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The Paradox of the End*

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We set ourselves ends and strive to achieve them. We hope that their attainment will improve our condition. The closer we get to our goals, the happier we feel. Paradoxically, however, when we finally do achieve them our joy is sometimes diminished. We have a sense of insignificance and emptiness, and we feel that in attaining our goal we have lost the meaningfulness and balance we experienced while we were striving towards it. In some ways, it seems to us, the struggle is more gratifying than the achievement of the end.

This view has found expressions both in philosophy and in literature. Pascal says that 'One loves the hunt more than the capture'[1] and Rousseau that 'One enjoys less what one obtains than what one hopes for'.[2] Lessing writes that if God would let him choose between the complete truth on the one hand and the striving for truth on the other, he would choose the latter, since pure truth is for God alone; and Kierkegaard quotes him approvingly in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.[3] This intuition also occurs in literature. Shakespeare has Cressida say 'Things won are done, Joy's soul lies in doing'.[4] It is a major theme in Goethe's *Faust*, where the fulfilled life is understood as one of unending striving and activity. Faust defies the Devil to bring him to total satisfaction. Although at the end of his varied life Faust does admit that he is satisfied, this condition is the consequence not of the achievement of a certain static end, but of continuous activity for the sake of humanity. Thus is Faust redeemed and carried to heaven. Life as infinite striving is also the moral of Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. The same intuition is again expressed in Robert Louis Stevenson's 'To travel hopefully is a better thing than to

*I am greatly indebted to Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, Franz Nauen, Eitan Felner, Zeev Rosenhek, and Saul Smilansky for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

[1] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, II, 139.

[2] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie ou la nouvelle héloïse*, VI, viii (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1960, 681).

[3] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, 'Eine Duplik', *Lessings Sämtliche Schriften*, Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker (eds), 23 vols. (Leipzig: G. J. Göschen, 1897), vol. 13, 24. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1944), 97.

[4] *Troilus and Cressida*, act 1 sc. 2.

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arrive';[5] Oscar Wilde's 'In the world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is the real tragedy';[6] and Constantine Cavafy's 'Ithaca'.[7]

I call this feeling. 'The Paradox of the End'. I argue in this article that it is an important and neglected expression of the existentialist notions of meaninglessness and Absurd. Moreover, I claim that many philosophical and religious systems can be seen as incorporating efforts to cope with this paradox. In section 1 I elaborate on the nature of this paradox of the end. In section 2 I show the principal ways in which theories and movements as different as determinism and mysticism, Judaism and Protestantism, Kant's theoretical philosophy and Stoicism, include attempts to address this problem, and conjecture why it has become more acute in modern times.

1

We usually understand ourselves as acting for a certain purpose; actions and thoughts are directed towards achieving a certain end. As long as we are in the process towards achieving that end we feel that our activity has meaning. The project we are engaged in bestows significance and equilibrium on our lives and activities. Without the goal, we feel that our activity, or being, is aimless and pointless. For this reason, we sometimes feel that striving towards an end is better than having actually achieved it. This is one way of expressing the paradox of the end.

However, if achieving our ends makes us lose our feeling of happiness and significance, then it seems that we should *not* try to achieve them, or even try *not* to achieve them. But if we do not try to achieve the ends (or if we try not to achieve them), we again lose the feeling of purposefulness and significance we wanted to retain.

[5] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'El Dorado', *Virginibus Puerisque* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1932), 184.

[6] Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, act 3; see also nearly the same phrase in George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, act 4.

[7] When you start on your journey to Ithaca
then pray that the road is long
.....
Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.
Without her you would never have taken the road.
But she has nothing more to give you.

Constantine Cavafy, 'Ithaca' (1911), *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, trans. Rae Dalven (London: Hogarth, 1961), 36–7.

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Hence, we ought both try and not try to achieve our ends, at one and the same time. We should try to achieve our ends, because if we do not we shall lose the happiness and meaningfulness that our striving towards them has given to our lives. But we should also *not* try to achieve our ends, since if we do achieve them we shall lose the happiness and meaningfulness that our striving towards them gave to our lives. We should try, then, both to realize and not to realize our goals. This is yet another way of experiencing the paradox of the end.

But this also means that the end of the activity is, in fact, its means, and what has been previously seen as its means—the end. The end is not valuable in itself; its value lies in its giving significance and direction to our efforts to achieve it (as long as it is believed to be important). It is our activities and life, which have so far been seen as the means, which are really the end. This is yet another expression of the paradox of the end.

But once the means and ends of an activity are understood in this way, we sense that the significance we used to feel in our activities vanishes. The moment we know that we do not really want the end itself, but have need of it only so that our lives should have some meaning, the end stops being important and significant. But if this happens, the end ceases to bestow importance and significance on the efforts to achieve it. We feel, to paraphrase Voltaire, that if there were no ends we would have needed to invent them (which we in fact frequently do). But once we are aware that we are inventing them, there is no point in our doing so. If we know that the end does not really matter, but is only a pretext for feeling that our life and activities are not aimless, they revert to the condition of aimlessness. All these are further expressions of the paradox.

The paradox reminds one of the story of Sisyphus as told, among others, by Cicero and Ovid.[8] Sisyphus was condemned by the Gods to roll a huge block of marble uphill. Whenever he managed to reach the top of the mountain the rock would roll down and he would have to start his labours all over again. According to the paradox, we (like Sisyphus) spend our entire lives in continuous and unending exertions, only to lose happiness and fulfilment just when we think we have attained them, and perpetually having to go back and start pushing the stone uphill again.

The story has nothing to say of how aware Sisyphus was of the paradox. Perhaps he carried out his task without giving it much thought. Or he perhaps understood that he was engaged in a repetitive activity in which he could never succeed, and which was

[8] Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* i, 5. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* iv, 459.

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therefore meaningless. Like him, we make our way in life with different degrees of awareness of the paradox of the end.

But the myth would have portrayed the paradox even better had it continued thus: one day, after pushing the marble block to the top of the mountain, Sisyphus realized that it was not rolling down again. He was surprised at first, then jubilant. He had finally made it. Excited but very tired, he lay down next to the rock whose weight he had overcome, happy that his unceasing toil had at last ended. He slept for many hours and then, waking up, he again looked triumphantly at the rock and the slope of the hillside. After having rested some more he leisurely looked around for the first time in a very long while at the beautiful view from the top of the mountain. He continued to rest, savouring this new experience, enjoying the thought that he had conquered not only the stone, but also the Gods. He had finally managed to lift the curse. He relaxed some more; but oddly enough he was feeling less and less comfortable now. As time passed, he became to his astonishment increasingly restless. Slowly he began to understand that in fact the God's curse was much more subtle and terrible than he had ever imagined, and that he had not managed to break the curse at all, but had only worsened his position. He stood up, sighed, went over to the stone and pushed it down from the hilltop himself. He watched it rolling down, walked down slowly after it, and again started pushing it uphill.[9]

I take the paradox of the end to be a major source and explanation of the feelings, discussed by both existentialists and non-existentialists, of the Absurd and of the meaninglessness of life. Like other sources of the feeling of meaninglessness (and as the feeling of meaninglessness itself) it is often disregarded or denied. But again like them, it is hard to get rid of completely. Many of us feel at least sometimes that our 'important ends' are merely pretexts which we invent so as to be able to believe that our activities are significant. Implicitly we sense a thread of self-deception in our activity. The intensity with which we experience the paradox varies, as does our success in suppressing it. But I contend that on some level, at least, it continues always to haunt many of us. It is the source and explanation of the indistinct feeling of existential discomfort and self-deception that we sense when we act and achieve our goals.

[9] It is interesting to note that Odysseus—Sisyphus' son, according to Ovid (*Metamorphoses,* xiii, 31)—also began his labours all over again, immediately after having achieved his goal. Following a long and hard journey home, full of temptations and perils, and after defeating Penelope's suitors and reclaiming his kingdom, Odysseus for no apparent reason sets out on his travels again.

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The paradox remains almost invariably unrecognized. Writers who assert that striving is better than achieving almost always do so very cursorily, and without elaborating on the significance of this observation for the feelings of the Absurd and the meaninglessness of life. Of the authors I cited earlier as having said that to travel is better than to arrive, only Pascal and Rousseau have to some extent linked this with the meaninglessness of the paradox of the end. Pascal says that people continuously seek to occupy themselves with new challenges so as to divert their minds from what they feel threatens them, such as illness or death. They constantly look for new commitments so that they need not think about themselves.[10] Rouseau maintains that our happiness disappears when the object of our desire is possessed, so that 'one can be happy only before becoming happy'.[11] But even Pascal and Rousseau do not look fully into the theme of the paradox of the end, and are not aware of all its implications.

Likewise, authors who discuss the Absurd or the meaninglessness of life hardly mention the paradox of the end at all. Writers such as Schopenhauer, Martineau, Tolstoy, Russell, or Camus[12] emphasize other issues—e.g. death, the irrationality in our being, the eventual destruction of the cosmos—as accounting for the feeling that life is meaningless. Schopenhuaer does observe that whenever we are satisfied we also feel empty and bored, and must therefore immediately look for other ends. But for him, a pessimist, the way towards the end is in any case so painful that the value of the end has no influence on the way we achieve it at all. Thus Schopenhauer declares that 'life swings ... like a pendulum between the pain and the boredom', but he does not relate this to the paradox of the end.[13] Camus sees the myth of Sisyphus as a fable of the repetitive hardships in our lives, against which we should revolt; but he too does not relate it to the paradox of the end. The neglect of the paradox by such authors, who have devot-

[10] See note 1 above.

[11] See note 2 above.

[12] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, bk. 4, sect. 56–59; supp. to bk. 4, chap. 46. James Martineau, *Modern Materialism and its Relation to Religion and Theology* (New York: Putnam, 1877). Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, trans. Alymer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1940). Bertrand Russell, 'A Free Man's Worship', in *Mysticism and Logic* (New York: Unwin, 1951). Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942).

[13] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, bk. 4, sect. 57, in *Sämmtliche Werke*, Julius Frauenstädt (ed.), 6 vols. (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1891), vol. 2, p. 368.

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ed so much of their efforts to expounding the different senses of the Absurd and of the meaninglessness of life, is surprising, since the paradox seems to be so central to these notions.

2

However, this article purposes to do more than to show that the paradox of the end is an important but neglected source of the feeling that life is meaningless. As an aspect of this feeling, the paradox is an issue which philosophical and religious systems, whose aim in part is to give significance to our lives, have to cope with. Indeed, I argue that just as many of these systems incorporate, even implicitly, the endeavour to cope with other aspects of the feeling that life is meaningless (e.g. death, the irrationality of the world), so too do they incorporate—and again, often unawares—the effort to cope with the paradox of the end.[14] They do so in a few types of ways. Some systems, of course, do not incorporate any of these ways; others, by contrast, include more than one.

One way to cope implicitly with the paradox is to stipulate a transcendent end. As such, it can never be attained. It may be possible to get closer and closer to the end asymptotically; but there is no danger that one day we shall actually achieve it. Thus, we can continue to strive to achieve such an end, to feel that it is really worthy and full of content, and to enjoy the balance and significance that our effort to achieve it gives our lives, without suffering from the paradox of the end.

This method of coping with the paradox is found, for example, in Plato.[15] With the exception of the mystically oriented *Symposium* and the *Seventh Letter*,[16] Plato's general doctrine is that knowledge is transcendent; some things are not knowable by the human

[14] Thus, I disagree here with Camus, who maintains that the great philosophical systems do not incorporate efforts to cope with the meaninglessness of life. He respects the great philosophical figures for trying to achieve a complete understanding of reality. However, he thinks that all in all they have occupied themselves with unimportant, theoretical questions, instead of dealing with the question of meaninglessness or, as he calls it, the problem of suicide (*Le mythe de Sisyphe*, p. 15).

[15] See Amihud Gilead, 'Plato's Eros, Camus' Sisyphus, and the Impossibility of Philosophical Satisfaction', *CLIO* **17**, (1988): 323–344.

[16] See *Symposium*, 210E, 212A; Seventh Letter 341C–D, saying that it is possible to grasp Beauty by uniting with it suddenly, as with a blaze or a spark.

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mind.[17] Hence only the gods, not human beings, can rightly be called wise.[18] Socrates, whom the oracle at Delphi declared to be the wisest of all mortals, knows only that he does not know.[19] Appropriately, his dialogues end not with a fixed conclusion but an *aporia*. Thus, Plato understands 'philosophy' literally, as love of wisdom (*philosophia*), precisely the state which Hegel, at the beginning of his *Phenomenology*, promises finally to overcome: the state in which one has not attained wisdom, but only strives towards it.[20]

Similarly, for Kant, we have an insatiable natural disposition to know.[21] But the effort to achieve knowledge which transcends the phenomenal world only leads to antinomies.[22] Hence, we should learn to set limits to our discontented cognitive impetus and accept that some things—*noumena*—are beyond our reach.[23] But we also have what Kant calls the Ideas. These are not *a posteriori*; yet neither are they *a priori* in the constitutive way that categories are: they are regulative. Being complete and unconditional, they serve as ideal goals that help to organize our experience but can never be actually achieved.[24] We can get asymptotically ever closer to them, but they can never be fully attained.[25]

The same type of solution also appears in Fichte, Lessing and Kierkegaard.[26]

More examples of this type of coping with the paradox of the end can be found in the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. They all pose a transcendent God who can be obeyed, prayed to, striven towards, perhaps even approached more closely, but never completely reached. Thus, the activities related to God can remain meaningful, and do not suffer, as striving for achievable and limited ends does, from the meaninglessness related to the paradox of the end.

[17] *Parmenides*, 135A.

[18] *Phaedrus*, 278D.

[19] *Apology*, 21D.

[20] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede (eds), 14 vols., (Hamburg: Meiner, 1980), vol. 9, p. 11.

[21] *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 21, 352–53, 670.

[22] Ibid. 'The Dialectical Inferences of Pure Reason'.

[23] Ibid. 294–309.

[24] Ibid. 670–696.

[25] Ibid. 691.

[26] Fichte, *Science of Knowledge* (*Wissenschaftslehre*), Second Introduction, section 11, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Meredith, 1970) 84. Lessing: See note 3 above. Søren Kirekegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 84, 85, 350.

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Other ways to cope with the paradox of the end are based on stipulating activities which are not founded on the categories of means/end, thereby not letting the paradox of the end emerge at all. This is done, for example, when the stipulated activity is understood as one's duty, and is performed not in order to achieve a goal, but as part of an observance of a law or a command. Thus the actual result of the activity becomes irrelevant. Of course, it is good if the end is actually achieved, and one should try one's best to do it. However, one ought to do so only because it is part of one's duty. If one has tried one's best to achieve the end, but has nevertheless failed because of various contingent conditions, one should not be downcast.

This is the type of activity stipulated, for example, in Kant's moral theory. According to Kant, our moral activity should be motivated not by the wish to achieve an end, but by respect for the law.[27] We should act not only according to the dictates of duty, but also *from* duty.[28] Kant even goes so far as to reject the traditional positive evaluation of moral desires. Although these may be present in our minds when we act morally, the moral activity should be motivated and directed only by the moral law and our respect for it. Acting from duty is also stipulated in mainstream Judaism, where the mere performance of certain religious activities—the rationale behind which is obedience to God's law—is stressed more than religious feelings, intentions, or even beliefs.

The third way of coping with the paradox of the end is employed in some forms of mysticism, in which the ends are identified with the means. Thus activity in the sublime state does not suffer from the paradox, since it is simultaneously both the means and the end. It is its own end and its own means, so there is no difference in it between means and end. For example, we find Meister Eckhart, in his commentary on the story of Martha in the New Testament, characterizing the correct activity as one which is neither a means nor an end but is both at the same time, overcoming in this way the two categories. Likewise, he also tells us that in order to achieve the sublime state we should *not* try to achieve it, since this would obstruct rather than facilitate our entering into it.[29]

[27] *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, chap. 1.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatise and Defence*, trans. E. Colledge and B. McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981) 168–9, 172–3, 178, 183–4, 264–265. Meister Eckhart: *A Modern Translation*, trans. R. B. Blakney (New York: Harper and Row, 1941) 136–7.

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An almost similar way of coping with the paradox is suggested in theories prescribing an activity which is an end to itself. Being performed for its own sake, the activity again transcends the means/end categories. This can be found, for example, in the Stoic teaching that virtue, the only thing which is good in a complete way, is its own end and should be done for its own sake without any ulterior motive,[30] as well as, again, in Kant's moral theory.

A fourth method of dealing with the paradox is suggested in theories of complete determinism. According to these, although it may *appear* to us that we freely choose and try to achieve ends which seem worthy to us, we are actually totally predestined to act as we do. Accepting this doctrine we can go on behaving and choosing as we have been doing, but we know that in fact everything we do is determined. We no longer fear that the ends which motivated us to act may not really be worthy in themselves, and therefore that the activity geared towards them may also be meaningless, or that other goals are probably meaningless too, and hence the whole activity directed towards them is insignificant, etc. When the understanding of our activity changes, and it is grasped that we *must* do what we do, the feeling of meaninglessness related to the paradox of the end should disappear.[31]

This method of coping with the paradox of the end appears, for example, in Spinoza's metaphysics. According to Spinoza there is a complete necessity in everything.[32] Nothing, including God's activity, could either be or happen otherwise than it is and does.[33] Our feeling of freedom and choice is merely an illusion; if the falling stone could talk, it too would exclaim that it freely chose to fall.[34] Analogous views can be found in the Stoa[35] and in theistic systems which emphasize predestination, such as Calvinism.

A fifth way of relating to the paradox, even if not of coping with it, is found in nihilism and pessimism. In these world views our endeavours and activities are explicitly pronounced meaningless. Such teachings, then, seem to relate to the paradox of the end by

[30] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VII, 89.

[31] Note, however, that seeing all our activities as predestined poses difficulties of its own. The paradox is solved at the price of making our activities analogous to those of an automaton. Thus, although deterministic theories can eliminate the frustration involved in the paradox of the end, they may arouse the feeling of meaninglessness in other ways.

[32] *Ethics*, part I, props. 26–29.

[33] Ibid. prop. 17, proof, cor. 1, 2, and note.

[34] Letter 58 in the Gebhardt Edition.

[35] A. C. Pearson, *The Fragments of Zeno and Cleanthes* (London: Clay 1891), Frag. 91.

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simply accepting it. This way of relating to the paradox is exemplified *inter alia* in Schopenhauer. According to him the nonexistence of the world would have been preferable to its existence. All happiness is an illusion and is bound to be frustrated, and there is nothing which is really valuable.

The sixth and last of the ways of implicitly coping with the paradox to be discussed here is found in Camus, and is somewhat close to the nihilistic one. Here, too, the paradox is accepted; however, it is not succumbed to. Camus holds that existence is absurd; he denies the basic presupposition of almost all philosophical theories—namely that reality is ordered and that there is an explanation of why things are as they are. Hence, although we may delude ourselves into thinking that we choose and act rationally, our choices are in fact arbitrary. In spite of this fact, and while remaining conscious of it, we should nevertheless continue to act, introducing meaning into our lives by our own decision. This meaning would be arbitrary and subjective; but it would be meaning just the same. The mode of activity and being that Camus proposes seems to be immune from the paradox of the end. Even if, as part of our meaningful activity, we continue to set ends for ourselves and to fulfil them, we are no longer shocked by the fact that they are invented so that life might have meaning, though in themselves they are meaningless. We realize that everything we do is part of an arbitrary, subjective decision to introduce meaning into our lives.

All these solutions to the paradox of the end (apart from the fifth, nihilistic one, which is really not a solution at all) are effective. Indeed, the decline of philosophies, religions, and mentalities which endorse acting from duty, trying to achieve transcendent ends, understanding behaviour as predetermined, or identifying means and ends, is related to the predominance of the paradox of the end in our culture. Furthermore, while the understanding of ourselves as acting in these ways has become less common, interpreting our activities by the means/end categories has become more common. We interpret ourselves in terms of these categories to a greater extent than ever before; in our instrumental culture we tend to understand ourselves almost exclusively as choosing certain goals as worthy, selecting the best means to achieve them, and then proceeding to do so. And, of course, the paradox of the end could not have arisen so long as one of the major ends which preoccupied most people was survival. Survival impressed itself as an important end with an instinctive force which could not be doubted. Moreover, it was an end that was never fully achieved, for there were always more dangers to be expected. It is only in our

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technological and relatively affluent culture, when day-to-day survival in the face of hunger, disease, and natural calamities has ceased to be an issue for most (Western) people, that the paradox of the end could arise. We can thus expect that if our culture continues along the path it has taken, the paradox will become increasingly explicit and acute. But this, in turn, may lead to a renewed interest in philosophical or religious movements whose systems incorporate the methods of coping with the paradox of the end.

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