

Nothing but Nihilism?

The Spirit of Purposelessness in James Tartaglia's *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*

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Abstract

This appreciative inquiry of James Tartaglia's *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* examines the case Tartaglia makes for the meaninglessness of life *itself* (as opposed to particular purposeful activities *within* life), and asks whether it is still possible for modern persons to entertain a notion of meaning that does not stem from human purpose and decision alone. Does meaning only reside in the purposes humans choose and the activities they invent, or can human beings experience the enveloping universe as itself responsive to the human quest for meaning? Taking up the work of Victor Frankl, this essay explores the latter possibility, in sympathy with Tartaglia's resistance to quick and easy impositions of all-too-human meaning on the transcendent context of life *itself*.

I. Philosophical Pluralism and the Question of the Meaning of Life

When the editors at the *Journal of the Philosophy of Life* invited me to contribute an essay to this special issue on James Tartaglia's most recent book, I was both honoured and happy to accept. I had appreciated Tartaglia's helpful and insightful commentary on Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and was curious to discover what sort of original philosophical contribution he would provide outside the format of a philosophical commentary.¹ Then I opened the .pdf file that the editors at Bloomsbury sent me and was greeted by the ominous title, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness, and Reality*. Since I'm one of those increasingly rare intellectuals who naively yet somehow confidently assumes that life is meaningful, even if we humans cannot provide a general definition of such meaning or otherwise provide for it on our own terms, I prepared myself for the worst. Would I be treated to yet another tiresome version of 'Ditchkinian' physicalist reductionism,

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¹ See James Tartaglia, *Rorty and the Mirror of Nature* (London: Routledge, 2007).

paternalistically explaining to me that there is nothing but atoms and the void, and that any non-scientific discourse claiming to find meaning in human existence is nothing more than fanciful human projection? Or would I get the ‘accomplished’ Nietzschean version, in which we humans, mere floating specks in a vast universe that cares nothing for our existence, may connect to nothing more ultimate than our own will-to-power?

Although Tartaglia’s version of nihilism more closely resembles the ‘accomplished’ Nietzschean version, ultimately the book pursues neither of the aforementioned directions (while also appreciating and learning from them). Instead, he takes the reader on a whirlwind philosophical tour through which he lays out his own unique and highly interesting take on nihilism. Along the way, we are also treated to some first-rate and deeply rewarding philosophy of mind, including intriguing treatments of such themes as consciousness, time, universals, and transcendence. Through his exploration of these themes, Tartaglia seeks to convince his reader that the relative purposefulness we experience through the daily activities we pursue within the framework of ordinary life provides us with meaning enough, and the fact that we cannot specify an analogous purpose or meaning for life *itself* need not bother us very much.² He even hints, toward the book’s end, that our inability to ascribe an overall meaning to life *itself* can in fact encourage an edifying form of spiritual comportment to the very fact of our existence, wherein our anxiety to impose meaning on life *itself* finally comes to be stilled (not answered), thereby providing a measure of existential comfort.

But before jumping to the end of the book, I need to say more about the way in which Tartaglia argues for life’s meaninglessness. I will do so in the next section. After that, I will finally turn my attention to some of the spiritual concerns Tartaglia’s position raises for me, and indeed for himself (if the book’s conclusion is any indication). At this point, however, I would like to head off a potential misunderstanding: Simply because, as I described above, I consider myself to be an intellectual who somehow naively assumes life *itself* to have meaning, I would hate for anyone to conclude from this admission that my reaction to Tartaglia’s work must be fundamentally hostile, and that I therefore plan to engage in some form of more or less veiled polemics. To the contrary, I have struggled with Tartaglia’s position and have taken it seriously as a possible and defensible answer

² See James Tartaglia, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 24–25. Further citations will be quoted parenthetically within the text.

to the big questions he asks. I have let his version of nihilism trouble my sleep. I have done so not simply to strengthen my position by exposing it to a strong contrast case, but also because, at the end of the day, I do not think that there exists any knock-down *philosophical* refutation of Tartaglia's position, and I respect the intellectual honesty that has led him to it.³

What I do spy in Tartaglia's position concerning nihilism, however, is that he might not grant the same quarter to my spiritual position with respect to the question of life's meaning (which I will reveal in due time), and would thus be less tolerant of a measure of philosophical pluralism when it comes to answering this question. Here I locate a productive tension between us that might help shed further light on the big questions that form the subject matter of this book. My hunch is that a greater tolerance of pluralism can open up dialogical space and a search for common understanding, if not common ground. Trying my level best to steer clear of polemic, then, I will take the opportunity this examination affords to consider ways in which the assumption of meaning to life *itself* could still look like a tenable position, even in modernity, in ways that perhaps Tartaglia has yet to consider fully or otherwise address. What I have found interesting and even surprising, given the difference between our positions, is the way that both of them eventuate in comparable (but of course not exactly similar) forms of attentive, if not receptive, spiritual comportment to human life in a world that transcends it. Of course, this spiritual resonance, however deep, still resides in the context of a difference that makes a difference. Nevertheless, I maintain that it presents real common ground upon which to continue a communal conversation.

One final word of caution: In this brief examination, I will remain relatively silent on many of the book's more fine-tuned arguments concerning the transcendence of human consciousness and self-aware experience from the objective or material world, the human consciousness of time, and the human ability to conceive the world in terms of universals. These are all fascinating discussions, and I'm still not sure that I have understood all the nuances of the arguments contained therein, and so I will leave it to others more capable than

³ My position here perhaps resembles Paul Ricoeur's response to Nietzsche's doctrine of the innocence of becoming: "Confronted with this hard doctrine, I by no means intend to prove or refute it, nor do I intend to put it in the service of some clever apologetics and thereby convert it into Christian faith. I must rather leave it where it is, in a place where it remains alone and perhaps out of reach, inaccessible to any form of repetition. It maintains itself in this place as my most formidable adversary, as the measure of radicality against which I must measure myself. Whatever I think and whatever I believe must be worthy of it." See "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," in Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 458.

myself to unpack them. Instead, I here take the risk of addressing my attention primarily to the beginning and end of the book, and so of neglecting somewhat the connecting parts in the middle. My justification for so doing, such as it is, is a felt need, as my discussion above already indicates, to take a high altitude view of Tartaglia's project; for questions about what meaning itself *is*, and whether or not anything like it can be ascribed to life *itself*, are large ones, the biggest questions we can in fact ask. It is at this high-altitude level, then, that I begin to engage with Tartaglia's project.

II. Purposeless Life as the Framework for Relative Meaning

As beings who ultimately pursue a meaningless life, humans are, to say the least, curious creatures. Together, over time and not without an enormous amount of violence and agonism, but also cooperation, we have developed cultures and civilizations that provide us with models for living together, roles to perform, and tasks to carry out. This feature of our existence provides us with goals and purposes, and these serve to provide relative meaning to the various and sundry activities we undertake to achieve them, as well as criteria by which to measure our success in so doing. In Tartaglia's words, human culture and civilization thus provide everyday life with a "framework," one that gives meaning to the activities that take place within it, and a sense of identity to those who perform them. "Within the framework ... we can tread a more or less beaten path through our lives, and are thereby provided with rules and objectives for living. In this way, life takes on the character of a game: a highly flexible and complex game, of course, but nevertheless an activity we can join in with others, and perhaps at the end, look back to evaluate how well we did" (23).

For humans, Tartaglia notes, this framework is not simply the framework of biological imperatives that we share with other animals. Our framework is more than simply biological because, unlike non-human animals, our lives are not constituted by biological imperatives alone. Whereas we would have good cause to ask what has gone wrong when an animal has stopped mating or eating for no discernible biological reason, we do not normally draw the same conclusion when a human being takes a vow of chastity or goes on a hunger strike (23). For Tartaglia, examples like this show us that human beings "have broken free of the biological framework in which their ancestors lived," so much so that it is more accurate to describe the human framework as a "social framework" (23). Tartaglia

goes so far as to suggest that our biological imperatives have been socialized to the extent that even the imperative to satisfy our desire to eat, although not something we invented or gave to ourselves, “can only govern our behaviour if we choose to play along.” Following this line of thinking to its logical end, he concludes that our freedom “to put even biological imperatives aside serves as a reminder that for the modern human being, all purposes are socially constructed impositions upon life, rather than something constitutive of life” (23).

The social framework we inhabit from day to day thus tells us some specific things about what is unique to the human form of life. For starters, when we consider the framework, we see that, unlike life *itself*, the activities and purposes that populate it are in some sense things that we ourselves have invented and chosen. While these activities and goals depend on the interpretation we give to them, life *itself* would continue to exist in the absence of such interpretation: “Once the interpretation is in place, activities have a purpose within life, just as chess moves have a purpose within the game, and the game has a purpose within life; but in all these cases the purpose is made up within a life that has no purpose of its own” (23). Life *itself* has no purpose because, as that which gives the framework in which we create all of our cultural inventions, it is something that we ourselves did not invent, and so it is something to which we could never ascribe, and upon which we could never impose, a purpose.

For Tartaglia, all meaning is relative to the framework, and that which gives the framework, life, is meaningless *itself*. On this understanding, human meaning is intimately related to human making. This understanding of meaning allows Tartaglia to claim, as we saw above, that “all purposes are socially constructed impositions upon life, rather than something constitutive of life” (23). Whatever or whomever it is that constitutes life, it is not us. As alive, we find ourselves to be merely the recipients of life, albeit a unique form of life that has evolved the freedom to impose socially constructed purposes upon that which we did not ourselves constitute. These purposes, Tartaglia goes on to describe, “have been made up anonymously over the course of history, as people living together in communities, guided by evolving conceptions of what constitutes a good life and how best to achieve it, have established patterns of behaviour with criteria of success and failure” (23). We see the difference between life *itself* and the human form of life that is only able to impose relative meaning and purpose upon it, once we consider the fact that, even if we suspended all our culturally prescribed activities within the framework, life *itself* would not cease: “It would remain, its

pointlessness rendered more perspicuous” (23).

One might wish to ask an epistemological question at this point, concerning how Tartaglia considers it possible for us to perform such a thought experiment in the first place. That is, how are we able to imagine the total suspension of everyday life practices, and thereby notice the way in which, in that situation, life *itself* would be seen to lack any point or purpose? In order for this thought experiment to succeed, would we not have to retain, rather than suspend, one last practice, i.e., the practice of judging the presence or absence of purposes? And wouldn't the need to simultaneously retain and suspend that practice show the impossibility of ascribing *either* meaning *or* meaninglessness to life *itself*? My point is that, if any judgment concerning the *meaning* or *meaninglessness* of life *itself* can only come into view upon the suspension of all purposeful human practices, and yet the act of judging is part of the parcel of those practices to be suspended, then under such a requirement one would never be able to come to one conclusion or its opposite, because one would not be able to engage in the practice of judging. It seems rather facile to conclude that life *itself* refuses to answer a question that no one can ever ask (under the requirement of this thought experiment); in the absence of a prior question, or anyone who could ask it, how or why should life *itself* supply an answer?

For now, however, we may put aside this epistemological quibble, for the inherent problems of Tartaglia's counterfactual thought experiment do not really present insuperable obstacles to his overall program. That is, the weight of his thesis does not hang upon the thought experiment's possibility, even if the way he poses it reveals some of his more important philosophical assumptions. The point he is really making is that we have no reason to believe that life *itself* would not continue if humans stopped being the free, socially constructive animals that we are. Counterfactually imagining a human witness to this situation, Tartaglia believes, renders the meaninglessness of life *itself* salient; by entertaining the absence or ceased existence of the activity of the meaning-giving creature—the socially-constituted human animal—one demonstrates the inaptness of searching for some 'point to it all', one akin to the relative purposefulness of everyday life. For, in this scenario, the purposefulness of ordinary life would no longer exist, and so could not be used to measure the meaning of life itself.

Closer to the main thrust of his argument, Tartaglia thinks he can account *positively*, and not just negatively, for our ability to judge in favour of life's overall meaninglessness, even in the midst of our purpose-filled, everyday lives. As it

turns out, humans are not just beings who exist within the everyday framework, but also beings who are able to transcend and thus suspend this framework in various ways. In moments of reflection, for example, we are able to look objectively at life as a whole. In thought, we are able to suspend our engagement with the framework, an ability, Tartaglia explains, we have evolved “to suspend engagement with one way of life in favour of another” (25). Unlike other animals, Tartaglia says, humans have evolved a degree of freedom with respect to their situation, through which they can choose which paths to follow in life, even changing them midcourse. As Bruce Springsteen reminds us, you can have a wife and kids in Baltimore, Jack, and then one day simply decide to go out for a ride and never go back. For Tartaglia, our freedom to make such shifts, to suspend engagement with one way of life in favour of another, demonstrates our ability to suspend framework engagement *as such*.

This significant feature of human existence, our evolved freedom to transcend the framework and reflect upon it, naturally leads us to entertain questions concerning the meaning of life *itself*, the point or goal of the entire framework as such, and not just the meaning of the various activities we pursue together within it. Equally naturally, we are tempted to think that the meaning of life *itself* must be something analogous to the meaning of our goal-oriented activities within the framework it provides. Just as these latter have a point that gives them meaning, so must the former. Yet when we transcend the framework, he says, we neither discover nor discern any *overall* purpose to life itself, one that would give it meaning in the same way that, say, nourishing our bodies gives the activities of farming, hunting, and eating meaning: “[O]ur collective movements have created the context in which individual movements are understood as meaningful, but there is no wider context in which life itself can be understood as meaningful” (25).

In order for us to attribute meaning to that which gives the framework, life *itself*, we must not only be able to transcend the framework, but also discern features of this new meta-context that would give *it* overall meaning. That is, this meta-context could not be any old context, but must rather be a context *of meaning*. “The idea of a further context of meaning beyond the framework, then, is the idea that life itself might be placed in a context of meaning; and if there were such a context, this might provide our various activities within life with a further significance” (48). Tartaglia argues, however, that any sort of meaning analogous to the kind we ascribe to activities within the framework is precisely

what this meta-context *itself* lacks (49), because we have no good reason to believe that it is itself a context of *meaning*. We know that the framework rests within the context of the physical universe, for example, but it is a leap beyond the available facts to presume that this context is a context of *meaning*, or that the physical universe itself is nestled within a further transcendent context of *meaning* (50).

While Tartaglia admits that we have no grounds to rule out the existence of such a transcendent context of meaning—because, he says, “we have no grounds to suppose that only meaningless existence could provide the final context of existence”—he nevertheless argues that “we have no good reason to believe in it either” (52). While we cannot rule out the *possibility* of the existence of such a context, there is nothing we can do to establish that possibility either. “All this is possible, but *possibility is cheap*” (52). The real significance of the very notion of a transcendent hypothesis of *meaning*, Tartaglia says, is not the challenge it presents to nihilism, “but rather that it provides us with an idea of what would be required for nihilism to be false; an idea which is deeply rooted in our intellectual history, which is made tangible by our experience, and which people might understandably want to be true” (53). Wishful thinking, however, is no basis upon which to insist on as dubious a posit as the existence of a transcendent context of meaning.

Yet even if we cannot in good intellectual conscience affirm the existence of such a context, we still need to come to terms with our ability to transcend the framework and view it as a whole (and thus entertain the question of the meaning of that whole). Precisely because of this ability, Tartaglia sees the emergence of two other features of everyday existence that bear witness to the meaninglessness of life *itself*. In particular, he points to what he describes, in Heideggerian fashion, as the “attunements” of anxiety and boredom. He describes these as attunements, rather than simply as moods, “because they are not responses to particular and changeable circumstances, but rather the human condition as a whole” (26). *Pace* Heidegger, Tartaglia maintains that both anxiety and boredom attest to the truth of nihilism, because they are attunements we naturally fall into once we transcend and thus suspend our ongoing activity within the framework. Both attunements are “appropriate responses to an existence which requires action because it is temporal, but does not require any *particular* action because it is meaningless” (26). Our freedom to transcend the framework and view all the moves within it as somehow optional is akin to our freedom to suspend the rules of a game like chess.

The moment we realize that nothing more ultimate than the conventionally interpreted rules of the game prevents us from moving the pieces in any direction or not at all, an infinite array of possibilities starts to loom. Our first response to such looming infinite possibility is anxiety—for, in the absence of any conventional rules, how shall we decide which to pursue? Finally this anxiety subsides into boredom, as the realization finally sinks in that it would be ultimately pointless to pursue any at all. Whether through reflection, anxiety, or boredom, then, our ability to transcend and suspend framework activity ultimately discloses the meaninglessness of life *itself*: “When we disengage in this way, either deliberately for the purposes of philosophy, or passively when we fall into anxiety or boredom, then previously unquestioned and all-consuming goals emerge in a new light: as optional and ultimately pointless” (27).

I pause here to ask whether anxiety and boredom are the only human attunements with a significant bearing on the question of the meaning of life, or if Tartaglia emphasizes them to the exclusion of others because of the privileged relationship they have to the nihilistic answer to this question. Are there other attunements, maybe even competing or contrasting ones, that would render the question less decidable and more ambivalent? I wonder, to take a few examples, where Tartaglia would place joy, wonder, or gratitude? Like anxiety and boredom, these too would seem to qualify as attunements on his definition, insofar as “they are not responses to particular and changeable circumstances, but rather the human condition as a whole” (26). Since we are in Heideggerian territory here, I might point out that in section II of *Being and Time*, in his discussion of “anticipatory resoluteness,” Heidegger draws attention to joy as a “fundamental mood” that accompanies angst: “Together with the sober *Angst* that brings us before our individualized potentiality-of-being, goes the unshakable joy in this possibility. In it *Da-sein* becomes free of the entertaining ‘incidentals’ that busy curiosity provides for itself, primarily in terms of the events of the world.”⁴ I mention Heidegger here not because he is an unassailable authority on this subject, but because Tartaglia seems to agree with him that our attunements are more than just subjective projections, but instead reveal something about our ontological situation, our being in relation to the world that surrounds and solicits us (even if the solicitation is more obvious in Heidegger’s case than in Tartaglia’s). Unlike Heidegger, however, Tartaglia thinks these attunements reveal only

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (SUNY Press, 1996), 286.

ultimate meaninglessness, and he thus refrains from locating ultimate meaning in anything at all, let alone something akin to Dasein's authentic seizing of possibility through its resolute being-towards-death.⁵ The question remains, however, whether anxiety and boredom are the only possible "tunings" of our situation, or if there are other tunings just as legitimate that disclose different aspects of our ontological situation.

Focusing on the attuning clues of anxiety and boredom exclusively, Tartaglia purports to discover meaninglessness as a kind of empirical fact. He thus frames his position as a kind of neutral discovery (one whose ramifications, moreover, are far from being as dire as philosophers and others have traditionally feared). In order to arrive here, he realizes that he can only follow Heidegger so far, and must eventually reject key features of the latter's existential analytic of Dasein. The reason he must reject these features is because his position does not allow him to claim the same ontological significance for our everyday absorption in our projects as Heidegger does. Heidegger invests great significance in the fact that from the very first we find ourselves in a world where things matter for us or concern us. Although Heidegger argues that attunements like anxiety allow us to awaken from a sort of fallen absorption in the framework, from our routine adherence to the roles and assignments that have already been carved out and interpreted for us, so that we may eventually come to recognize and seize the possibility of choosing our own life projects, he still maintains that this awakening always (already) takes place within our careful and concerned being-in-the-world. While we may work upon and alter our everyday absorption, we never really transcend or escape it. For Tartaglia, on the other hand, the break from our absorption in the framework he describes is more radical. He ultimately rejects Heidegger's view that, although we can fall back from our engagements with the world, these engagements remain constitutive of our being. Instead, he insists that "falling back from our engagements—by viewing life as the ultimately pointless activity of bodies moving around and making noises—allows us to grasp something fundamental about our situation" (29). Tartaglia sees no reason to recognize anything more significant than temporal priority in the fact that existential absorption precedes philosophical reflection. What matters for him, rather, is the accomplishment that detached reflection represents. In thought, says Tartaglia, we have developed the ability to escape from the involved

⁵ For his treatment of Heidegger on these and other questions, see Tartaglia, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*, 24–34.

understanding that Heidegger thinks we never truly escape, and this allows us to “look at our lives in detachment from the significance they normally have for us” (29).

Of course, as Tartaglia himself recognizes, Heidegger would conclude that Tartaglia’s interpretation of our ability to fall back from our framework engagement smacks far too much of Cartesian detachment, and thus significantly misinterprets our being-in-the-world. Firmly grasping this horn of the dilemma, Tartaglia responds that the Heideggerian prioritization of existential absorption over reflective detachment fails to register the significance of the scientific worldview that modern humans have achieved: “[A]lthough we spend most of our waking lives in concerned engagement with the world, withdrawing from these engagements has produced a scientific worldview capable of explaining many of the features of them, as well as many other features of reality that have nothing to do with human engagement; and it is hard to see why temporal priority should be thought to take precedence over explanatory power” (30). Because “objective, scientific thinking provides a more comprehensive vocabulary for describing the world than the kind of understanding we have when engaged in the framework” (30), we have reason to take it seriously as indicating an answer to the question of the meaning of life *itself*, and thereby to question the derivative status to which Heidegger consigns it. By discovering and explaining “features of reality that have nothing to do with human engagement,” the scientific worldview “allows us to view our lives within a wider, physical context from which we are able to see that there is no overall point to our activities” (30). When it comes to determining criteria for what makes a context ultimate, the wider and more impersonal the better, Tartaglia thinks, even if interpreting ultimacy in this way forces us to relativize the only context we know that, according to Tartaglia, is capable of providing life with any meaning at all.

With this all too brief summary of Tartaglia’s case for nihilism in hand, but with its rough contours in place, I now turn to some of the spiritual concerns it raises. In the next section, I will appeal to an extraordinarily influential modern treatment of the question of the meaning of life *itself*, Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*.⁶ My intention in turning to this famous little book is not to produce some sort of philosophical trump card, but rather to see how Frankl’s alternative posture both compares to and resonates with Tartaglia’s nihilism. The

⁶ Victor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962).

comparison, it turns out, is highly illuminating, and even surprising in some ways. My destination will finally be Tartaglia's own admission, near the book's end, that embracing nihilism need not relegate us to a lonely and comfortless existence, devoid of any and all spiritual sense or answer to human spiritual longing. This admission comes as a sort of culmination to his struggle to come to terms with what he takes to be the legitimate and necessary question of the meaning of life, including the need to face the likelihood of a negative answer squarely, while refusing any wishful consolation from the various speculative traditions of religion and philosophy along the way. The manner in which Tartaglia articulates the residual spiritual sense of nihilism portrays far more than it explicitly says, and it is in the space of this 'more', finally, that I think Tartaglia's position discloses a modicum of spiritual solidarity with certain positions, like Frankl's, that offer the opposite answer to our shared question.

III. Spiritual Attunement and the Scientific Worldview

As he builds his case for the meaninglessness of life *itself*, Tartaglia never doubts the legitimacy of the question. His project is not to answer the question of the *meaninglessness* of life, but rather to answer the question of the *meaning* of life, and the answer he purports to discover is that it has none. Although his negative answer to this question, that life *itself* has no meaning, point, or purpose, might tempt one to think he takes the question lightly, his respect for the question itself is on every page of the book. Because our framework-transcendence makes the question unavoidable, he recognizes the significance of the longstanding traditions of religion and philosophy that have attempted to address it (55). We moderns have come a long way, however, and with the ascendance of the scientific worldview we have finally come to see that the context that transcends the framework, the physical universe, is not a context of meaning, not a context that can provide any point or purpose to life in general or as a whole.

But do we really know that the context we enter when we transcend our framework is *only* a "physical" universe, one that does not give any meaning to life itself? Surely it is *also* physical, but why is it *only* physical? Tartaglia spends two chapters in the book explaining how it is that human beings are not *only* physical, and that our conscious awareness of our experience cannot be reduced to brain states or some other material level (see chapters 4 and 5). Yet, because "everything we know about on the basis of experience exists within the physical

universe,” and because the physical universe, as physical, fails to provide a context of *meaning*, the possibility of a wider context of meaning, he says, “might seem to be nothing more than an abstract possibility arrived at by a process of reasoning about what would be required if life were to have meaning” (50). And as it turns out, Tartaglia suggests, this is just how we have in fact arrived at the conviction that life is meaningful: because we thought it must be. Because we mistakenly considered such general meaning to be a necessary requirement of a tenable life, we assumed that such meaning must be there for us to discover. Speculative traditions of religion and philosophy have arisen and passed away, all to meet this demand. But the entire time prior to the rise of the scientific worldview, we had not yet developed the intellectual chops that now allow us to recognize that the physical universe is silent, especially where the question of the meaning of life is concerned.

Hearing only silence in response to his question, Tartaglia interprets its answer to be a resounding “no.” He would likely not put the matter this way. For him, when we look for a meaning to life itself, we simply don’t find one, and that puts the question to rest. Life *itself* is meaningless. But I still think this conclusion is an interpretive gesture, and not simply the neutral registering of simple fact, and that is why I would insist that, even if it is true that the transcending universe or cosmos responds only silently to our question, no answer is not the same thing as the definitive answer “no.” To be sure, neither is it compatible with a definitive “yes.” Rather, I would construe the silence as a space we enter with our question, one in which we must tarry and listen, resisting any immediate and easy answers of either the “yes” or “no” variety. This space has perhaps what Heidegger calls a “resonance of silence” (*Gelaut der Stille*)⁷. I’m not sure if Tartaglia would be friendly to this suggestion, or if he would think affirming it leaves us in far too vague and mystical a place, so perhaps I can fill it in with greater definition, and for this I wish to turn to Frankl.

Frankl is an important historical witness to the human search for meaning because his reflections are borne in the crucible of unspeakable human suffering, a crucible in which one has been stripped of all framework engagements, not through free choice but through the external imposition of violent force. Surely this particular form of framework suspension would, as much or more than any other, put one in a position to reflect on the whole, the framework as such, life

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 207.

itself. Anyone asking the question of the meaning of life, then, cannot afford to ignore Frankl's witness; because, unless one has suffered this intensely (and thankfully not all of us have), one would, without such witness, be utterly unable to access the perspective, indeed the spiritual orientation, it affords.⁸ Now, I would not to be misunderstood: many of those who survived this crucible or others akin to it have come away with a different answer to our question than Frankl has. I do not wish to gainsay the interpretation they have taken from their experience, or even their inability to make any sense of it at all. Indeed, at the end of the day, there is a profoundly inescapable senselessness to this kind of suffering, and—again—quick and easy attempts to stitch meaning from it are bound to fail. We must resist the temptation to do so.

At the same time, none of these worries robs Frankl's own reflections and perspective of their peculiar legitimacy either. Yet beyond merely pointing to his example as one that portrays the *possibility* of ascribing meaning to life *itself* in ways that Tartaglia might yet be moved to consider, Frankl's attempt is particularly apt for this discussion because of its own refusal to provide a quick and easy answer to the question, of the variety that Tartaglia say will never be forthcoming: "Long ago," Frankl tells his reader, "we had passed the stage of asking what was the meaning of life, a naive query which understands life as the attaining of some aim through the active creation of something of value."⁹ Whatever meaning can be found here in this crucible of suffering, Frankl attests, must be different in kind than the sort of point and purpose that gives framework activities their meaning, and those who perform them their identity.

Frankl ultimately bears witness to a meaning disclosed *in* suffering (and, importantly, not the meaning *of* suffering, i.e., a meaning that would somehow justify its cruelty and uselessness). But in order to entertain the possibility of such meaning, one needs to adopt a paradigmatically different philosophical anthropology than the one Tartaglia assumes, wherein human beings are *not* the only and final meaning makers, beings who, as such, are unable to receive meaning from that which they did not themselves make (from sources like the physical universe, or life *itself*). But Frankl bears witness to just this possibility:

⁸ I owe this insight to Joseph Kirby, a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute for Christian Studies now under my supervision. I expect his forthcoming dissertation, *On the Origins of Nihilism and the Rhetoric of Moral Ontology*, to make a signal contribution to the very discussion about life's meaning that Tartaglia addresses in this book, and my own thoughts on this matter have benefitted greatly from his insights.

⁹ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 78.

Selected by the Nazis to perform punishing forced labour under conditions of extreme malnourishment, he nonetheless found it in himself to reflect on his severely depleted condition, and wonder if any meaning could be found in it. His answer is rather stunning, especially to one who has not endured this level of suffering: “I was struggling to find the *reason* for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious ‘Yes’ in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose.”¹⁰

Now, perhaps I have here jumped too quickly to Frankl’s ‘yes’, but it is really the way in which he interprets that ‘yes’ that is important for the comparison I would here make between it and Tartaglia’s ‘no’. The quickest shorthand for me to use to get at this comparison is to highlight a difference between ‘what’ and ‘that’ when it comes to how we think about the possibility of answering our question. That is, both Frankl and Tartaglia could likely agree that the ‘what’ question has no answer, at least not a general one applicable to everybody. But just because no everlasting or universally applicable answer to the question “what is the meaning of life” is forthcoming (such as *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*’s famously hilarious “42”), does not preclude us from asserting *that* it has meaning or is meaningful *itself* in some way unrelated to our imposition of ends, points, purposes. “[F]rom somewhere I heard a victorious ‘yes’,” Frankl tells us, intimating that this answer is not something wishfully and willfully imposed on reality, but instead a message that came to him from beyond the darkness of his miserable situation. He proceeds to tell us that this message came in several forms: a light comes on in a distant farmhouse, piercing the grey gloom; his wife from whom he had been long separated, and who has likely already died, becomes palpably present to him; and finally, at that very moment, he tells us, “a bird flew down silently and perched just in front of me, on the heap of soil which I had dug up from the ditch, and looked steadfastly at me.”¹¹ Now, it could be that we moderns are no longer capable, or find it increasingly difficult, to be moved by this form of witness. Or, alternatively, this kind of witness could amount to little more than a highly sophisticated form of projection or wishful thinking. Even though I reject the latter conclusion, I cannot rule it out as demonstrably false. But

¹⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹¹ Ibid., 40. Again, I thank Joseph Kirby for impressing upon me the importance of the what/that distinction for this discussion.

at the very least Frankl's witness portrays a different relationship with the surrounding physical universe than the one that the scientific worldview discloses. His surroundings speak to him in surprising and compassionate ways.¹²

The difference I am trying to indicate here is the difference between thinking of the enveloping universe as something that somehow speaks to us, whether to issue a summons or to provide comfort and strength in the midst of suffering, or thinking of it as something that is mute and purposeless, because immune to our projections (however sympathetically one might interpret those). Tartaglia tells us that "some human desires—especially those for eternal life and universal justice—cannot be satisfied within *our* lives; whatever may happen in the future." Because of this limitation, he says, we turn to "a transcendent hypothesis of meaning" which, in offering up the prospect of securing a meaning for life "satisfies these desires already." Because these desires are eminently worthwhile in and of themselves, the transcendent hypothesis of meaning that would secure them, he tells us, "is an idea worthy of faith" (53).

But for Tartaglia a transcendent hypothesis of meaning, such as the one Frankl claims to access, is not an idea worthy of *reason*, because when we follow our own rational lights beyond the everyday framework, we find nothing even closely resembling it. "Things make teleological sense only within life, and causal sense only within reality. Reality itself, however, makes neither teleological nor causal sense, for there is no purpose to it, and we cannot explain why it is here" (36). Tartaglia's deeper spiritual position here seems to be, however, that there is no purpose to reality, or life *itself*, because we cannot explain why it is here. We cannot locate a purpose for it in the same way we can for our daily framework activities. If we could explain it in this way, if we free makers could impose a point or purpose upon something we ourselves have not made, then and only then would life *itself* yield an affirmative answer to our question. But then we need to ask, would such an answer really be one that comes from life *itself*? If we decide that the only meaning available to us is of this self-imposed variety, then we have already chosen to relate to the universe that surrounds and transcends us in a way that by definition precludes it from having any kind of voice or summons that could speak into our question.

While Tartaglia marshals reasons to support an argument that would deny that

¹² Here I have in mind something like Martin Buber's distinction between relating to a given entity in the world as either an 'it' or as a 'you'. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 58, 173.

the enveloping context possesses such a voice, his decision to do so also bears trademarks of its own leaps of faith. For there is something about the scientific *worldview* he trumpets (as opposed to everyday interdisciplinary, institutional, and communal scientific *practice*) that *requires* the enveloping physical world to be silent and purposeless. In its more ideological and strident forms, this worldview requires the enveloping cosmos to be infinitely pliant and manipulable. Reality must not talk back to us or otherwise resist our instrumental interventions. Because this is the world the scientific worldview needs, it is the world that it finds. It is the world discovered by a being who has already decided that it is the only maker of meaning, and so it is free to impose any purpose upon life it chooses (even if not upon life *itself*, which I will get to later). This cluster of anthropological and cosmological assumptions, while of course not completely lacking in rational support, are far from being rationally demonstrated either. As such, the worldview composed from them is just as much an article of faith as is the religious assumption that the context that transcends the framework is one that speaks to us as a partner in dialogue. Both positions are rooted in faith, finally, because no one, *per impossibile*, is in the epistemological position to describe how the world is *anyway*, and science, in its multiplicity of forms, just as much as religion, in its multiplicity of forms, is an answer to a question that we ourselves have asked. Try as we might, we cannot erase ourselves from the equation.¹³

Now, there can be no doubt that, to a great extent at least, we *become* who we say we are. But, should we decide to spiritually attune ourselves to the context that transcends our everyday framework, a possibility Tartaglia gestures toward at the end of the book, we may yet receive a message that might give moderns like us pause to consider if we should not in fact try to become something other than who we now find ourselves or think ourselves to be. Tartaglia's insistence that life *itself* is not of our making, and so finally resistant to human-imposed meaning, carves out its own kind of spiritual space, one that he says promises to transform our willful relationship to our surrounding context. The pursuit of philosophy itself brings him to this space:

¹³ Here I am in fundamental agreement with Hannah Arendt, who in the essay "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern" offers the following interpretation: "[T]he answers of science will always remain replies to questions asked by men; the confusion in the issue of 'objectivity' was to assume that there could be answers without questions and results independent of the question-asking being" See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Penguin, 2006), 49.

On occasion ... the ideas come alive, and I find myself realizing once more that my life belongs to a transcendent reality which serves no overall purpose, and which I cannot and should not hope to make any more than minimal sense of. Many kinds of philosophical reflection can get you to this place, and when you arrive everything takes on a new significance; this is the most sense I can make of the idea of spirituality. (184)

There is, indeed, something very spiritually edifying about Tartaglia's stated refusal to impose human-made meanings on life *itself*; for there is something deeply terrifying about those who presume to have secured the meaning of life *itself* in precisely these self-imposed terms—those who think the search is over and they have it all figured out. Tartaglia's position, that when we search for this kind of meaning to life *itself* we find none, has the spiritual benefit of encouraging us to cease imposing our finite human meanings on that which we have not made, on a world that transcends us. It encourages us to assume an attentive form of spiritual comportment that suspends this feverish activity, and instead puts us in a receptive posture.

Would it be too far of a stretch to say that this attentiveness or wakefulness journeys awhile alongside the form of spiritual comportment that Frankl urged his fellow prisoners to adopt? According to Frankl, the only hope for those “despairing men” whose inner lights were in danger of becoming extinguished under the pressure of a world that no longer recognized the value of human life was to somehow retain their sense of being an individual, “a being with a mind, with inner freedom and personal value.”¹⁴ To prevent this slide into personal oblivion, which was always closely followed by physical oblivion, one had to *stop* asking about the meaning of life:

We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to

¹⁴ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 49.

fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.¹⁵

While Tartaglia might agree with Frankl that we need to stop asking about the meaning of life, stop looking for a kind of self-imposed purpose or point to it, I still doubt, given everything he has said, whether he would embrace Frankl's further conviction that we must refrain from such hasty meaning imposition in order to put ourselves into the sort of receptive posture whereby we can once again become beings who are and can be questioned *by* life.

So, in spite of some common ground we seem to have arrived at an impasse. For Frankl, it is imperative that we are not the only meaning makers in the universe: "If the meaning which is waiting to be fulfilled by man were really nothing but a mere expression of self, or no more than a projection of his wishful thinking, it would immediately lose its demanding and challenging character; it could no longer call man forth or summon him" (100). Perhaps Frankl's spiritual posture in these and other passages ultimately amounts to just that, another form of wishful thinking, and life ultimately demands nothing from us. Perhaps we only want to think it does because such a summons would provide an underpinning for the kind of moral sense that Frankl suggests is so vital for us to maintain if we are to remain human. Perhaps that sense is finally only a sophisticated projection upon a physical universe that has no reason for existing and doesn't care that we are here. I have no philosophical arguments at my disposal that could disprove any of these conclusions (which is not to say that I am unable to marshal any reasons to doubt them). Tartaglia leaves his reader enough space to wonder, however, whether or not his practice of philosophy as a kind of spiritual exercise has brought him right up to the threshold of the very space in which a human being might once again become open to receiving a meaning that he did not simply construct or impose.

¹⁵ Ibid., 77.

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