

WITHOUT PURPOSE: MODERNITY AND THE LOSS OF FINAL CAUSES

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Phenomenologically, boredom is described as a lack of interest that results in a lack of motivation.¹ When questioned about this lack of interest, the bored person often asserts that the given activity or object of boredom has no purpose, it does not result in happiness, or contentment, or eudemonia.² This is even true when the object of boredom is something that the bored person also maintains to be very important, such as religious observances, education, or discipline of various kinds. Boredom in this sense can be localized, and the person's life more generally is not 'boring' because the person can divert their attention and activity to objects of interest. But what happens if life itself is perceived to be boring and without interest? Here I will argue that this will be the case when life is believed to be without any purpose. This lack of purpose filters down to the various activities of life, which are perceived to be meaningless.

I. PURPOSELESSNESS AND FINAL CAUSES

While I am not arguing that this is a condition limited to the modern age, I am going to explore its roots in the rejection of final causes that has become a marked part of Modernity. Indeed, we find it linked to one of the seven deadly sins, and an important part of classical and medieval thinking about sin. 'Sloth' is but one medieval translation of the Latin term *acedia* (Middle English, *accidie*) and means 'without care'. It also carried with it the idea of a lack of interest, or feelings, and a kind of boredom or apathy that resulted in sluggish behavior and depression. This resulted in 'terrible and terrifying acts' to relieve the boredom.³ In classical mythology the life of the Homeric gods corresponded 'to just those much feared activities that Christian theologians supposed would come from sloth; Zeus was an insatiable philanderer, Apollo, the archer, often gave himself up to minstrelsy, and Ares encouraged battles and wars'.⁴ Thus, leisure time without any goal beyond self-gratification was viewed as prime soil for *acedia* and all of its attendant problems and sins. Spiritually, *acedia* first referred to an affliction attending religious persons, especially monks, wherein they became indifferent to their duties and obligations to God.⁵ But what happens as the transition from the Medieval, and even Enlightenment, periods occurs where belief in God is common, and therefore it makes sense to speak of duty toward God, into Modernity where increasingly belief in God is marginalized or jettisoned?

Individuals living in the modern age may continue to pursue final ends that shape their lives and provide interest, but especially in mid and late Modernity science has worked within a framework that explicitly rejects final causes, and this is reinforced by political, economic, and religious structures that trivialize daily life. If the highest goal of one's work

is to earn money to satisfy desires for pleasure, or the highest goal of the political realm is to guarantee freedom to satisfy such desires, or the teaching of religious institutions that the goal is to attain blessings in the next life and that this world is unimportant by comparison, then it is not surprising that a person will begin to ask questions about the purpose and meaning of life. If this is all there is to life, then one is in the condition described by the Teacher who says ‘Meaningless, meaningless, utterly meaningless . . . everything is meaningless. What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?’⁶

II. ARISTOTLE AND FINAL CAUSES

This lack of final causes was not present in the Aristotelian framework that dominated the pre-Modern, pre-Enlightenment world of European thought. For Aristotle, the purpose of knowing the cause of something is to gain knowledge. ‘Men do not think they know a thing till they have grasped the ‘why’ of which is to grasp its primary cause’.⁷ He articulates four causes, the material, formal, efficient, and final. The final cause is that for the sake of which something is done.⁸ In the *Metaphysics* the final end is called the good. To understand the final cause of something one must understand its form and function. The good for a human, which will give life meaning, is to live according to the form and function of a human (hereafter ‘human nature’). Therefore, for Aristotle, the understanding of the meaning and goal of life is necessarily connected to one’s understanding of human nature.

Aristotle rejected those who try to limit causation to the material causes.⁹ Those philosophers who sought to explain all things through the elements, say fire and earth (energy and matter), were unable to arrive at knowledge. Fire and earth can account for some change, but not to explain coming to be, or goodness, truth and beauty.¹⁰ For this reason other kinds of causes are necessary, and especially the final cause which explains the purpose of things.

The final cause is an end, and that sort of end which is not for the sake of something else, but for whose sake everything else is; so that if there is to be a last term of this sort, the process will not be infinite; but if there is no such term, there will be no final cause, but those who maintain the infinite series eliminate the Good without knowing it (yet no one would try to do anything if he were not going to come to a limit); nor would there be reason in the world; the reasonable man, at least, always acts for a purpose, and this limit; for the end is a limit.¹¹

Aristotle asserts that all human activities aim at some goal, and this goal is happiness.¹² The vulgar type of human identifies this happiness with pleasure.¹³ But the happiness spoken of by Aristotle is not pleasure, but instead the effect of developing the excellences of human nature and of contemplation. This is achieved by: ‘an active life of the element that has a rational principle . . . if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete’.¹⁴ This highest virtue is the activity of contemplation, or the use of reason.¹⁵ ‘For man, the life according to reason is the best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man’.¹⁶ This alone is loved for its own sake, and not for the sake of something else.¹⁷ He likens this to the life of God: ‘Therefore the activity of God, which surpass all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of

happiness'.¹⁸ The chief good must be achievable, in contrast to a process that goes on to infinity:

If, then, there is some end of things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good.¹⁹

III. FINAL CAUSES, HUMAN NATURE, AND CONTEMPLATION

Here there are three important parts relating to boredom in Modernity. First is Aristotle's claim that to know a thing one must know its final cause. Second, the final cause for humans (the good) depends on human nature – the final cause for humans is the use of reason because this is the best aspect of human nature. Third, the object of the use of reason is the contemplative life aimed at knowing what is eternal (without beginning, changeless); this is because it is imitative of God, who is involved in eternal contemplation and eternal happiness. Each of these is challenged and changed in the Enlightenment and Modernity. This is especially noticeable as a change in the understanding of the natural world, and then filters into the understanding of human nature.

IV. THE EARLY ENLIGHTENMENT

The Aristotelian framework supported a view of the solar system that placed earth at the center and the eternal spheres surrounding earth. To challenge this, the Aristotelian view of the heavenly bodies as eternal had to be challenged. An effect of this was a challenge to the understanding of final causes. Rather than view earth as the locus of change from potentiality to actuality, the heavenly bodies were viewed as changing material objects as well. Instead of changing to become like the eternal heavenly bodies, earth and the rest of the universe were created and given perfect design by God, whose glory they revealed. The first Enlightenment scientists made the glory of God the goal of their research, including Francis Bacon, Johannes Kepler, and Isaac Newton.²⁰

Final causes had not yet been abandoned, but had been changed. The final cause of the material world was believed to be the glory of God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism's first question is: What is the chief end of man? The answer is: To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. As the Enlightenment progressed this final cause was challenged indirectly through the challenge to man's ability to know God given by David Hume.

V. THE ENLIGHTENMENT'S SKEPTICS: HUME AND KANT

Hume is reported to have said that he was never an atheist until he read Clarke and Locke. The latter had given proofs for God's existence. Hume, using Locke's empirical assumptions, showed that knowledge of God is not possible. None of the traditional proofs actually demonstrate the existence of God. The design argument at best establishes a designer or designers. The cosmological argument relies on a faulty analogy of causation. The ontological argument argues from ideas to existence which is not possible. Indeed, no argument is possible because any attempt to prove the existence of God requires an

extension of human reason beyond experience. But since all knowledge is based on experience, any claim going beyond experience is unsupported.

Immanuel Kant, in seeking for a solution to Humean skepticism, put a final nail in the coffin of the knowledge of God. In distinguishing between the noumenal world (being in itself) and the phenomenological world (being as experienced), Kant limited human knowledge to the latter. The world of experience is shaped by the human mind which adds categories such as space, time, and causation. The consequence is that being in itself can never be known. The best humans can do is postulate God's existence as necessary for morality.

The result is that the goal of bringing glory to God must be abandoned. If God cannot be known then his glory cannot be known. If the world is to be explained it must be explained in purely natural terms that do not require reference to a transcendent or noumenal reality. Earlier it was noted that Aristotle had criticized the Greek materialists who limited causation to the material causes because they could not explain the cause of change itself, nor could they explain such realities as truth, beauty, and goodness. This critique, while old, continues to hold true when Modernity limits itself to material/natural causes. The natural sciences have trouble explaining change itself (and eventually appeal to uncaused events at the tiniest levels of matter), and concepts such as truth, beauty, and goodness are thought to be outside the scope of what science describes.

This brief description of Aristotle's final cause and how the Enlightenment rejected final causes can be better understood by seeing the role played by Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. Each of these scientists, in their respective fields, sought to do what Newton had done for physics and astronomy. Newton had provided a purely natural and mathematical explanation of motion and the solar system. He did make an appeal to God to explain slight corrections that were needed in the orbit of the planets, but this appeal was rejected once greater observation allowed the orbits to be corrected mathematically. It was acceptable to describe the motion of non-living objects in natural and mathematical terms, but what about living species, human societies, and the self?

VI. DARWIN, MARX, FREUD, AND THE REJECTION OF FINAL CAUSES

Each of these thinkers (Darwin, Marx, Freud) has provided interest and purpose for many who use their ideas to understand reality. Particularly Marx has been an icon of purpose for millions in revolutions around the world. What I wish to demonstrate is how they fit into the modern framework of denying final causes, and how ultimately this leads to a lack of meaning, and how they make the mistakes that Aristotle warned about with respect to the Good and human nature. Darwin limited causation to the efficient causes which Aristotle warned against as resulting in the failure to attain knowledge. Marx proposed an infinite process wherein the good is not achievable, which Aristotle warned against as making the individual's desires empty and vain. Freud reduced the self to a pleasure seeker, which Aristotle rejected as the least human of the approaches to happiness. Aristotle said that the purpose of the four causes is to have knowledge, which cannot be achieved if only some of the causes are known. Furthermore, the final cause is especially important for meaning in human life, so that if Modernity has abandoned it then the result will be a loss of meaning (emptiness and vanity). Indeed, 'Will not the knowledge of it [the good], then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to

determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object. It would seem to belong to the most authoritative art'.²¹

VII. THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES AND DESCENT OF MAN WITHOUT FINAL CAUSE

Darwin provided an explanation of the origin of species that did not require an appeal to God. He relied on beliefs that were commonly held at his time, such as how societies grow and the need for a check on growth, that adaptations occur in relation to environment, and that there is a struggle for survival.²² This explanation does not need (and rejects) final causes. What guides the development of a species is not change from potentiality to actuality in form and function. It is guided by natural laws:

These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance, which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a ratio of increase so high as to lead to a struggle for life, and, as a consequence, to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less improved forms. Thus, from the war of Nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows.²³

Darwin argued against special creation, but he also argued against Aristotle's view of life. There is no form and function toward which each living being is striving. Rather, each being is simply struggling to survive and have offspring. 'Nothing can be more hopeless than to attempt to explain this similarity of pattern in members of the same class, by utility or by the doctrine of final causes'.²⁴

This lack of final causes is applied to humans as well. In his *Descent of Man* Darwin concluded:

The main conclusion here arrived at, and now held by many naturalists who are well competent to form a sound judgment is that man is descended from some less highly organized form. The grounds upon which this conclusion rests will never be shaken, for the close similarity between man and the lower animals in embryonic development, as well as in innumerable points of structure and constitution, both of high and of the most trifling importance, - the rudiments which he retains, and the abnormal reversions to which he is occasionally liable, - are facts which cannot be disputed. They have long been known, but until recently they told us nothing with respect to the origin of man. Now when viewed by the light of our knowledge of the whole organic world, their meaning is unmistakable. The great principle of evolution stands up clear and firm, when these groups or facts are considered in connection with others, such as the mutual affinities of the members of the same group, their geographical distribution in past and present times, and their geological succession. It is incredible that all these facts should speak falsely. He who is not content to look, like a savage, at the phenomena of nature as disconnected, cannot any longer believe that man is the work of a separate act of creation.²⁵

In the above Darwin denied all three points of Aristotle mentioned earlier: There is no final cause that can give meaning to human life; there is no human nature (no form and function toward which humans are striving); rationality does not distinguish humans from animals but is a trait only slightly different than what lower forms of life possess. Indeed, the two problems Darwin addressed in human uniqueness were the intellect and moral disposition: 'The high standard of our intellectual powers and moral disposition is the greatest difficulty which presents itself, after we have been driven to this conclusion on the

origin of man'.²⁶ He argued that both formed through a slow process of gradual changes from lower forms.

The intellectual powers of humans are not unique and provide no source of meaning for human life. 'Everyone who admits the principle of evolution, must see that the mental powers of the higher animals, which are the same in kind with those of man, though so different in degree, are capable of advancement'.²⁷ The intellectual difference between an ape and a fish is huge, but within each species it is easy, according to Darwin, to see how the intellectual capacity would be favored. In humans, it was necessary for survival as the source of tools, weapons, traps, and the invention of language.

A great stride in the development of the intellect will have followed, as soon as the half-art and half-instinct of language came into use; for the continued use of language will have reacted on the brain and produced an inherited effect; . . . The higher intellectual powers of man, such as those of ratiocination, abstraction, self-consciousness, etc., probably follow from the continued improvement and exercise of the other mental faculties.²⁸

The intellect does not make man God-like, as in Aristotle, but is a product of being animal-like.

Darwin explained the development of moral sentiments as part of the need for social survival. He attributed the evolution of moral instincts 'firstly, from the enduring and ever-present nature of the social instincts; secondly, from man's appreciation of the approbation and disapprobation of his fellows; and thirdly, from the high activity of his mental faculties, with past impressions extremely vivid'.²⁹ Due to this last faculty, humans cannot help but look upon the future in light of the past and apply their impressions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Ethics is therefore not an explanation of what is necessary to achieve the good, but a developed and developing code of behavior dictating what is best for the survival of the group and an expression of the tastes of the individual.

VIII. OPPRESSION AND LABOR WITHOUT FINAL CAUSE

This leaves open the need for a naturalistic explanation of the group and the individual. Karl Marx provided the former. Marx stands in contrast, and clearly argued against, capitalism and industrialism. He sees these as trivializing the great majority of human life, and promoting inequality and oppression. Certainly these have come down to the present in a form that relegates the human to a worker, a part in an industrial machine, who works for a paycheck to turn around and be a consumer. Others, such as Heidegger,³⁰ have noted this aspect of modernity and the role it plays in boredom. One might contend that Adam Smith's laws play the same role that Marx's will be shown to play in divesting humans of any transcendent goal. The difference is that while Smith sought to explain work in a law-like fashion, he did not equate humans with work. It is this that I am arguing is a further step in Modernity to eliminating any final cause.

Marx began his manifesto with an explanation of the development of human societies: 'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle'.³¹ He describes all societies as stratified into systems of oppressor and oppressed. In the modern instantiation of this conflict, the bourgeoisie, who own the capital, oppress the workers by making them compete for wage-labor. 'The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combinations, due to association. The development of Modern

Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products'.³²

The idea that there are eternal truths of reason is one means that the bourgeoisie uses to oppress others, and must be (will be) overthrown with the bourgeoisie culture.³³ The result of this communist revolution will be the end of class distinctions, at which time all power will be in the hands of the association of the whole nation, and public power will no longer have a political character.³⁴ 'Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another. . . In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all'.³⁵

Marx defined human nature in terms of work. 'Estranged labour . . . estranges man from himself, from his own function, from his vital activity'.³⁶ Capitalism separates man from his work, and instead gives man a wage that is used to fulfill individual desires such as eating, drinking, and procreating.³⁷ Marx affirmed these as necessary human activities, but when made ends in themselves they are merely animal activities. What makes a human different from an animal is the connection to his work and the object of his work. Animals produce only what they need, whereas man produces this and more.³⁸ 'It is, therefore, in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself to be a species-being'.³⁹

This is a focus on process. Even if the Marxist utopia is realized, it is a utopia from Marx's perspective because all humans can work as they see fit. Marx provides a natural law about how society develops and will overcome oppression. Society develops much like the species that Darwin described: there is a struggle for survival in which the owners oppress the laborers. Marx defined oppression as evil because it is contrary to human nature – work and producing. For Marx, human nature is defined in terms of labor: the human is a worker and is defined by his work. The process in history which ends in the communist utopia is called dialectical materialism. It might be argued that there is in Marx the final end of a perfect society, but this is an end only in the same way that each individual in a species has as its end the overcoming of struggle in order to survive. Humans overcome to work, there is no final end to work.

Aristotle warned against those who focus on work rather than making the end achievable; if there is no final goal, only an infinite process, then desire cannot be satisfied and becomes vain and empty. Continuing under the auspices of Hume and Kant, there is no knowledge of the transcendent that calls humans to a purpose other than the mundane. 'Nature is man's inorganic body – that is to say, nature insofar as it is not the human body. Man lives from nature – i.e., nature is his body – and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man's physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature'.⁴⁰

Where Marx distinguished humans from animals in that humans produce more than they need, Aristotle distinguished them in having a different final cause. 'To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without some ground) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment. For there are, we may say, three prominent types of life—that just mentioned, the political, and thirdly the contemplative life'.⁴¹ For Marx, a human is a human as long as one produces more than is needed to stay alive, even if it is merely for vulgar pleasure. In contrast, Aristotle likens such persons to animals, and what distinguishes the human life is for most virtue (what is studied in politics), and most importantly contemplation.

IX. THE PLEASURE SEEKING SELF WITHOUT FINAL CAUSE

Freud provided a naturalistic explanation of the self. Human activities should be understood not as the product of a soul or non-physical mind, but as desire impulse components (mostly sexual).⁴² ‘The flight from the unsatisfying reality into what we call, on account of its biologically injurious nature, disease, but which is never without an individual gain in pleasure for the patient, takes place over the path of regression, the return to earlier phases of the sexual life, when satisfaction was not lacking’.⁴³ The self can be understood in terms of pleasure seeking, pleasure fulfillment, and repression from society. Infantile sexuality is aimed at pleasure, not reproduction, and ‘even before the advent of puberty certain impulses have undergone the most energetic repression under the impulse of education, and mental forces like shame, disgust, and morality are developed, which, like sentinels, keep the repressed wishes in subjection.’⁴⁴

For Freud the self is a pleasure seeker.

As we see, it is simply the pleasure-principle which draws up the programme of life’s purpose. This principle dominates the operation of the mental apparatus from the very beginning; there can be no doubt about its efficiency, and yet its programme is in conflict with the whole world, with the macrocosm as much as with the microcosm. It simply cannot be put into execution, the whole constitution of things runs counter to it; one might say the intention that man should be *happy* is not included in the scheme of *Creation*. What is called *happiness* in its narrowest sense comes from the satisfaction – most often instantaneous – of pent-up needs which have reached great intensity, and by its very nature can only be a transitory experience.⁴⁵

The self develops as pleasure seeking activities are repressed. This is the origin of personal values and of moral codes. He also uses this model to explain civilization and religion. ‘The gratification of our instincts is happiness, but when the outer world lets us starve, refuses us satisfaction of our needs, they become the cause of very great suffering. So the hope is born that by influencing these impulses one may escape some measure of suffering’.⁴⁶

What is the purpose of human life, according to Freud?

The question, ‘What is the purpose of human life?’ has been asked times without number; it has never received a satisfactory answer; perhaps it does not admit of such an answer. Many a questioner has added that if it should appear that life has no purpose, then it would lose all value for him. But these threats alter nothing. It looks, on the contrary, as though one had a right to dismiss this question, for it seems to presuppose that belief in the superiority of the human race with which we are already so familiar in its other expressions . . . One can hardly go wrong in concluding that the idea of a purpose in life stands and falls with the religious system.⁴⁷

This might appear to be pro-religion, however earlier on the page Freud said the religious feeling in man is a system of doctrine that proposes a solicitous Providence that explains the riddle of life and watches over him, guaranteeing a future existence for any shortcomings in this life. ‘The whole thing is so patently infantile, so incongruous with reality, that to one whose attitude to humanity is friendly it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life’.⁴⁸ The implication is that the idea of purpose in life is infantile as well.

Clearly each of these thinkers, Darwin, Marx, and Freud, have been modified and built upon since their time. The goal here is not to cover that material. The goal is to show how Modernity transitioned from talk about man’s chief end (the Westminster Confession of Faith) to the denial of final causes. These thinkers provide the contemporary Modern

outlook with natural explanations of the origin of species, society, and the self. What 'natural' means is that they do not appeal to anything non-physical, and they do not provide an explanation of purpose or final causation (even if such an explanation would appeal only to physical causes). What is the result?

X. THE RESULTS OF EFFICIENT CAUSES WITHOUT FINAL CAUSE

The framework of Modernity leaves only physical stimulation/pleasure leading to various attempts to fill the emptiness that results: consumerism, amusement, entertainment, waste and environmental degradation, and excessive behaviors in all areas of life. Freud noted this internal struggle and explained it as the result of repressed desire. It has been noted that Freud's sample base was not sufficiently broad so that while he might have been accurately describing those he interviewed, these are not representative of all. That is, individuals are at different places in their levels of consciousness and consistency so that while some may struggle with repressed sexual desires, others may struggle with visions of grandeur, and some are content with gardening. But there is a formal similarity that is true of each particular case. The formal desire is that persons have desires that they want fulfilled. What Darwin, Marx, and Freud have done is to reduce human desire to non-human categories: human desire is really just part of a struggle for survival; or it is really just part of a struggle to overcome alienated labor; or it is really just a struggle to seek pleasure and overcome repression. The human is reduced to a non-human explanation.

What is the result of Modernity's rejection of final causes and reduction of the personal to the non-personal? Insofar as an individual is aware of these theories the implication is that human activity has no purpose-no final goal. Human activity can be described as can other non-personal activities, but humans cannot be told what they ought to do to achieve a purpose because this requires an achievable goal. Modernity tells humans that whatever goals they set for themselves are illusions hiding the true goals of nature, which are survival, the overcoming of alienated labor, and achievement of sexual pleasure. The best way to be true to oneself is to simply make these one's goals and stop pretending there are any higher or better ends to pursue. Since these goals are not unlike the goals for animals, humans are told that they are just another kind of animal.

The extent to which a person is conscious of these implications, and consistent in thinking them through, affects the extent to which their life will result in boredom with life. This kind of boredom is also called *ennui*, to be distinguish from more trivial kinds of boredom. However, the root of the English word 'boredom' seems to be connected with something that does not arose desire or interest, or which is offensive in its inability to do so, and when this is applied to life rather than a specific event the outcome is a dissatisfaction with life – purposelessness and meaninglessness. This appears to be the history of the word, which is consistent with the claim that boredom is a universal existential problem for humans, not limited to Modernity although perhaps having unique manifestations in Modernity:

Were they alive today, users of Classical Latin might be surprised to find that centuries later a phrase of theirs would still survive, although in the form of a single word. The phrase *mihi in odio* (literally translated as 'to me in a condition of dislike or hatred is'), meaning 'I hate or dislike', gave rise to the Vulgar Latin verb *inodiare*, 'to make odious', the source of Modern French *ennuyer*, 'to annoy, bore'. In the Old French period a noun meaning 'worry, boredom', came from

the verb *ennuier*. This noun in its Modern French form *ennui* was borrowed into English in the sense ‘boredom’, the English word being first recorded in 1732. People may have needed a word for boredom in the polite, cultivated world of the 18th century, but at an earlier period, around 1275, we have already borrowed the French verb *ennuier*, the source of our word annoy. One of the earliest instances of annoy in English is, in fact, used in the sense ‘to bore an audience’.⁴⁹

Modernity has explained away competing systems that give final causes. It has done this through reductionism and skepticism. Competing systems, especially the otherworldliness that is still very popular, are explained away in terms of non-personal forces. The belief in heaven is a function of survival, is an opiate for the masses, is postponed pleasure seeking. Furthermore, because knowledge is only through sense data (radical empiricism) it is impossible to know about anything except this world (the phenomena). Speculation about heaven is at best speculation, but might also be unhealthy fantasy escapism. We simply cannot know about that kind of thing. Is it any surprise that life is viewed as without any ultimate purpose?

In contrast we can distinguish in Aristotle his formal characteristics of human nature and the good, and the way he fills in these characteristics with his answer. The formal characteristics were noted earlier: it is necessary to know the final cause to have knowledge; the final cause (the good) depends on the form and function of a being; the good must be achievable to avoid vanity and emptiness, and for humans is achieved through the use of reason. Modernity rejects final causes and accepts the skepticism that accompanies this (see Freud’s remark about the purpose of life above); it either rejects the idea of a form and function for humans, or limits this to non-personal characteristics; where modernity posits any goal, such as in Marx, it is an infinite process without an achievable goal therefore making desire vain and empty.

Aristotle is not necessarily in a better position. While he is great at explaining these formal characteristics, his answer is also attended with problems. In contrast to Modernity, Aristotle does make an attempt to explain the final cause for human nature, and he does preserve personhood in his description of human nature. For Aristotle, the basic form of humans is personal – they are thinkers, persons, users of reason who can reflect on their desires, and they cannot be reduced away to something else. The human function is therefore to develop the rational principle toward excellence. But here is where Aristotle’s metaphysics affects his understanding of the good. Aristotle trivializes this world and instead says that excellence in thinking, contemplation, involves an otherworldliness or transcendence. God is not concerned about matters of this life, indeed is involved only in self-contemplation, and so the humans who seek the good should not be concerned about this life but should instead reflect only on the infinite perfection of God. This is a perfection known directly and immediately through the mind rather than indirectly through the world and what it reveals of God.

Furthermore, all the world is moved toward perfection by attraction to the unmoved mover and has been so moved from eternity (there is no ‘creation’ in Aristotle’s philosophy). But this means either that the world should have reached perfection (after an eternity of trying), or it can never reach perfection if it has not yet done so (after an eternity of trying). The alternative is to conclude that the world is created and temporal, not eternal. Thus, Aristotle’s view of God cannot simply be ‘transplanted’ into theism – in one case God does not know the world, is absorbed in self-contemplation, and the world is uncreated, and in the other God creates the world as an expression of his being with the intention of being known.

XI. THE VANITY OF MAN'S TOIL UNDER THE SUN

Both Aristotle and Modernity lead to boredom with this life. Aristotle provides the formal characteristics of the good and final cause, but his view of reality is that the changeable/potential is moving toward being the unchangeable/eternal. Therefore, that which is potential has no inherent interest, but only insofar as it can be like the eternal. Modernity, in seeking to make sense of this world, rejected Aristotelianism. In affirming the reality of change (vs. change is potentiality not actuality) it overreacted and denied that there is anything eternal and changeless. There is only the process of struggle to survive; only the process to overcome oppression and then labor to produce more than one needs; only the process of struggle between pleasure seeking and repression. But in rejecting final causes (rather than Aristotle's specific final cause) it ultimately dehumanized humanity and left life in this world without any personal purpose. Humans are gastropods seeking to reproduce, work more than they need, and fulfill their desires without critical reflection. Either way, life in this world is without purpose, meaningless, and therefore boring.

XII. POST-MODERNISM

What are we left with? Have the best minds left us only with boredom in this life? Should we reject Aristotle as too old and Modernity as too absolutist, and instead go with something post-Modern? Post-Modernism, or hermeneutical skepticism, recognizes the need for the personal in contrast to the dehumanizing affects of Modernity.⁵⁰ It places a person in a given historical context and frame of reference, and denies the possibility of a grand narrative that explains reality objectively – from a vantage point that is not situated in a historical context. This will not be treated in depth here because it is continuous with Modernism in that it accepts the skepticism which rejects the human ability to know final causes. Instead, it focuses on individuals as the source of meaning. However, this only perpetuates the problem for two reasons: it gives no solution to the problem of the appearance of meaning vs. actually having meaning; and therefore it can give no account of what is actually meaningful in this life vs. what only appears to be meaningful. That is, if each person (historical epoch/context) is the determiner of meaning, then each person has to deal with the reality that his/her vision of meaning often comes up short. For Aristotle or Modernism this is easily accounted for as the difference between opinion and knowledge; one's vision of meaning was insufficient because one only had opinion and did not know. But if one is the determiner of meaning, then there is no distinction between opinion and knowledge: the failure of one's vision would be an absolute crisis with nowhere to turn for help. One cannot rely on one's self since this has already failed, and one cannot look to square one's beliefs with what is actually the case since this is not available either. Life is rather a process of attempts to find meaning and failures to do so – a process that makes desire empty and vain.

XIII. CONTINUING THE ERROR

Consider the way that numerous and notable thinkers of the 20th century have continued the errors that lead to lack of purpose and boredom. Some thinkers continue to emphasize otherworldliness, making this world a shadow or endurance test before the real world of

heaven or the transcendent is achieved.⁵¹ Others seek to find meaning in this world through ideas of truth, beauty, and goodness, although denying any final cause and therefore any ability to explain these ideas.⁵² Some, seeing this problem, affirm the lack of meaning in this life and humanity's fate in oblivion, and seek to find meaning in the struggle against change, fate, and destruction itself.⁵³ A helpful point made by Thomas Nagel is that if nothing matters, then this does not matter either;⁵⁴ the need for meaning is impossible to avoid.

From this it follows that where a theory or worldview denies purpose and meaning it is incomplete or false (it denies the very thing it affirms – there is no meaning and this claim is meaningful). This was affirmed by Aristotle when he articulated his four causes, all of which are necessary for knowledge, and where any one is lacking there is an incomplete picture. Hence, where a theory or worldview denies final causes then this worldview is either incomplete, or incorrect. Specifically, it would be incomplete if it leaves open the possibility of a final cause for human nature, incorrect if it denies that there can be a final cause for human nature (say, by denying that there is a form and function for human nature).

XIV. THE FEATURES OF THIS WORLD: RATIONALITY AND STRUGGLE

These errors can be avoided by applying the formal insights of Aristotle to the problem of purpose. We saw earlier that Aristotle himself provided a final cause that empties this life of meaning, while Modernity supplies no final cause. But Aristotle correctly noted that the final cause is connected to the form and function of human nature, and that this involves the use of reason. This can be called a necessary presupposition to any human activity. Thought (governed by the laws of thought – reason) is presupposed by Darwin in giving an account of origins, by Marx in explaining social development, by Freud in describing the self. Thought is undeniable in that its denial involves thought. Furthermore, thinking aims at knowing, correct thought, or certainty about the object of thinking. So the two questions are: first, is there anything worth thinking about in this life, anything interesting about which to think that will give life purpose? And second, can knowledge in this world be connected to anything eternal, lasting, and changeless so as to make the endeavor for knowledge attainable and permanent rather than empty and vain?

Russell and Camus seek to find purpose and meaning in knowing about truth, beauty, and goodness in this life.⁵⁵ Certainly, if these can be known, then the process of doing so is of the highest interest. But if they are not connected to anything lasting, eternal, and changeless, but instead end at death then the process amounts to nothing. Knowing truth, beauty, and goodness amounts to nothing, and not knowing them amounts to nothing, so which a person picks is merely a matter of personal preference rather than of human form and function – both amount to nothing.

Neihbur seeks to find purpose and meaning in the transcendent, in heaven, where there is connection to the eternal, lasting, and changeless.⁵⁶ But while this connection is made, it is disconnected from this life and this world. Otherworldliness makes this world boring as one awaits the blessings of the next life. The errors of denying a final end and making this world without meaning require showing how the meaningfulness of this world is connected to the final end. This requires a response to the skepticism of Hume and Kant about the human ability to know the highest reality, but also a rejection of Aristotle's disconnect of that reality from this world.

The solution seems to be: the form and function of a human is to use reason to know truth, beauty, and goodness; these are known in this world, and the knowledge of them in this world is a revelation of the eternal, changeless creator of the world. Rather than being merely this worldly, or merely otherworldly, the two must be combined. This world reveals the eternal creator. By disconnecting knowledge of this world from what it reveals of the creator, knowledge is made empty and vain. By attempting to get knowledge of the eternal creator directly and apart from this world the importance and interest of the creation (and therefore the activity of God the creator) is denied.

The world is of the highest interest because it reveals the highest reality. In knowing this world and seeing what it reveals about God the creator, the human is connected to the highest reality in a way that affirms the form and function of human nature. The failure to do so leads to emptiness and vanity, which are attended by lack of interest, boredom, and meaninglessness. Modernity has been characterized by these, but so has pre-Modernity.⁵⁷ Post-Modernity will only avoid them if it learns from previous mistakes rather than repeating them.

XV. BOREDOM AS AN EXISTENTIAL CALL BACK

Is boredom worthless? Can it serve any purpose or contribute to the final cause of human form and function. I believe it can. If boredom is viewed as an indication of the lack of knowledge (incomplete or incorrect knowledge due to the failure to know the final cause) then it is supremely valuable – a kind of existential call back from meaninglessness. However, if it is simply endured through a hardening of one's self, or through avoidance by being lost in excess (the gluttonous person spoken of by Aristotle) then it serves as a revelation to others about the consequences of the failure to know final causes. The kinds of activities done by humans to avoid boredom become excessive, gross, and destructive. This strengthens boredom's purpose as an existential call back to those who understand that it cannot be avoided through sensuous living. So, boredom itself fits into the form and function of human nature – boredom has a final cause that serves the final cause of humanity.

But what if there is nothing eternal? This is essentially what Modernity has claimed. It has arrived at this claim due to its adoption of empiricism. Hume rightly pointed out through experience one cannot come to know anything about God. But this should be a call back to re-examine empiricism rather than deny that there is something eternal. Aristotle can provide us with a formal solution to the problem, although this need not result in our accepting his understanding of the relationship between the eternal and changeable. Aristotle proved that there must be something eternal (without beginning): 'If there is nothing eternal, neither can there be a process of coming to be; for there must be something that comes to be, i.e. from which something comes to be, and the ultimate term in this series cannot have come to be, since the series has a limit and since nothing can come to be out of that which is not'⁵⁸ and 'Everything that comes to be comes to be by the agency of something and from something and comes to be something'.⁵⁹ If there is now something, then there cannot have ever been absolutely nothing. The implication is that something, or some process of beings, is eternal.

Asking if there is something eternal is the same as asking if there is something changeable. Both are inferences of the mind. We can infer from the impossibility of being from non-being that there is something eternal. We infer from our own change, our

perception of change in the world, and the impossibility of denying change without at the same time affirming it, that change also is a reality. There must be something eternal, but not everything is eternal. Boredom is the result of not understanding the reality of each and the relationship between the two.

XVI. MEANING IN THIS WORLD

Is this world boring? Has Modernity given us any reason to find interest in the world? Was the scenario better in pre-Modernity ruled by Aristotelian otherworldliness where the eternal is contemplated apart from this world? Here I have discussed the formal characteristics of final causes, the particular way that Aristotle attempted to fill in these formal characteristics, and how final causes were denied in Modernity by considering the shaping influence of Darwin, Marx, and Freud. The result of this study was to find that Aristotle was in a better position than Darwin Marx, and Freud all of whom denied the existence of final causes and therefore made human life empty and vain. But Aristotle ultimately emptied this world of meaning by denying that the world of change is of any importance, and instead focused on contemplation of the eternal. Using Aristotle's insight that the good must be attainable but also lasting and connected to what is eternal, I have argued that humans can find the highest purpose in knowing what this world reveals about the eternal creator.

This does not rule out the possibility of divine revelation in addition to what is known from general revelation. Indeed, it provides the foundation for understanding the need for special revelation. It is only the virtuous person who is able to understand the world as it is. Thus, while the virtuous person sees the goal and how the virtuous life fits into this, other persons do not understand. This raises the question of redemption, of how persons will be able to move from not being virtuous to being virtuous, if they will not see the need for this change until they are virtuous. And yet in Aristotle's version of the unmoved mover, the perfect being absorbed in self-contemplation, there is no possibility of assistance with redemption or in giving divine revelation. The rest of the world is moved by attraction to this unmoved mover, but is not known by the unmoved mover.

Above we considered the problems attendant to Aristotle's view of the unmoved mover, and how solving these problems leads us to the creator. The work of God the Creator is not out of need (as an eternal being cannot be in need of anything), but out of an expression of God's being. Considered in relation to the problem of persons who are not virtuous we have the foundation for claiming that there is a need for special (redemptive) revelation. Persons who are not virtuous, and therefore do not understand the world as they should, require redemption, and the knowledge of this redemption cannot be derived from general revelation precisely because they have rejected and not understood general revelation. Instead, there is the need for divine, redemptive revelation explaining how redemption is possible. Thus, where the act of creating is a revelation of the being of God, so too is the act of redemption a further deepening of that revelation. This special revelation further deepens the revelation of God, adding to the purpose of humanity.

The highest purpose of humanity is to find the meaning in this world and understand what it reveals about the eternal creator. For Aristotle, contemplation was a project only possible for a few; the masses could at best attain virtue but were not suited to the life of contemplation. It might simply be true that most people will not do philosophy. But does this mean that the lives of most people are destined to boredom? The discussion above

offers an alternative view that will allow all humans access to the highest purpose. The meaning to be found in the world is not limited to philosophical contemplation but involves all possible aspects of reality that are and can be of interest to anyone. Any possible aspect of this world is meaningful and full of interest because it was created and therefore reveals something about the creator. Philosophy, religion, politics, natural science, law, art, education, sports, etc., all involve the human mind in seeking knowledge, and this is revelatory.

So far from being without purpose, human life and this world can be said to be full of meaning. Where a human sees this he/she will be captured in interest. Where a human does not see this, or does not connect it to anything eternal, then the interest will fade and be replaced with boredom. And yet boredom itself is not without purpose. Boredom is a mark that our attempt to understand the world has failed and must be rethought. And this process itself is full of meaning.

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