6.0 Do we, or does the universe, have a purpose?
A question more general than ethics

• Ethics asks: *How should one live?* And we generally strive to answer this question by determining ‘what is the good?’, and ‘how one should act with respect to the good?’

• This question of ethics clearly overlaps with our question of purpose: “Do we have a purpose?”

• BUT: ethics is generally considered more constrained. The question of whether you should become a dentist or a broadcaster, for example, is not one we typically think ethics will help us answer.

• AND: most ethical theories appear to sometimes allow for conflicts in recommendations. (Maybe there is a conflict between whether you should give all your money to the poor and whether you should be responsible for your own future, for example. Or whether you should always be honest or sometimes lie to criminals. Etc.) Then, the question of what you should do sometimes goes beyond the advice of ethics.

• FINALLY: we sometimes ask whether the universe, or all life, or all history, or human history, or some other vast enterprise, has a purpose. These are different questions than the questions that are asked by ethics.
6.1 The Naturalist Answer
Aristotle’s view

- Aristotle had the view that we have innate purposes that come from being the kind of organisms that we are.
- Purposes that are not for some other purpose are the true ends of an activity or way of living.
- Aristotle’s view of the world is fully teleological. (In this context, that means that he believes he can explain everything, including natural phenomena like motion, in terms of purposes). But, after the scientific revolution, we have increasingly abandoned teleological theories.
The Marxist Exception

• There is an important exception to this general trend of turning away from teleological explanation.

• The German philosopher Hegel proposed that history had a direction, in which through resolving ever more complex “spiritual” conflicts, we ultimately arrive at a better way of living and understanding.

• Karl Marx changed Hegel’s theory by replacing spiritual with material conflicts. He argued that history has a direction, in which through confronting the inherent contradictions in capitalism, we will ultimately arrive at a better way of living (communism).

• Marx’s view was enormously influential: for more than a century millions of people believed that human history had a direction and purpose.
6.2 The Theological Answer
There are at least two ways to use god to explain the nature of purpose

1. Divine command theory: the good is what god wills it to be.

2. Architect theory: god constructed the universe with a purpose (which may now, in a sense, be independent of god – or, at least, the universe would be different if the purpose were changed).
An ancient challenge to Divine Command Theory: The Euthyphro Dilemma

• NOTE: Divine command theory is a very strong theory. It is an identity claim: the good = what god wills it to be.

• In his dialogue, *Euthyphro*, Plato asks:
  – Is an act good because the gods love the act? Or:
  – Do the gods love an act because the act it good?

• Plato sees this as a dilemma. If an act is good just because the gods love it, then if tomorrow the gods love lying and murder and theft, these will be good acts. Plato concludes this is absurd, and that the good (and presumably then all purposes) can be studied independently of theology.

• Some philosophers respond to The Euthyphro Dilemma by “biting the bullet.” William of Ockham did this. He said that, yes, if tomorrow God loved adultery (his example of something horrible) it would become a good thing.
God as Architect of purpose

• An alternative view is that god’s will determined what is good and then built this into the universe. Now, the things that are good are the things that follow these pre-determined rules.

• Philosophers who had such a view, and who also found themselves committed to an omniscient and omnipotent god, often felt compelled to add the claim that this universe is perfect.

• The best example of this is from Leibniz, who argued that *this is the best of all possible worlds*.

• The French philosopher Voltaire mocked this in his satirical masterpiece, Candide. The joke is that the problem of evil makes it seem (to some of us, anyways) absurd to claim this is the best possible world.
6.3 The Nietzschean Problem
Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)
Nietzsche’s Principle Reasoning

- Darwin eliminates the last good reason to be a theist.
- Darwin shows that we are animals.
- From this, Nietzsche draws a surprising conclusion: The suffering of non-human animals always moves us deeply because we feel that it is purposeless. But, if we are animals, then our suffering is equally purposeless.
- Note that Nietzsche seems to have reasoned like this: we believe we have (justified) purposes and we believe that animals do not; we discover we are animals; we conclude we lack (justified) purposes. He might have thought instead that we were mistaken to assume the other animals lack justified purposes.
- Nature, Nietzsche claims, is incomplete. It needs something added in order for there to be purposes. Perhaps, Nietzsche claims, some human beings can create purposes.
To Fight Nihilism

“Man is necessary for the redemption of nature from the curse of the life of the animal, and... in him existence at last holds up before itself a mirror in which life appears no longer senseless but in its metaphysical significance.” (From Nietzsche’s essay, “Schopenhaurer as Educator”: 157)
Nietzsche’s Hidden Assumption?

• Nietzsche seems to have the following implicit argument:
  – If a human being realizes that her purposes are unjustified, then she will abandon those purposes.
  – Most humans would realize their purposes are unjustified if they reflected sincerely.
  – Therefore, most humans, if they reflected sincerely, would abandon their purposes.
• This state of purposeless is nihilism.
• Nietzsche also seems to implicitly believe that human beings need their purposes (or, at least: he believes that it is better to have a purpose than not).
How to overcome nihilism?

• Nietzsche is not a systematic philosopher, but he offers some suggestions for overcoming nihilism.

• Nietzsche is partially a naturalist. We have some purposes which we inherit. When we suppress those purposes, we act in a way that is unhealthy.

• Beyond our natural purposes, nature leaves us incomplete. Nietzsche suggests two guides to what it is be a healthy human:
  – The principle of the eternal return: if one can look at her life, and assert that she would live that life exactly as it is, over and over again, without a single difference, she would achieve a kind of victory over nihilism.
  – The Ubermensch: Nietzsche also proposes that there might be special people who imagine great purposes, and in so doing give themselves and others a purpose. These will be the over-people, or super-people.
Another aspect of Nietzsche: his doubts about our self-understanding

- In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche offers a different story about how our ethics arose.
- In terms of our goal in this class: note that Nietzsche is trying to attack our understanding of (some of) our purposes.
- Nietzsche believes that if we saw why we really had these purposes, we would abandon them.
- Why abandon them? His reasoning is not completely clear, but in part he believes that these Christian purposes are “unhealthy,” because they deny the value of life. (Imagine, like Nietzsche, that you believed Christianity was false, that there is no god or afterlife. You might then conclude that talk of god and an afterlife, and talk of renouncing this life, are bad for us.)
- Nietzsche also believes that we can have greater and better purposes than Christianity offers (the kind the Ubermensch would embrace).
6.4 The Existentialist Answer
Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre

De Beauvoir (1908-1986)

Sartre (1908-1980)
Sartre: “Existentialism is a Humanism”

- Sartre’s believes that we are radically free, and completely responsible for every one of our choices.
- This means we create our own purposes, but we must also have the courage to live up to those purposes.
- We create ourselves with each action, and can never actually *be* a thing: *existence precedes essence*.
- Sartre introduces three important terms
  - Anguish. This is the recognition (and feeling) of the special burden of our absolute responsibility.
  - Abandonment. This is the recognition (and feeling) of being totally without any kind of guidance in choosing our purposes.
  - Despair. This is the recognition (and feeling) of being unable to influence many events.
- Most of the time, Sartre believes, we lie to ourselves and hide from our responsibility, because anguish is painful. This he calls *bad faith*. (Other existentialists call this *inauthenticity*.)
Sartre: “No Exit”

• For Sartre, we can never *be* a thing. One cannot just *be* a brave person, or be a coward. One can only continue to act bravely, or continue to act in a cowardly way. Our past does not fix our future.
• Where are Ines, Garcin, and Estelle?
• Do Ines, Garcin, and Estelle deserve to be here?
• Why don’t Ines, Garcin, and Estelle leave the room when they finally open the door?
De Beauvoir: Freedom

• Are any purposes then acceptable to the existentialist, as long as you will them without lying to your self?
• Simone De Beauvoir claims not. Freedom has a positive character, it is the revealing of being through our choices. Perhaps this is best interpreted as: I make music exist by choosing to be a musician, I make medicine exist by choosing to be a doctor, etc.
• But, she claims, it is contradictory to will the oppression of others. This is because you always will that when you want to be something (remember, that’s bad faith—you never get to be a thing, you only get to keep choosing in certain ways).
• Thus, our freedom requires that we support the freedom on others.
• This is not quite right, but it a rough approximation to say that what increases freedom for all is good, and what decreases freedom for anyone is bad.
6.5 The Absurd. Naturalism Again?
Albert Camus

- Camus’ philosophical works include *The Rebel* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*
- Camus’ novels include *The Stranger* and *The Plague*
Absurdism as a new naturalism?

• Camus clearly believes that the universe, and human history, is without a purpose. (It is *absurd*: meaning in this case, they have no purpose.)
• Camus also seems to believe that our own individual human purposes cannot be given any external justification. (This seems to be a different sense of *absurd*: meaning, there is no justification for these purposes.)
• But for human purposes, in his later work Camus seems to believe that, even though they are not justified by some external standard:
  – They are real;
  – They will not dissolve when we recognize that they are not justified; and
  – We should thus seek to fulfill these purposes and we should respect these purposes in others.
• Camus believes that this is very difficult. We seem to sometimes be driven to want to justify our purposes to others (including by forcing our purposes upon others), and also to deny the purposes of others (when their purposes are different from our own).
The Conclusion of The Rebel

At this meridian of thought, the rebel thus rejects divinity in order to share in the struggles and destiny of all men. We shall choose Ithaca, the faithful land, frugal and audacious thought, lucid action, and the generosity of the man who understands. In the light, the earth remains our first and our last love. Our brothers are breathing under the same sky as we; justice is a living thing. Now is born that strange joy which helps us live and die, and which we shall never again postpone to a later time. On the sorrowing earth it is the unresting thorn, the bitter brew, the harsh wind off the sea, the old and the new dawn. With this joy, through long struggle, we shall remake the soul of our time, and a Europe which will exclude nothing. Not even that phantom Nietzsche, who for twelve years after his downfall was continually invoked by the West as the blasted image of its loftiest knowledge and nihilism; nor the prophet of justice without mercy who lies, by mistake, in the unbelievers' plot at Highgate Cemetery; nor the deified mummy of the man of action in his glass coffin; nor any part of what intelligence and energy of Europe have ceaselessly furnished to the pride of a contemptible period. All may indeed live again, side by side with the martyrs of 1905, but on condition that it is understood that they correct one another, and that a limit, under the sun, shall curb them all. Each tells the other that he is not God; this is the end of romanticism. At this moment, when each of us must fit an arrow to his bow and enter the lists anew, to reconquer, within history and in spite of it, that which he owns already, the thin yield of his fields, the brief love of this earth, at this moment when at last a human is born, it is time to forsake our age and its adolescent furies. The bow bends; the wood complains. At the moment of supreme tension, there will leap into flight an unswerving arrow, a shaft that is inflexible and free.