

THE AIM OF PHILOSOPHY: SATISFYING CURIOSITY OR ATTAINING SALVATION?

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I begin with remarks made by Bernard Williams that there are two main motives for philosophy, curiosity and salvation, and that he is not 'into salvation'. I seek to make the case for the claim that philosophy, at its best, should aim at a kind of 'salvation'. In the first section, I discuss the problematic character of the world that philosophy should aim to address as a matter of seeking a kind of salvation. I identify this as the problem of 'cosmodicy', i.e., the problem of how to justify life in the world as meaningful and worthwhile in the face of extensive evil, suffering, disorder, and the like. In the second section, I discuss how Williams's claim not to be 'into salvation' is not entirely accurate. Although he rejects a certain 'grand' traditional picture of salvation, he still seeks a more minimal kind insofar as he addresses the problem of cosmodicy. This comes through in his advocacy of 'humane' philosophy and in his attempt to support the values that arise for us from within our historically contingent forms of life. I argue here that Williams is wrong to reject the human concern for a larger cosmic significance. In the final section, I discuss two secular attempts to address the issue of cosmic significance: viz., those of Thomas Nagel and Paolo Costa. I also briefly consider here what a theistic perspective has to offer. I conclude by suggesting that if I am right that philosophy, at its best, should aim at a kind of salvation, then this means that the philosophy of religion should have a central place in any philosophy curriculum.

KEYWORDS

Philosophy, cosmodicy, absurdity, disenchantment, comic Enchantment, salvation.

‘Stuart Hampshire used to say that historically, there have been two motives for philosophy. One was curiosity and the other was salvation. [...] I am not into salvation’.

Bernard Williams¹

In *La ragione e i suoi eccessi* (‘Reason and Its Excesses’), Paolo Costa defends an ideal of philosophy that inescapably leads to certain ‘reasonable excesses’.² In particular, the urge to philosophize (as he puts it), at its best, leads us to pursue a synoptic vision of the world that is always to some extent beyond our cognitive reach. In this essay I seek to add further support to this conception of philosophy by suggesting that the urge to philosophize, at its best, is an expression of our nature as ‘meaning-seeking animals’, which can more controversially be formulated in terms of our being *homo religiosus*.³ I take as my starting point the above remark by Williams regarding the two primary motives for philosophy: curiosity and salvation. Although Williams says he is not ‘into salvation’, I seek to make the case for the claim that philosophy, at its best, should aim at a kind of ‘salvation’. In speaking of philosophy ‘at its best’, I am deploying a normative view of philosophy: a view of how philosophy is best conceived and the ideal way of pursuing it. Such a view is derivative from an understanding of the human condition and of what is most admirable about us as human beings and thus integral to human fulfillment.

In the first section, I discuss the problematic character of the world that philosophy should aim to address as a matter of seeking a kind of salvation. I identify this as the problem of ‘cosmodicy’, i.e., the problem of how to justify life in the world as meaningful and worthwhile in the face of extensive evil, suffering, disorder, and the like. In the second section, I discuss how Williams’s claim not to be ‘into salvation’ is not entirely accurate. Although he rejects a certain ‘grand’ traditional picture of salvation, he still seeks a more minimal kind insofar as he

¹ ‘A Mistrustful Animal’, in Alex Voorhoeve (ed.), *Conversations in Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 197–8.

² *La ragione e i suoi eccessi* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2014).

³ I have taken up this theme in a different context elsewhere: ‘*Homo Religiosus*: Does Spirituality Have a Place in Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics?’, *Religious Studies* 51:3 (2015): 335–46. A significantly expanded version of this essay is forthcoming in David McPherson (ed.), *Spirituality and the Good Life: Philosophical Approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

addresses the problem of cosmodicy. This comes through in his advocacy of ‘humane’ philosophy and in his attempt to support the values that arise for us from within our historically contingent forms of life. I argue here that Williams is wrong to reject the human concern for a larger, cosmic significance. In the final section, I discuss and critically assess two promising secular attempts to address the issue of cosmic significance: viz., those of Thomas Nagel and Paolo Costa, with a focus on the latter.

I

What does it mean for philosophy to aim at ‘salvation’? The need for salvation only arises if the world appears to us as problematic in some sense such that there is something from which we need to be ‘saved’. The problematic character of the world that philosophy aims here to address, I believe, can be described as the problem of ‘cosmodicy’: i.e., the problem of how to justify life in the world as meaningful and worthwhile, especially in the face of extensive evil, suffering, disorder, and the like, where there is a general sense that the world is deeply ‘out of joint’?⁴ This problem precedes theodicy, since theistic faith is itself one prominent way of addressing the problem of cosmodicy (i.e., it provides a way of living meaningfully in the face of evil, suffering, disorder, and the like), but it has its own special problem of theodicy. Because the problem of cosmodicy precedes that of theodicy, it is thus a problem for both theists and non-theists.

For many people, as long as life is going well, this problem may not be present to consciousness. However, it does arise for us in certain troublesome moments or crisis experiences. We might think, e.g., about the common experience of a midlife crisis in which one finds him or her self – to paraphrase Dante at the beginning of *The Divine Comedy* – ‘in the middle of life’s journey, having lost

⁴ I borrow the term ‘cosmodicy’ from Charles Guignon, who uses it to describe the problem put forward by Ivan Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (‘Introduction’, *The Grand Inquisitor: with related chapters from The Brothers Karamazov* [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993], xxx). Ivan forcefully presents the problem of evil and suffering for theists and non-theists alike and then says that he hands back his ‘ticket’ to life in the world. One might also recall here the well-known remarks at the beginning of Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*: ‘There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest [...] comes afterwards’ (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien [New York: Vintage, 1991 (1942)], 3).

one's way'. This is often because the goals that one has been pursuing and which perhaps have been central to his or her identity (e.g., the goals of a particular career path) no longer seem so significant, especially in the face of the growing recognition of one's own mortality.⁵ Such an existential crisis can of course occur at any stage of human life, provided that one has reached a certain level of reflectiveness and self-awareness. What is required is an ability to step back from our various activities and ask: what is the point of it all? Charles Taylor writes:

What we do always has a point; we undertake various projects, and in-between we keep going the routines which sustain our lives. Through all this, something may be growing: a life of love; children who are becoming adults and then leaving to live their own lives; we may be getting better at some valuable and useful activity. But we can also be struck by a question of what this all adds up to; what is the meaning of it all? Or since the individual projects and the recurring routine all have their purpose, the question comes as a higher order one: what is the meaning of all these particular purposes?⁶

We are asking here about *the* meaning of life, about its overarching significance, about how our lives fit into the grand scheme of things. In short, we are asking a meta-question about the overall or *ultimate* meaning of all the particular activities that we find meaningful.

The worry is that perhaps human life is ultimately absurd; i.e., we regard particular goals and activities as being significant to us, but ultimately they do not matter in the grand scheme of things.⁷ There are some who seek to avoid this sense of the absurd by attempting to avoid asking the meta-question about the overall meaning of all our particular goals and activities. For instance, we see something like this in the 'quietist' approach championed by Wittgenstein, which is also taken up by others such as John McDowell and Richard Rorty. On this approach one seeks to remain content with the meanings (or values) that arise

⁵ See Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) for a powerful depiction of this point.

⁶ *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 677.

⁷ According to Thomas Nagel, the sense of the absurd arises from the conflict between the *seriousness* with which we naturally regard our experiences of meaning (or value) and the lack of objective support for them ('The Absurd', in *Mortal Questions* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979]). Somewhat similarly, Camus says that human beings have a 'longing for happiness and for reason' and '[the] absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world' (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 28).

within a given ‘form of life’ without asking questions about the ultimate significance of these meanings.⁸ However, in his essay on ‘The Absurd’, Thomas Nagel writes:

Given that the transcendental step [of considering the overall view of things and how our life fits into it] is natural to us humans, can we avoid absurdity by refusing to take that step and remaining entirely within our sublunar lives? Well, we cannot refuse consciously, for to do that we would have to be aware of the viewpoint we were refusing to adopt. The only way to avoid the relevant self-consciousness would be either never to attain it or to forget it – neither of which can be achieved by the will.⁹

This sense of absurdity can then lead to a feeling of existential disorientation or vertigo, and perhaps also to a sense of existential futility or despair. Some, like Nietzsche and Camus, have sought to avoid such despair through idealizing a heroic stance of defiance that seeks to affirm life in the world in spite of its ultimate meaninglessness. However, such views cannot tell us why we *should* do so beyond saying that it enables a feeling of self-empowerment; i.e., they cannot tell us what it is about the world that is *worthy* of such affirmation. And they also do not adequately account for the possibility of truly crushing hardship that can overwhelm us (more on this shortly). Nagel – at least at the time of his essay on

⁸ We might also consider here the proto-Wittgensteinian view of David Hume. In a famous passage near the end of Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume remarks that when he is faced with certain ultimate questions regarding human existence – such as, ‘Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me?’ – and having found himself confounded by all these questions, he attempts to cure himself of his ‘philosophical melancholy and delirium’ by taking refuge in ‘common life’: ‘I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour’s amusement, I wou’d return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further. Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin’d to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life’ (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nded., ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P.H. Niddich [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978 (1738)], 269). With regard to this passage, see Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘The ends of life, the ends of philosophical writing’, in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 131–2.

⁹ ‘The Absurd’, 21; see John Cottingham, ‘The Good Life and the “Radical Contingency of the Ethical”’, in Daniel Callcut (ed.), *Reading Bernard Williams* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 35–6, where he also briefly discusses the stances of quietism, defiance, and irony, which I discuss as well.

‘The Absurd’ – thought that the best we could do was live with a sense of *irony* with regard to the fact that we find certain things important to us that do not really matter in the grand scheme of things. However, as we will see in the final section, in his later work Nagel is no longer satisfied with this ironist stance and instead he seeks to show how our lives can be seen as cosmically significant from a secular perspective.

A somewhat similar case to the quietist strategy of avoidance is that of Kierkegaard’s ‘aesthete’, the person who is primarily concerned with having experiences that are interesting, novel, or pleasurable.¹⁰ It is important to note that one can be more or less sophisticated as an aesthete: the unsophisticated aesthete follows the immediate impress of his or her desires, whereas the sophisticated aesthete is more calculating or reflective in pursuit of his or her desires. Examples of sophisticated aesthetes include: calculating sensualists such as Don Giovanni, or Kierkegaard’s own character, Johannes the Seducer; intellectuals who are only concerned with the ‘interestingness’ of their thoughts; people whose primary concern is to be witty; etc. But is it really possible for the aesthete to avoid addressing the problem of cosmodicy? One of the main goals of Kierkegaard’s account of the aesthete in fact is to show that neither the sophisticated nor the unsophisticated aesthete’s life is an existentially viable option as both are forms of despair. The aesthete cannot continually sustain experiences that are interesting, novel, or pleasurable, and so becomes bored and is forced to reflect on his or her life. According to Kierkegaard, there is a fundamental human need to give a unity and meaning to one’s life as a whole. But the life of the aesthete lacks any such overall unity and meaning and thus he or she is in despair.

There are other ways that the problem of cosmodicy can arise for us besides facing up to the question of what our life amounts to. It can also arise, e.g., in the face of the death of a loved one, where we feel a sense of irremediable loss. To quote from Taylor again:

One of the things which makes it difficult to sustain a sense of the higher meaning of ordinary life, in particular our love relations, is death. It’s not just that they matter to us a lot, and hence there is a grievous hole in our lives when our partner dies. It’s also [...] just because they are so significant, they seem to demand eternity. A deep love already exists against the vicissitudes of life, tying together past

¹⁰ See Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York, Penguin, 1992 [1843]).

and present [...]. By its very nature it participates in gathered time. And so death can seem a defeat, the ultimate dispersal which remains ungathered [...]. The deepest, most powerful kind of happiness, even in the moment, is plunged into a sense of meaning. And the meaning seems denied by certain kinds of ending. That's why the greatest crisis around death comes from the death of someone we love.¹¹

In short, love seems to demand eternity since the joy of love 'loses some of its sense if it doesn't last'.¹² Here again, in the face of our human finitude and vulnerability, one may encounter a sense of existential futility or despair.

Another area where the problem of cosmodicy can arise is when we encounter a tragic event, such as a major natural disaster. Or similarly, it can arise in the face of great evil and crushing hardship, such as in the Holocaust or in the terrible cruelty inflicted upon children by adults, as seen in the cases reported by Ivan Karamazov (and actually collected by Dostoevsky from newspapers) and which cause Ivan to want to return his 'ticket' to life in the world because of seeing no way these wrongs could be made right.¹³

The deep human need to address the problem of cosmodicy in its various manifestations— i.e., to provide a justification for life in the world as meaningful and worthwhile in the face of evil, suffering, disorder, and the like – is indicative, I believe, of our nature as meaning-seeking animals, and this need finds clear expression in the pursuits of philosophers throughout the ages. Consider, e.g., the concern of Ancient Greek philosophers with responding to the problems of change, decay, finitude, vulnerability, misfortune, and tragedy; i.e., to what Martha Nussbaum calls 'the fragility of goodness'. Ancient philosophers, as Pierre Hadot has shown, sought to offer paths or 'ways of life' that could provide

¹¹A Secular Age, 720–1.

¹²A Secular Age, 721. Cf. Plato: 'love is wanting to possess the good forever' (Symposium, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997 (c. 375 BC)], 206a).

¹³ See n. 4. To quote from Taylor yet again: 'We can be overwhelmed when we are made aware of all the suffering there is in the world [...]. There are unguarded moments when we can feel the immense weight of suffering, when we are dragged down by it, or pulled down into despair. [...] But beyond suffering, there is evil; for instance, the infliction of suffering, the cruelty, [...] the sinking into brutality [...]. It's almost like a nightmare. One wants to be protected, separated from this. But it can creep under your guard and assail you' (A Secular Age, 680–1).

existentially satisfying responses to these problems.¹⁴ Medieval philosophers such as Augustine and Aquinas were also clearly concerned with salvation, though the way of life they promoted was within the context of the church. They sought to show how imperfect happiness in this life points to a higher good beyond the present order of things. Of course, by making appeals to divine providence, they also had to address the problem of theodicy, i.e., how to justify the ways of a good God in allowing suffering and evil.

In many ways, the problems of cosmodicy in general and theodicy in particular only become more acute in the modern period.¹⁵ Philosophers from Descartes and Leibniz to Kant and Hegel can be seen as seeking to provide an existentially satisfying response to the new mechanistic science, which threatened the loss of a deeper sense of meaning that was often taken for granted in the pre-modern period, where nature, as John McDowell puts it, ‘was conceived as filled with meaning, as if all of nature were a book of lessons for us’.¹⁶ Many modern philosophers of course still affirmed a providentialist framework, but it was often a tamer deistic version that lessened the sense of mystery and transcendence and so made addressing the problem of evil and suffering even more challenging. With Darwin the problem only becomes more exacerbated, and this leads Nietzsche (and others) to declare the ‘death of God’ in virtue of no longer being able to regard as tenable any religious interpretation of reality as purposefully ordered according to ‘the goodness and governance of a god’ where the world is seen as a ‘moral order’ that expresses ‘ultimate moral purposes’.¹⁷ However, it is to Nietzsche’s credit that he clearly saw that even if one no longer regards theodicy as viable, this still leaves the original problem of cosmodicy.¹⁸

¹⁴ ‘The philosophical school [...] corresponds, above all, to the choice of a certain way of life and existential option which demands from the individual a total change of lifestyle, a conversion of one’s entire being, and ultimately a certain desire to be and to live in a certain way. This existential option, in turn, implies a certain vision of the world, and the task of philosophical discourse will therefore be to reveal and rationally justify this existential option, as well as this representation of the world’ (Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Case [Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2004], 3; cf. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Chase [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995]).

¹⁵ Susan Neiman has persuasively argued that the history of modern thought can be rewritten in terms of a predominant concern with addressing the problem of evil and suffering; see *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 71.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974 [1882/1887]), §125, §357; cf. §343.

¹⁸ See my ‘Nietzsche, Cosmodicy, and the Sainly Ideal’, *Philosophy* 91:1 (2016): 39–67.

II

In the modern age, especially in our late modern age, the problem of cosmodicy takes a particular shape as a result of the process of ‘disenchantment’, which can be understood in terms of the loss or threatened loss of meaning due to the rise of the modern scientific worldview and the prevalence of various forms of scientism in modern intellectual life. In the work in which he coined the phrase the ‘disenchantment of the world’, Max Weber wondered about the *raison d’être* of the intellectual life in a disenchanted world, where there is ever increasing academic specialization and where, he thought, science does not discover ultimate meaning but if anything undermines it.¹⁹ Weber believed one just had to make a ‘decisive choice’ for the intellectual life, even though there is no inherent meaning to be found in the world and by extension in the intellectual life.²⁰ He seems here to put forward a subjectivist ideal of the courageous, disengaged observer who is able to face the ultimate meaninglessness of reality and still nevertheless carry on in the pursuit of truth, however small or insignificant it might be.²¹ When asked what his scholarship meant to him, Weber is reported to have said: ‘I want to see how much I can stand’.²²

¹⁹ ‘Science as a Vocation’ (1919), in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 134–5, 142–3, 155. Weber writes: ‘Who—aside from certain big children who are indeed to be found in the natural sciences—still believes that the findings of astronomy, biology, physics, or chemistry could teach us anything about the *meaning* of the world? If there is any such ‘meaning,’ along what road could one come upon its tracks? If these natural sciences lead to anything in this way, they are apt to make the belief that there is such a thing as the ‘meaning’ of the universe die out at its very roots’ (142). We might say that because of its ‘disengaged’ approach (which prescind from our sense of the significance of things for us), natural science is not the sort of pursuit that could discover meaning. But its findings are certainly relevant for a more engaged standpoint. We will come back to some of these issues in the last section.

²⁰ ‘Science as a Vocation’, 152; cf. 137.

²¹Weber writes: ‘Whether, under such conditions, science is a worth while ‘vocation’ for somebody, and whether science itself has an objectively valuable ‘vocation’ are again value judgments about which nothing can be said in the lecture-room’ (‘Science as a Vocation’, 152; cf. 143). The appeal to ‘value judgments’ here clearly carries subjectivist connotations.

²²This is according to his biography (by his widow). Here is the passage: ‘One day, when Weber was asked what his scholarship meant to him, he replied: “I want to see how much I can stand.” What did he mean by that? Perhaps that he regarded it as his task to endure the *antinomies* of existence and, further, to exert to the utmost his freedom from illusions and yet to keep his ideals inviolate and preserve his ability to devote himself to them’ (quoted in Paolo Costa, ‘A Secular

We might wonder about philosophy specifically: what is its *raison d'être* in a disenchanted world? If we are not inclined to Weber's subjectivist ideal of the courageous, disengaged observer, what else remains? One answer is of course the satisfaction of curiosity, where one just happens to want to possess certain bits of knowledge about the world but is not concerned with the existential task of achieving the sort of holistic understanding (i.e., wisdom) that can answer to the problem of cosmodicy. While this reduced conception of philosophy fits well with and is encouraged by the hypertechanical and often scientific nature of much analytic philosophy and the increasing fragmentation of professional philosophy into specialized sub-disciplines (and it also can be buttressed up by the motive of professional self-aggrandizement), it hardly seems to do justice to the human condition and what is most admirable about us as human beings.²³

What we need is a more 'humane' mode of philosophizing. In our present age, such humane philosophy would involve seeking a kind of 're-enchantment', i.e., discovering (or recovering) of a deeper sense of meaning in life, which perhaps has been occluded from view (e.g., by the scientific tendencies of modern intellectual life). I think this can also be understood in terms of addressing the problem of cosmodicy, and thus of seeking a kind of salvation. At its best, the urge to philosophize arises from a sense of existential *urgency* in needing to address, as a matter of seeking salvation, the ultimate questions of human existence, such as: Who am I? Does my life have a meaning? Can suffering be redeemed? Is there a God? How ought I to live? This sense of urgency has been clearly expressed in many of the great philosophers throughout history. Consider, e.g., Socrates in Plato's *Republic*: 'I fear that it may even be impious to have breath in one's body and the ability to speak and yet to stand idly by and not defend justice when it is being prosecuted'.²⁴

Even philosophers like Bernard Williams who claim not to be 'into salvation' often still evince a concern for a kind of 'salvation' insofar as they are in touch

Wonder', George Levine (ed.), *The Joy of Secularism: 11 Essays for How We Live Now* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011], 135).

²³ On the hypertechanical nature of much analytic philosophy and the increasing fragmentation of professional philosophy into specialized sub-disciplines, see John Cottingham, 'What is Humane Philosophy and Why is it At Risk?', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 65 (2009): 233–55. I should note that I think much 'Continental' philosophy is also inhumane in its obscurantism and often it also has self-aggrandizing motives. In my view we would do better to distinguish between 'humane' and 'non-humane' philosophy, rather than between 'analytic' and 'Continental' philosophy.

²⁴ *Republic*, 368b.

with the human condition in their philosophizing, as Williams most certainly is. Indeed, he has been at the forefront of those calling for a more ‘humane’ mode of philosophy (against scientific conceptions) where it is seen, as he puts it, ‘as part of a wider humanistic enterprise of making sense of ourselves and of our activities’, and where this takes place ‘in the situation in which we find ourselves’.²⁵ In light of this, I think it is somewhat *curious* that he should describe his motive for philosophy as mere curiosity. After remarking that he is not ‘into salvation’, Williams says:

I suppose my interest in philosophy is primarily a curiosity that stems from puzzlement. It is the old philosophical motive of *simply not seeing* how various ideas, which are supposed to be central to human life or human activities, hang together: the notion of the self, obviously, the notion of moral and aesthetic value, and the place that certain kinds of valuable things, such as works of art, have in our lives.²⁶

The word ‘curiosity’ seems too tame to accurately capture Williams’s motivation here, since curiosity has connotations of a kind of detached, non-existential interest in certain bits of information, which contrasts with the holistic concern for ‘making sense of ourselves and of our activities’ in ‘the situation in which we find ourselves’, which ultimately aims to answer ‘Socrates’ Question’ (as Williams calls it): ‘How should one live?’²⁷

If ‘curiosity’ is too tame of a word to describe Williams’s motive for philosophy, he no doubt thinks ‘salvation’ is too grandiose. However, I think it is appropriate, if properly understood. When Williams says that he is not ‘into salvation’, I think this is really an expression of his despair over – or if ‘despair’ is too strong, we might say ‘disbelief in’ – a certain picture of salvation. He writes: ‘We know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world, that our history tells no purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities’.²⁸ But there can still be another, more truncated form of salvation that is sought in the wake of giving up this ‘grand’ traditional picture of salvation. The concern is with how we

²⁵ ‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’, in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 197, 182.

²⁶ ‘A Mistrustful Animal’, 198.

²⁷ See *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), ch. 1.

²⁸ *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 166.

can still live a meaningful life without this kind of purposive view of the world and of human life.

Although human life is cosmically insignificant in Williams's view, he thinks it can be and often still is seen as significant from a 'human point of view', where our 'concepts [including our evaluative concepts] and explanations are rooted in our more local practices, our culture, and our history'.²⁹ Thus, we should focus on the significance of our lives *sub specie humanitatis* (i.e., from the human point of view), rather than *sub specie aeternitatis* (i.e., from the point of view of the universe, or what is sometimes called the 'view from nowhere' or the 'synoptic view').³⁰ In fact, Williams accuses Bertrand Russell (in 'A Free Man's Worship') and others who bemoan our cosmic insignificance of 'sentimental' muddle:

It is a muddle between thinking that our activities fail some test of cosmic significance, and (as contrasted with that) recognizing that there is no such test. If there is no such thing as the cosmic point of view, if the idea of absolute importance in the scheme of things is an illusion, a relic of a world not yet thoroughly disenchanted, then there is no other point of view except ours in which our activities can have or lack significance.³¹

What should we make of this? There in fact seems to be something of a muddle *here*. Williams's main idea is that we cannot fail a cosmic test because there is no test, i.e., no ultimate standard of significance. He later says (echoing the above passage) that it is a holdover from the 'enchanted world' to think that our lives have 'absolute importance', to think that our achievements are 'being cheered on by the universe'.³² But there are two ways to take this (and perhaps Williams intends both). The first is that since there is no moral teleology operative in the universe – as on the standard theistic view – we can cease to worry about our lives lining up with any such purpose. This interpretation is suggested by Williams's remark about knowing that 'the world was not made for us, or we for the world [...]'. A second interpretation is that there is no cosmic test because the idea of a cosmic test is incoherent; i.e., 'there is no such thing as the cosmic point

²⁹ 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', 186–7.

³⁰ See John Kekes, *The Human Condition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 232–45; Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³¹ 'The Human Prejudice', in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, 137; cf. 138. See also Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 110–12, 116–19.

³² 'The Human Prejudice', 144.

of view' (i.e., a 'view from nowhere'), but only the human point of view (i.e., a 'view from somewhere'). So, again, we should cease worrying about cosmic significance (or the lack thereof). Both of these lines can be seen as kinds of defusing strategies: i.e., they seek to diffuse the worry about human life lacking cosmic significance and to maintain 'confidence' (as Williams puts it) in the values that arise for us from within our human form of life, even though these 'human values' are ultimately (or 'radically') contingent upon our particular personal, cultural, and evolutionary histories.³³ Williams in fact often seems pulled between, on the one hand, a quasi-optimistic³⁴ quietism where one seeks to remain content with – or 'confident' in – the values that arise within a given form of life without asking questions about the 'ultimate significance' of these values, and, on the other, a pessimistic, tragic outlook (as in *Shame and Necessity*). But why the pull in the latter direction?

I think in one sense Williams is obviously right that there is no cosmic point of view in that the cosmos is not the sort of thing that can have a point of view (unless of course we are pantheists). But we can understand the idea of the cosmic point of view in another, perfectly legitimate way: viz., it is a particular *humanpoint of view* in which one forms an outlook – what we might call a 'cosmic outlook' – on the wider world and his or her place within it. In other words, we can say that it is a human point of view *in a wider frame*. This is how I take the idea of a 'cosmic point of view'. The problem then for Williams's defusing strategies is that *from within the human point of view* it matters whether we can see our lives in light of a cosmic moral teleology (i.e., a purposive view of the world as an enduring 'moral order' oriented towards the good) by which we might 'authenticate our activities' and thereby discover a deeper sense of meaning in life. Williams seems to acknowledge this in his discussion of the radical contingency of our ethical beliefs, as he says: 'This sense of contingency can seem to be in tension with something that our ethical ideas themselves demand, a recognition of their authority'.³⁵ Williams also seems to recognize it when he puts forward the view that an Aristotelian ethic – which affirms a strong correlation between virtue and happiness (*eudaimonia*) and depends on teleological thinking

³³ See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, chs 8–9; Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 21; Williams, 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', 193–4; and Cottingham, 'The Good Life and the "Radical Contingency of the Ethical"'.
³⁴ I say 'quasi' here because I do not want to accuse someone of Williams's temperament of optimism.

³⁵ *Truth and Truthfulness*, 21.

– is no longer viable in light of Darwinian evolution (at least on his reading of it). He writes: ‘The first and hardest lesson of Darwinism, that there is no such teleology at all, and that there is no orchestral score provided from anywhere according to which human beings have a special part to play, still has to find its way fully into ethical thought’.³⁶ Therefore, if we are to adequately address the problem of cosmodicy, it seems that we cannot entirely avoid the synoptic or cosmic view of things (as a particular kind of human point of view), even if considering this leads, as Costa puts it, to certain ‘reasonable excesses’, as a cosmic or synoptic view is always to some extent beyond our cognitive reach.

III

In a recent essay entitled ‘Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament’, Thomas Nagel contends that secular philosophy should try to develop ‘an alternative to the consolations of religion’.³⁷ More specifically, it should recover something of the ‘religious temperament’, which involves a yearning for cosmic reconciliation and completion, i.e., a desire ‘to live not merely the life of the creature one is, but in some sense to participate through it in the life of the universe as a whole’.³⁸ In short, secular philosophy should seek a kind of salvation and this requires taking up a synoptic or cosmic view of things.³⁹

Nagel thus shows that he is no longer satisfied with the ironist stance that we saw he affirmed in his earlier essay on ‘The Absurd’. In contrast to Williams’s endorsement of the human point of view *against* the cosmic point of view, Nagel writes: ‘the religious temperament regards a merely human life as insufficient, as a partial blindness to or a rejection of the terms of our existence. It asks for

³⁶ *Making Sense of Humanity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 110. See also Williams, ‘Replies’, in J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind, and Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 199; and my ‘Cosmic Outlooks and Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics’, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55:2 (2015): 197–215.

³⁷ ‘Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament’, in *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

³⁸ ‘Secular Philosophy’, 6.

³⁹ Nagel says that the key question is: ‘How can one bring into one’s individual life a recognition of one’s relation to the universe as a whole, whatever that relation is?’ (‘Secular Philosophy’, 5). He then remarks: ‘It is important to distinguish this question from the pure desire for understanding of the universe and one’s place in it. It is not an expression of curiosity, however large. [...] It is rather a question of attitude: Is there a way to live in harmony with the universe, and not just in it?’ (5).

something more encompassing'.⁴⁰ Of course, it is one thing to say that there is such a human need (which can be seen as an expression of our being *homo religiosus*), and it is another to think that it can be adequately satisfied. Nagel thinks it can and he expresses his own view as follows: 'Having, amazingly, burst into existence, one is a representative of existence—of the whole of it—not just because one is part of it but because it is present to one's consciousness. In each of us, the universe has come to consciousness and therefore our existence is not merely our own'.⁴¹

Nagel has gone on to develop this view further in *Mind and Cosmos*, where argues for a non-theistic cosmic teleological perspective, which stands in strong contrast to Williams's claim that 'the world was not made for us, or we for the world'. Nagel writes:

The world is an astonishing place [...]. That it has produced you, and me, and the rest of us is the most astonishing thing about it. If contemporary research in molecular biology leaves open the possibility of legitimate doubts about a fully mechanistic account of the origin and evolution of life, dependent only on the laws of chemistry and physics, this can combine with the failure of psychophysical reductionism to suggest that principles of a different kind are also at work in the history of nature, principles of the growth of order that are in their logical form teleological rather than mechanistic.⁴²

This allows then for a cosmic teleological perspective according to which human beings have a special place, where '[each] of our lives is a part of the lengthy process of the universe gradually waking and becoming aware of itself'.⁴³ This gradual waking up of the universe begins with the emergence of life and consciousness, and then further develops with the emergence of rational, linguistic forms of consciousness: 'The great cognitive shift is an expansion of consciousness from the perspectival form contained in the lives of particular creatures to an objective, world-encompassing form that exists both individually and intersubjectively. It was originally a biological evolutionary process, and in

⁴⁰ 'Secular Philosophy', 6; cf. 8, 11–12.

⁴¹ 'Secular Philosophy', 6.

⁴² *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

⁴³ *Mind and Cosmos*, 85; cf. Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 127–33; 'Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament', 16–7.

our species it has become a collective cultural process as well'.⁴⁴ Furthermore: 'to explain not merely the possibility but the actuality of rational beings, the world must have properties that make their appearance not a complete accident: in some way the likelihood must have been latent in the nature of things'.⁴⁵ Nagel goes on to say: 'I am not confident that this Aristotelian idea of teleology without intention makes sense, but I do not at the moment see why it doesn't'.⁴⁶

I will not pursue here the question of whether this fully makes sense, or whether a theistic perspective may be needed for explanatory purposes. Rather, I want to conclude by considering the existential adequacy of this sort of secular perspective that seeks a kind of salvation through taking up a synoptic or cosmic view of things. By 'existential adequacy', I mean adequacy as a response to the problem of cosmodicy.

Here I want to return to Paolo Costa's work, and especially to his essay 'A Secular Wonder', which is also the final chapter of *Reason and Its Excesses*.⁴⁷ Costa begins this essay by raising what I have called the problem of cosmodicy, though he speaks of it in terms of whether or not we can be 'at home in the world', which recalls Nagel's concern with cosmic harmony. Against the stance of disengaged rationality, which is often tied to a sense of existential alienation and an attempt to resist and control the world, Costa explores – in a Heideggerian mode – the perspective of our engaged involvement with the world through 'an epistemology of basic existential moods' in order to show how we can be at home in the world from a secular perspective.⁴⁸ By 'mood', Costa means: 'a fundamental emotional attunement, [...] a basic disposition to be affected in this or that way by world around us' and thus have things *matter* to us. A mood – e.g., a sense of well-

⁴⁴ *Mind and Cosmos*, 85.

⁴⁵ *Mind and Cosmos*, 86.

⁴⁶ *Mind and Cosmos*, 93. Mary Midgley defends a similar position. See Mary Midgley, 'Darwinism, Purpose and Meaning', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 68 (2011): 193–201; Midgley, 'Why the Idea of Purpose Won't Go Away', *Philosophy* 86 (2011): 545–61; see also Paul Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006). My discussion of Nagel here draws some on my 'Cosmic Outlooks' and my 'Seeking Re-Enchantment', in Philip J. Rossi (ed.), *Seekers and Dwellers: Plurality and Wholeness in a Time of Secularity* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016): 17–46.

⁴⁷ All references here will be to the English essay version found in George Levine (ed.), *The Joy of Secularism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). Costa's own sympathies with teleological thinking can be seen in his 'Beyond Teleology?', in Luca Illetterati and Francesca Michelini (eds), *Purposiveness: Teleology between Nature and Mind* (Frankfurt: OntosVerlag, 2008), 183–99.

⁴⁸ 'A Secular Wonder', 136.

being, serenity, anxiety, etc. – involves a way of ‘feeling the whole’: it involves an ‘intentionality whose content [...] is an indeterminate one: that is, the totality of things’.⁴⁹ Furthermore, ‘for living beings, moods (i.e., primary affectedness) are the precondition for having a world’ (in the Heideggerian sense of ‘world’), they are the ‘conditions of articulation, insofar as they are the framework of all frameworks: the global frame’.⁵⁰

Coming to his main theme, Costa writes: ‘In the world’s intricacy and density to which alternation of moods accustoms us, a space is naturally opened for wonder, that is, for a stance towards things that is intentional without being appropriative’.⁵¹ In other words, wonder does not seek to control the world or put it to use; rather, it appreciates and feels awe or amazement at the world. In fact, there seem to be two main modes of wonder: The first is that which is at the root of the philosophical impulse; it is active and it can express itself in agitation or a restless perplexity that seeks deeper understanding. As Aristotle famously remarks: ‘It is because of wonder that human beings undertake philosophy, both now and at its origins’, and they do so in order to no longer feel ‘at a loss’ in the world.⁵² For Aristotle, this clearly involves seeking out a synoptic understanding of the world. The second mode of wonder is more passive, i.e., it typically involves a kind of restful, contemplative delight in the world, as a way of being ‘at home’ (though, as we will see, there are also less serene forms); it is a kind of intellectual and emotional beholding and appreciating, which in fact often comes about as the result of the first mode of wondering.

Costa’s focus is on this second mode of wonder (though he acknowledges the first mode), and he provides an illuminating phenomenology sketch of this sort of wonder as a kind of ‘re-enchantment’. A crucial feature of this wonder is its ‘quality of attention’:

Wonder is an exceptionally intense way of being affectively aware of the things that surround us. In this sense, it results in a powerful experience of presence [...]. [In] wondering, the subject is absorbed in reality, without being its hostage or puppet. In this sense, the wonder-response always embodies a form of assent, a “yea-saying,” and, having

⁴⁹ ‘A Secular Wonder’, 138.

⁵⁰ ‘A Secular Wonder’, 140–1.

⁵¹ ‘A Secular Wonder’, 142.

⁵² *Metaphysics* II, 982b12–18; this translation is from Martha Nussbaum in *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001 [1986]), 259.

no utility whatsoever, it fosters in the subject a vague sense of joy in the very fact of being alive and of an objectless gratitude that turns outward. Wonder is an expansive response to the world's allure that encourages respect, compassion, gentleness, humility, unpossessiveness.⁵³

Costa's remarks, I believe, can be seen as filling out some of Nagel's statements about the world being 'an astonishing place', with its apparent purposiveness, and his 'amazement' at our having 'burst into existence' and then our becoming 'a representative of existence' through our rational self-consciousness.⁵⁴ We can also see here how this form of wonder can offer a response to the problem of cosmicism, as it involves a 'yea-saying' to the world (to its 'superabundance of meaning', as he later says⁵⁵) and 'a vague sense of joy in the very fact of being alive and of an objectless gratitude that turns outward'.

The picture is in fact more complex than this. Costa acknowledges that the attitude of wonder involves not only positive experiences of awe, euphoria, serenity, and gratitude toward the 'life empowering' aspects of the world, but also dread, nausea, melancholy, horror, and sheer terror toward the 'life menacing' aspects of the world.⁵⁶ Nagel acknowledges this as well in a footnote where he cites the following remark by the character Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Chance*: 'It was one of those dewy, clear, starry nights, oppressing our spirit, crushing our pride, by the brilliant evidence of the awful loneliness, of the hopeless obscure insignificance of our globe lost in the splendid revelation of a glittering, soulless universe. I hate such skies'.⁵⁷ Such experiences are perhaps to be expected in a universe that is at bottom impersonal and indifferent to our human fates. But these experiences can also suggest that even if there is a non-theistic teleology operative in the universe, there is no guarantee that it is necessarily expressive of an enduring 'moral order'. Or they may even push one towards Williams's

⁵³ 'A Secular Wonder', 143, 147.

⁵⁴ See also Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Dworkin was a friend of Nagel, and the book begins with an acknowledgement to him: 'To Tom—who led me into the mysteries of the secular temperament'. Dworkin's main claim is the following: 'religion is deeper than God. Religion is a deep, distinct, and comprehensive worldview: it holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order' (1; cf. 10–11).

⁵⁵ 'A Secular Wonder', 149.

⁵⁶ 'A Secular Wonder', 143–4, 149.

⁵⁷ 'Secular Philosophy', 9, n. 2.

pessimistic, tragic perspective, where one believes that ‘the world was not made for us, or we for the world, that our history tells no purposive story [...]’. In response to these sorts of concerns, Costa concludes his essay by discussing what he calls ‘comic enchantment’, where humor can be an antidote to hardship and tragedy as it ‘transfigures our ordinary perception of things’ and allows us to ‘feel more at home in the world without necessarily being reconciled with it’.⁵⁸

I think that there is certainly much that is valuable in Costa’s combined response of wonder and humor to the problem of cosmodicy, especially if one is no longer able to affirm a theistic view. But compared to a theistic view, this response seems rather limited. While humor can be a fairly effective response to absurdity and have an uplifting or cathartic function in relation to the difficult things of life, it is more limited as a response to crushing hardship, horror, and deep despair. Moreover, as Aristotle writes: ‘Happiness [...] is not found in amusement; for it would be absurd if the end were amusement, and our lifelong efforts and sufferings aimed at amusing ourselves. [...] Rather, it seems correct to amuse ourselves so that we can do something *serious*’.⁵⁹ So in order to adequately respond to the deep difficulties present in the human condition we need to be able to see our lives as orientated towards a serious or profound good, and humor on its own does not capture this (though a sense of wonder may point us in the right direction). Speaking of comic *enchantment* in fact seems misplaced here as the kind of enchantment that we are concerned with in addressing the problem of cosmodicy is that which makes for a deeply meaningful and worthwhile life, and which involves responding to an objective source (or sources) of meaning or value (used equivalently here) that makes normative demands upon us. While humor can be uplifting or cathartic on certain occasions, and so it can be ‘enchanting’ in a more reduced sense, it does not seem to be enchanting in the requisite sense.

By contrast, a theistic worldview does seem to allow for the requisite sense of enchantment by affirming in the world an objective moral order (i.e., God is seen as having created the world as good and as teleologically directed towards a fuller realization of the good). Along with this, theism sees the world as a personal order; i.e., it rejects the idea that the world is ultimately impersonal and indifferent to our fates, even though it may seem so at times. As William James put it: ‘The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in

⁵⁸ ‘A Secular Wonder’, 149–54.

⁵⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terrence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), X.6, 1176b29-34; my emphasis.

our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*, if we are religious [i.e., theists]; and any relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here'.⁶⁰ On the theistic view there is *someone* to whom we can feel and express gratitude for the *wonderful* things of life, and this seems preferable to an 'objectless gratitude'. Moreover, in the face of evil and suffering, there is a faith and hope that ultimate reality is on the side of the good and tragedy will not have the final word because the universe is seen as enduring moral order that expresses 'ultimate moral purposes' (to recall Nietzsche's phrase). To have faith and hope in such a theistic moral order, James says, 'not only incites our more strenuous moments, but it also takes our joyous, careless, trustful moments, and it justifies them'.⁶¹ In light of these remark, I think that the philosopher who seeks salvation has good reason to hope that a theistic worldview is true and thus to explore the reasons for theistic faith. But if we are not able to have such faith (e.g., because of the problem of theodicy), I think Costa points us in the right direction for how to still live a richly meaningful life – i.e., how we still might be 'saved' – even if there remains a sense of loss in not 'being [fully] reconciled with [the world]'.

A final concluding thought: If I am right that philosophy, at its best, should aim at a kind of salvation, and if I am right that the philosopher who seeks salvation has good reason to hope that a theistic worldview is true and thus to explore the reasons for theistic faith, then this entails that the philosophy of religion – broadly construed – should have a central place in any philosophy curriculum. This of course would represent a significant change from its current marginalized position.

⁶⁰ 'The Will to Believe' (1896), in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy and Human Immortality* (New York: Dover, 1956), 27–8.

⁶¹ *Pragmatism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981 [1907]), 51; cf. 49–51. Similarly, John Cottingham writes about the 'buoyancy of the good' in a theistic worldview: 'what the religious [i.e., theistic] dimension adds is a framework within which [human] nature is revealed as more than just a set of characteristics that a certain species happens intermittently to possess, but instead as pointing to the condition that a Being of the utmost benevolence and care that we can conceive of desires us to achieve. Focusing on this dimension, moreover, encourages us with the hope that the pursuit of virtue, difficult and demanding though it often is, contributes however minutely to the establishment of a moral order that the cosmos was created to realise. To act in the light of such an attitude is to act in the faith that our struggles mean something beyond the local expression of a contingently evolving genetic lottery; that despite the cruelty and misery in the world, the struggle for goodness will always enjoy a certain kind of buoyancy' (*On the Meaning of Life* [New York: Routledge, 2003], 72–3).