Meaning of Life

Existing scholarship (and even public opinion) has often found Zapffe's conclusions overly pessimistic, although it is often not clear exactly where Zapffe supposedly goes wrong. One common complaint is that Zapffe's pessimistic conclusions do not follow from his biological method or his empiricist approach

29 Fremstedal 2005, pp. 83–84.

30 Zapffe 1941, pp. 116–117, 335 and 1997, pp. 43–45, 51.

towards philosophy. Another complaint is that Zapffe's anti-religious existentialism is much more religious than Zapffe himself admits.[31] In what follows, I will suggest an alternative type of criticism by discussing Zapffe's metaphysical interest in meaning and justice.

We have seen that metaphysical meaning differs from autotelic meaning by being heterotelic. This means that an activity is only meaningful if it has some source of meaning that is external or different (heteronomous) from itself. In the case of life as a whole, this means that the meaning of life must have a source (or possibly a *telos*) that is different from life or outside of life.[32] This line of reasoning indicates that life as a whole can only have meaning if there is some transcendent source (or *telos*) that provides meaning. However, Zapffe often uses the term "existence" instead of "life," suggesting that existence requires a source of meaning outside of itself (e.g. God).[33] Zapffe insists that human beings demand meaning and justice, although these are not to be found in the world since the universe is indifferent towards our needs.

Zapffe interprets this as an inevitable conflict between our earthly environment and our nature (notably our metaphysical interests).[34] His analysis seems to presuppose that it would be possible to realize our metaphysical interests in another environment, in some possible world. However, this assumption about a possible world in which our metaphysical interests can be realized seems problematic. I will argue that, given Zapffe's basic premises, the conflict between ourselves and the environment is not contingent and avoidable as Zapffe claims. Since the demands Zapffe makes are necessarily impossible to realize (given his own premises), the demands should be given up or the basic premises revised.

It is Zapffe's notion of a source of meaning beyond life or existence that appears to generate difficulties at this point. He presupposes that this source could have been given but is in fact missing. But it is far from clear that such a source could have been given, if we accept Zapffe's view (or even related views) of human knowledge and human experience. Zapffe maintains that experience (*erfaringen*)

31 Cf. Hessen/Bostad 1999; Haave 1999. Although some commentators and readers are sympathetic to Zapffe, there have been very few attempts to defend Zapffe against his critics. Cf. Hessen/Bostad 1999.

32 Bostad 1999, p. 107; Fremstedal 2005, p. 82.

33 Zapffe uses the Norwegian word *Tilværelsen*, a term that corresponds to the German *Dasein*. Zapffe uses capitalization because he follows the 1907 *Riksmål* spelling he learned at school. This means that Zapffe's Norwegian is fairly close to Danish from the same period.

34 Zapffe's analysis at this point is reminiscent of Camus's concept of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). However, Zapffe developed this point independently of Camus in "The Last Messiah" (1933) and *On the Tragic* (1941).

is the healthiest source of thinking in general.[35] His philosophy is based on biology and is intended to address problems in a consistently *empiricist* manner.[36] Any belief that is not directly based on experience but rather on an extension of experience is said to be questionable at best.[37] But how can we experience a source of meaning outside of existence (or outside of life)? The source of meaning which plays such an important role in Zapffe's philosophy is not only at odds with his empiricism, but also appears to lie beyond the limits of possible experience.[38] He wants knowledge of the meaning of life instead of religious belief, but such knowledge is simply impossible.[39] Zapffe conceives of existence as a thing that is not only limited but also as something that should have a meaning outside itself.[40] He thereby understands something that is not a thing or an object (i.e. existence) as if it were a thing or object. In other words, he reifies existence (or life).[41]

Zapffe does not say anything about what could possibly serve as a source of metaphysical meaning, except that it must be something different from life or existence. He does not say whether God, immortality or even inorganic nature could serve as such a source in virtue of being external to life or existence. It seems clear, however, that God could not provide such meaning, since we cannot have any knowledge of the infinite, supersensual or supernatural as such based on sensory experience or our finite cognitive abilities. Neither can we experience God as an idea in the Kantian sense, since an idea is something that surpasses all experience. We run into similar problems if we entertain the possibility of immortality somehow providing meaning, since immortality is necessarily beyond the reach of possible experience as well. And religious belief is also unavailable to Zapffe because he thinks that it necessarily involves intellectual dishonesty.[42]

35 Zapffe 1941, p. 12; Bostad 1999, p. 108.

36 Zapffe 1999b, pp. 66–67; Bostad 1999, p. 113.

37 Zapffe 1999b, p. 67. Regarding Zapffe's scientism, empiricism, and biological method, see Åslund (1999, pp. 141–144). It should be noted, however, that Zapffe allows use of generalization, introspection, empathy and participatory understanding of others in order to understand tragedy. See Zapffe 1941, p. 12.

38 Fremstedal 2005, p. 37; cf. Hessen 1999, p. 102.

39 Bostad 1999, p. 114. Rossvær (1999, p. 137) concludes that Zapffe's biological view of the world (*verdensbilde*) is tied to fundamental presuppositions that can *prevent* us from finding meaning. However, the reasons Rossvær provides are different from the ones provided above.

40 Fremstedal 2001, p. 82 and 2005, p. 37.

41 At this point Arnfinn Åslund (1999, p. 148) criticizes Zapffe for relying on the "metaphysics of presence".

42 Fremstedal 2005, pp. 83–84. However, the situation looks quite different if we consider inorganic nature as a possible source of meaning on the grounds that it is outside of life (but not necessarily outside of existence). It seems that we can experience inorganic nature and have knowledge

5 Problems with the Moral World Order

So far we have focused on one of the metaphysical interests, namely the meaning of life. However, the above interpretation indicates that Zapffe connects the meaning of life with justice, since meaning is linked to our final end – a moral world order consisting of meaning together with justice. We might ask then whether Zapffe's conception of justice can be realized in some possible world (even if his conception of meaning cannot). In order to discuss this, I will briefly use a thought experiment Kant formulates in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*.[43] The thought experiment assumes the existence and knowledge of a moral world that rewards (moral) virtue with happiness and punishes (moral) vice with unhappiness. In other words, it assumes the existence of something very like Zapffe's moral world order. Although such a moral world might seem highly desirable (Zapffe certainly thinks so), Kant actually argues that it is not, at least not in the sense that the moral world should have been realized from the beginning.

Kant asks what would be the result of possessing insight (*Erleuchtung*) into the relation between happiness and virtue.[44] More specifically, he asks what would be the consequence of knowing that virtue leads to happiness, given an interest in both. Kant argues that if the outcomes (consequences) of actions were not uncertain, then we would act not from duty, but from fear of punishment or hope of reward.[45] Our interest in happiness would undermine morality, since we would be motivated by happiness – not duty. If we knew that virtue led to happiness, and vice to unhappiness, then we would act *in order to* become happy. Virtue would be reduced to an instrument in the quest for happiness, and morality reduced to prudence. Kant argues that we would only be able to do good for its own sake if

about it, but it is far from clear how it could possibly provide a fundamental meaning of life as a whole even in a possible world that is different from ours. It should be mentioned that Zapffe's philosophical works may differ from his works on mountaineering, nature, and environmentalism at this point. Whereas the philosophical works (notably *On the Tragic* and "The Last Messiah") see the conflict between individual and surroundings as inescapable, the works on mountaineering and nature suggest otherwise. The philosophical works depict the human condition as meaningless, whereas the works on mountaineering suggest a notion of meaningful meaninglessness. See Markussen 1999.

43 Kant 1968, pp. 146–147 and 1968–72, pp. 1083–1084. See Fremstedal 2012b for a more detailed analysis.

44 Kant 1968, pp. 146–147.

45 Kant 1968, pp. 146–147.

we could ignore the insight into the relation between virtue and happiness, something he thinks is virtually impossible for humans beings.[46]

Kant concludes that it is beneficial that such insight is not available to us. It is desirable that the moral world remains distant and uncertain, and that virtue is *not* straightforwardly rewarded with happiness (or vice punished with unhappiness).[47] The upshot is that we *can only be moral in an imperfect world*, a world in which virtue does not always lead to happiness and the outcomes of actions are uncertain. Kant concludes: "If there were no disproportion at all between morality and well-being here in this world, there would be no opportunity for us to be truly virtuous."[48]

This thought experiment is supposed to show that the relation between virtue and happiness must be opaque in this world. Therefore, morality requires ignorance and the possibility of unhappiness. This suggests that ignorance and the possibility of unhappiness form necessary presuppositions for morality. However, it does not say how much unhappiness must be possible. It only says that moral agency presupposes *friction* or some type of struggle: Moral freedom cannot overlap completely with nature and happiness. Because of the very nature of moral agency, there must be a *gap* between freedom and nature, and virtue and happiness, which cannot be completely bridged in this life. Thus Kant makes *constitutive* assumptions about the moral structure of the world on practical (moral) grounds.[49] Susan Neiman comments:

> The best of all possible worlds is not a world we could live in, for the very notion of human freedom depends on limitations. To act freely is always to act *without* enough knowledge or power – that is, without omniscience or omnipotence. Not knowing whether our good intentions will be rewarded is essential to our having them [...]. Solving the problem of evil is not only impossible but immoral. For knowing the connections between moral and natural evils [unhappiness, suffering] would undermine the possibility of morality. (Neiman 2004, p. 68)

Kant's thought experiment raises some questions that cannot be dealt with here.[50] Although there are some difficulties with his argument, it nevertheless indicates that Zapffe's demand for a moral world is problematic, since Zapffe seems committed to denying the friction or struggle necessary for human agency and hence to reducing morality to prudence. His notion of a moral world order seems to

46 Fremstedal 2012b, pp. 25–29.

47 Cf. Kant 1968, p. 147.

48 Kant 2001, p. 414 and 1968–72, pp. 1081–1082.

49 Cf. Beiser 2006, pp. 620–622; Fremstedal 2012b, pp. 29–32.

50 See Fremstedal 2012b for more details and references to relevant literature.

presuppose that the individual can have a good will or disposition without struggling with natural evil, moral evil or inclinations. Kant, on the other hand, argues that moral virtue presupposes resistance, since virtue is a feature of a non-holy rational being who struggles against his inclinations and even moral evil. Kant conceives of virtue as "the form in which a rational being with a non-holy will expresses her supreme commitment to morality: as a continually cultivated capacity to master her inclinations so as to fulfill all her duties, a capacity whose cultivation and exercise is motivated by respect for the moral law." (Denis 2006, p. 513)

Zapffe's moral world order threatens to undermine the need for action, since it is not clear how we could have incentives for acting if we did not have difficulties or discontentment that we struggled to overcome. Kant argues that "ill [*Übel*] is necessary if the human being is to have a wish and an aspiration [*Verlangen* – demand] towards a better state [*Zustand*], and at the same time to learn to strive to become worthy of it."[51] This means that discontentment is necessary if man is to strive for something better and to become worthy of it by being moral. Kant says that contentment without desire, a pure pleasure, would result in the most useless human being in the world, a being that lacks the incentive (*Triebfeder*) to act. We cannot frame a correct concept of happiness except by thinking of it as *progress towards contentment*, since happiness and pleasure presuppose pain and discontentment.[52] For us, happiness is labor (*Arbeit*), difficulty (*Schwierigkeit*), and effort (*Mühe*) with the prospect of tranquility (*Ruhe*).[53]

This suggests an endless striving towards a regulative idea, an idea that cannot be fully reached in this life. This striving does not involve simply accepting or justifying the present situation as it is, since that would mean succumbing to the evil and injustice in the world. The point is rather to accept our circumstances and to endure them because this is seen as leading to reconciliation in the future through rational reform and historical progress towards the highest good. In this way, Kant appears to view the present situation as unacceptable (in its actuality) and acceptable (in its potentiality) at the same time. Zapffe, on the other hand, simply judges the human condition to be morally unacceptable (Zapffe 1997, p. 51). Zapffe's philosophy involves a radical alienation from our imperfect world, whereas Kant's critical philosophy seeks to reconcile us with it while stressing the need for reform and progress.

Kant's thought experiment is not only relevant for Kantian ethics but seems to hold for any type of ethics that acknowledges a distinction between moral-

51 Kant 1968–72, p. 1081.

52 Himmelmann 2003, pp. 15–23 and p. 184.

53 Kant 1968–72, p. 1080.

ity and mere prudence. (This includes, for example, the existential ethics of Kierkegaard.[54]) Recent scholarship on virtue ethics has, for instance, argued convincingly that moral virtue is valuable in itself, not merely as a means for reaching (individual or general) happiness.[55] If we accept this central ethical point, then it seems to follow that Zapffe's notion of justice is questionable since it reduces morality to prudence, something that seems problematic for reasons external and internal to Zapffe's theory.

Zapffe himself believes that some things or projects have intrinsic or non-instrumental value, including not only autotelic interests but also the quest for the meaning of life and sympathy towards fellow human beings as well as attempts to extend one's consciousness and refine one's sensibility.[56] Zapffe considers morality to be indispensable and tends to rely on a deontological notion of ethics.[57] Indeed, Zapffe's pessimism revolves around the human tendency to make moral demands on the world.[58] Zapffe even goes as far as to argue that, since our essential interests are impossible to realize, we are thereby morally obligated to exterminate humanity altogether,[59] or at the very least to decrease the population drastically (Zapffe 1941, p. 402). Thus Zapffe's metaphysical interests lead to antinatalism.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that Zapffe's metaphysical interests, both the interest in meaning and the interest in justice, are problematic. I have first and foremost argued that Zapffe's metaphysical interests lead to problems given his own premises and, to a lesser extent, indicated how the metaphysical interests are at odds with other theories (notably Kant's critical philosophy) and how they lead to an overly pessimistic worldview. The conclusion that appears to follow from the preceding anal-

54 Regarding Kierkegaard's influence on Zapffe, see Fremstedal 2012a. I have elsewhere argued that Kierkegaard follows Kant in seeing ethics as something that presupposes discontentment and uncertainty. Both thinkers argue that moral agency and moral motivation require this world to be imperfect in the sense of having restricted knowledge and in the sense that moral virtue does not automatically lead to happiness. Thus, both Kant and Kierkegaard make constitutive assumptions about the moral structure of the world on practical grounds (Fremstedal 2012b).

55 See Annas 1993, pp. 125, 127–128, 225–227, 260–290; Horn 1998, pp. 202–213, 220–224. See also Hare 2001, pp. 78–84.

56 Zapffe 1941, pp. 391–393; cf. Fremstedal 2001, p. 30.

57 Cf. Åslund 1999, p. 146; Markussen 1999, p. 119.

58 Fremstedal 2001, p. 26 and 2005, pp. 81, 83, 94–95.

59 Zapffe 1997, p. 51; cf. Zapffe/Tønnesen/Næss 1983, p. 60.

ysis is that Zapffe should either give up his metaphysical interests or give up his empiricism, his anti-religious views, and his moral commitments. More specifically, Zapffe's views on the meaning of life contravene his own empiricism, since they appear to transcend the limits of possible experience. Zapffe wants knowledge of the meaning of life instead of religious belief, but such knowledge seems impossible given his own premises. His focus on the meaning of life also tends to overshadow the importance of meaning in life.[60]

As we saw, Zapffe's demand for metaphysical justice also leads to problems, since it seems to reduce morality to prudence and to deny the friction and struggle necessary for human agency. Plausibly, the upshot is that Zapffe must either give up his notion of (metaphysical) justice or change his views on ethics and human agency. Thus, it seems that Zapffe's notions of justice and meaning are both problematic, since they appear to be at odds with other elements in Zapffe's theory and lead to an overly pessimistic interpretation of the human condition. If Zapffe's metaphysical interests are untenable, this also means that the hard core of Zapffe's pessimistic existentialism is likewise untenable. Although he may have been aware of some of these difficulties, he nevertheless insisted that metaphysical needs are the most important needs for human beings.[61]

The criticism set forth in this paper aims to undermine the central tenets of Zapffe's existential philosophy as it is found in *On the Tragic* and "The Last Messiah". It does not, however, aim to undermine Zapffe's contributions to other fields. Zapffe's work is rightly known for its literary qualities. Zapffe is particularly good at describing phenomena such as meaninglessness, injustice, alienation, and the death of God. His descriptions not only have strong literary qualities but also resemble phenomenological descriptions found in other existentialist philosophers and theologians. His philosophy represents an original contribution to continental existentialism and Norwegian philosophy. This is perhaps especially noteworthy since Norway does not have a philosophical tradition of its own but has rather been dominated by continental and analytic philosophy.

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60 Cf. Bostad 1999, p. 107.

61 Zapffe 1941, pp. 63, 69; Fremstedal 2005, pp. 82–83.

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