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ARISTOTLE
AND
THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

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degree of
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By

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ABSTRACT:
ARISTOTLE AND
THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Since time immemorial, man has feared his finiteness and sought to overcome his limitations by winning immortality. In the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, the hero-king longs for immortality but finally learns to find pleasure in earthly delights and accomplishments. Each of us formulates some life philosophy which serves as a value system, by which we measure our progress towards our goals, evaluate the individual history we will leave behind, and which defines one as a person.

To find meaning in one's life is one of the most personal, and also most universal, journeys that an individual can undertake. What existential fear lies deep within all of us, driving us to fret over the possibility of extinction of our individuality? How can man hope to transcend death via the accomplishments of a limited lifespan? What pattern can one trace in the mosaic of life's experiences? How does this correlate to an ultimate meaning in one's life? How might dysfunction develop if no purpose is found? What value systems are employed to assist in fulfilling the meaning one has attributed to one's life? These are the questions with which this thesis is concerned.

Some of mankind's greatest philosophers, poets, authors, humanitarians, and scientists have grappled with the question of meaning in one's life. It is fascinating that such advanced thinkers pondered these same topics, thousands of years ago, perhaps sharing our same thoughts when they first embarked. The "founding fathers" of philosophy, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, each explored the above questions to some extent. This thesis will examine the thoughts of Aristotle on these issues in order to contrast the early Greek experience with the modern experience. It will show Aristotle's influence on later value systems, notably that of St. Thomas Aquinas, and trace the change of focus from a value system based on self and society to one that is rooted in belief in a caring God. It will also investigate the ways in which the historical Greek perspective is an insufficient simile for the 20th-century experience, particularly in the areas of theism and existentialism.

Chapter I will give an overview of the system Aristotle developed to explain mankind relates to the divine, and how we should relate to the world around us. Chapter II will show the application of Aristotle's view of friendship, as illustrated by works that were contemporary to Aristotle: The Iliad, and the Epic of Gilgamesh. It will also show how Aristotle's philosophy served as the foundation for later religious thought, particularly in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. And it will introduce fear of death as man's primary motivation, which Aristotle largely ignored.

Chapter III continues the examination of man's fear of death, by presenting modern Existentialist arguments and exploring man's need to attach meaning to his life. The theistic response is offered as explanatory evidence for the phenomena of hope and faith. Chapter IV explores those areas in which Aristotle's system, being relevant to the propinquity of his own culture, will not suffice for the modern experience, and presents an alternative value system for evaluation. In the conclusion we see how Aristotle's philosophy still applies to the modern experience in some ways, and in other ways requires adaptation to our own culture and era.

"Because I could not stop for death,
He kindly stopped for me.
The carriage held but just ourselves
and Immortality."

CHAPTER I

Aristotle wrote many treatises, only one-fifth of which are still extant; and many volumes more have been written by others about his work. His philosophy cannot, of course, be examined fully in the limited space of a thesis. To adequately comment on such vast and diverse writings is the work of a lifetime, as it took Aristotle a lifetime to produce them. The focus of this chapter will be to present a brief synopsis of those areas of Aristotle's philosophy which are particularly cogent to the theme of this paper. These theories can be found primarily in Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics.

To Aristotle, all things have a characteristic function: the function (or purpose) of a bowl is to hold food, the chair to provide seating. If the bowl leaks, or the chair collapses under the weight of a person, they will not fulfill their functions well and will not be a good chair or bowl. The purpose of a thing is that property which distinguishes it from all other things; while chairs could be used as stepstools, they are primarily for sitting upon.

That happiness is the chief good is evident because it is man's ultimate goal; we do not choose to be happy for the

sake of reaching some other goal, but because we wish to be happy; we choose it in and of itself. The Greek term 'eudaimonia' (happiness) means 'to be flourishing', to be in the best state possibly achievable. All living things, by fulfilling their purpose, will then be in the best possible state; to do otherwise would mean they are not a "good" thing. Aristotle believed that, if we but knew what is man's purpose, we could determine if he is a "good" man by how well he fulfills that purpose.

The characteristic which distinguishes man from all other living things is his ability to think rationally; the ability to identify a statement as true or false, to form an opinion as to the veracity of an event, to distinguish between just and unjust. Therefore the purpose which man claims as his own is that of rational thought (logos/reason). If rational thought is man's purpose, then a good man is one who thinks well; for "the virtue of a thing is relative to its proper work".

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But how can we tell if a man thinks well? If "the excellences most properly human are the intellectual excellences, and eudaimonia consists primarily in activity in accordance with those excellences", then we can analyze a man's virtues, the manner in which he employs reason, and determine if he has made a success of his life and, as a result, flourishes.

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Since the distinguishing feature (and therefore purpose) of man is his ability to reason, and happiness (the chief good) is contingent upon how well man fulfills his purpose, then the highest good of man is the complete realization of his reason. But reasoning is only a part of man. He also has feelings: appetites, desires, emotions, and social needs. A rational attitude toward these feelings is essential to happiness. A good life is one in which all of these factors are brought into a balance of perfect harmony. This state is reached when a person does the right thing, at the right time, in the right way or to the right person. This 'appropriateness' can be achieved through the use of practical wisdom; essentially, one must practice virtue until it has become a habit. Moreover, the man of practical wisdom will be well-rounded, for in order to have excellence in any one virtue, it is necessary that he be excellent in all; so that a fatal flaw in one area does not taint the other areas of virtue. The practicing of virtue is necessary, Aristotle thought, because "none of the moral virtues arise in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature". In other words, if man were

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virtuous by nature, then all men would automatically be virtuous (which they obviously are not; Aristotle wrote, "for men are good in but one way, but bad in many").

While a good life requires that reason rule the will and the appetites, Aristotle admitted that happiness is augmented by 'external goods', such as friendship. He realized that 'man is a social animal': "...intellectual activity is not enough. Men are not isolated individuals, and the human excellences cannot be practised by solitary hermits."⁶ But in order to achieve this, he will have to make certain covenants with society, covenants which may require sacrifice. Aristotle believed, as did Socrates and Plato before him, that there is no such thing as individual good independent of the good of society ("perhaps one's own good cannot exist without household management, nor without a form of government"). In order to live in a society, we must accept certain duties and relinquish a certain amount of freedom (Socrates called this the 'social contract').⁷ Aristotle said that "man is born for citizenship".⁸ The farmer, the blacksmith, the tailor, the politician must all work together since no man can fulfill every function alone. As the eye, hand and foot contribute to the functioning of the body, so is man meant to contribute to the functioning of society through his activity (his chosen career). Moreover, his allegiance to the State must be inviolable, for his fellow citizens depend upon him to fulfill his assigned duty. The safety and well-being of all

may well depend on his accomplishing this obligation. If man is born to be a citizen, then the highest calling of a citizen is to employ reason in the rendering of justice. Man must choose between the just and unjust; a good man is he who chooses well and who acts upon (carries out) his decision.

A person chooses well when three conditions are met: their reasoning must be true; the desire must be right (temperate rather than uncontrolled) and their reason and desire must aim at the same thing. Thus reason and desire must be in accord with each other.⁹ However, essential to Aristotle's ethical system is the necessity for action. The virtuous man must not only choose well, but act accordingly; thus is he exercising his will. Deliberation is not enough; the person must also implement the choice he or she has made. An act is just when it is made with true knowledge; when the choice is made for its own sake, not for the sake of something else (some other end), and with a firm and unchangeable character. By this Aristotle means that the man of practical wisdom will not need to think about what is right, because he instinctively knows; he will simply do it as if it were second nature to him.

Aristotle identified two separate kinds of virtue: intellectual and moral. Intellect belongs to the soul; but

since the soul has two parts that are able to follow a course of reasoning (the scientific and calculative), he identifies the calculative/deliberative as the part which forms opinions and is therefore responsible for making choices. Virtue is measured by whether that choice is good or bad; i.e. praiseworthy or blameworthy.

Aristotle sees moral virtue as a mean, lying between two excesses, and relative to each individual. This is a very humanistic view, because it takes into account both man's complex nature and the individual differences between each person, as well as the circumstances of the act (for action is required in order to implement the virtuous activity; merely thinking about it cannot bring about the desired good end). If, for example, the virtue in question is charity, and our goal is "liberality" (being a mean between the two excesses of profligacy and stinginess), the definition of "liberality" would be relative to the financial means of each person; what one person could easily afford to give might represent another's entire fortune, and in giving it he would then be unjustly depriving his own household of sustenance. So that "stingy" for one person might not apply to another person who gave the same amount; even if the two people are of similar means, one may have a large household to support and the other only himself, so that the second could afford to give more. As a model for excellence, the man of

practical wisdom exemplifies the virtuous mean through "moderation in all things", or temperateness.

Thus Aristotle defines virtue as a state of character, lying in a mean (between two vices, the one a vice of excess, the other of defect), the mean being relative to the individual, and determined by a rational principle, this principle being determined as would the man of practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is defined as "practical habit with true logos"¹⁰. Similarly Aristotle attempts to define¹¹ and categorize each individual area of virtue, along with its corresponding vices of excess and defect.

Aristotle's philosophy, while elegantly reasoned, is above all very pragmatic. By appealing to the common sense of the average man, Aristotle's theories bring philosophy out of the 'ivory tower', and offer applicability to everyday life; it also allows for the variances of individual preference or predisposition. At the same time, his philosophy is esoteric enough to give even the most scholarly mind plenty of contemplative material. As Einstein is to physics, Aristotle is to philosophy; although his writings were suppressed in the Middle Ages, he had a tremendous impact on the thinking of later philosophers and theologians.

In Chapter 2 we will see how Aristotle's thought was gradually adapted to fit the changing mentality of man, and helped form the foundation of modern theology. The bridge that made this possible was St. Thomas Aquinas.

CHAPTER 2

Homer's Iliad and the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh were both extant during Aristotle's lifetime. We know he was familiar with Homer's epics, as he mentions them in his writings; it is quite possible that he also knew of the Epic of Gilgamesh, or had heard a substantially similar story.

In the Iliad, Achilles is the supreme hero, triumphing over all who oppose him; a model of bravery and courage, he is also a devoted friend to Patroclus. In the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu and Gilgamesh are likewise models of bravery and courage as well as inseparable companions. Like the Iliad, the Epic is a poignant tribute to the grief experienced at the death of a beloved friend. In the two stories, there are similarities in the heroes' inability to accept responsibility for complicity in the death of friends, but their reactions also reveal the differences between the two: Gilgamesh accepts Enkidu's death but not his own mortality, and goes in search of everlasting life; while Achilles in seeking revenge on Hector accepts not only Patroclus' death but his own as well, knowing through prophecy that his own death will soon follow.

Aristotle's ultimate definition of friendship is "a wishing of good to the other." This is the true friend, as opposed to those who are friends merely for the sake of pleasure (as in the example of children at play) or for utility (as in the case of governments who are each other's allies); for these are self-serving motives, "but to a friend we say we ought to wish what is good for his sake" and "we define 'friend' as one who will always try, ¹² for your sake, to do what he takes to be good for you." However, in all cases of friendship, the friends wish the ¹³ same end (in some cases pleasure, in others advantage, in others companionship, etc.); Aristotle wrote that "those, then, are friends to whom the same things are good and evil" and "like is dear to like". This applies equally ¹⁴ to good men and evil men; those friends who are just will ¹⁵ both love justice, whereas those who are evil will both love wickedness; and governments will each seek that which assures the safety and continuity of their states, so that they will be friendly with those other governments who hold views aligned with their own, share the same enemies, or seek the same ends.

According to Aristotle, each person must first be a friend to himself; for it is in wishing for himself what is good, and acting upon these wishes for his own sake, that he learns to treat others the same in the spirit of friendship. St. Thomas Aquinas, building upon the ¹⁶ foundation of Aristotle's comments on friendship,

progresses to the belief that friendship is necessary because love of neighbor is man's imitation of the perfect love of God, and is a reflection thereof. That God loves himself perfectly follows from Aristotle's idea that man must first learn to be a friend to himself before he can befriend others; it would therefore be necessary for God to love himself perfectly (since perfection, the highest excellence, is the nature of a divine being) before he could love mankind perfectly. Since man, being imperfect himself, is not capable of perfect love, he cannot return God's love in its perfect form. Therefore, according to Aquinas' thought, the closest man can come to being God's friend is to do nothing that is against God's wishes. Thus would man fulfill Aristotle's description of friends, as "those to whom the same things are good and evil". However, as Aristotle writes that it is difficult for persons of different rank to maintain friendships (such as between a superior and his inferior), the friendship between God and man must be as that between parents and children; for "the product belongs to the producer...but the producer does not belong to the product, or belongs in a lesser degree." It is interesting that both Aristotle and Aquinas agree that man's function is to imitate the manifestation of God, but differed in their theories of what form of expression that manifestation would take: Aristotle via contemplation, Aquinas via love.

Aquinas was obviously very much influenced by Aristotle's philosophy, because he mentions Aristotle frequently in his writings. Their theories are substantially the same, the major difference being that, while Aristotle places great emphasis on friendship, Aquinas goes one step farther and places this emphasis on love, specifically as a reflection of God. Also, while St. Thomas thought that happiness comes as a result of virtuous activity (contending in Question V, Article 7 that deeds on the part of man are required before God bestows happiness), Aristotle thought that happiness is virtuous activity (and in the Ethics toys with the possibility of happiness being God-sent). Aquinas seems to place emphasis on life as a drudgery which must be endured in order to attain the happiness of eternal life; whereas Aristotle seems to accept death as man's fate, and therefore places emphasis on how this life can be happiest, since it is all man has to look forward to and should therefore be used to the fullest. However, in the Eudemian Ethics, thought to be written at a later date than the Nichomachean Ethics, he finds the most excellent state of humans to be the service to and contemplation of God, and the control of desire by reason.

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Aquinas has a syllogism with which Aristotle would probably agree (but for different reasons): Since God is the most perfect thing, and happiness is the highest good,

God must therefore be perfectly happy. Aristotle's syllogism would differ only slightly, the third premise becoming: God must be perfectly happy by virtue of devoting himself constantly to contemplation. However, Aquinas sees happiness more in good works than in divine contemplation (sharing Aristotle's emphasis on action vs. pure contemplation). Action is more fittingly God-like to Aquinas, because if divine contemplation were the work of God, He would be locked into the apparent tautology of constantly contemplating Himself. Aristotle also reasons that a divine mind, being the perfect intellect, cannot think of nothing, nor think constantly about itself; though neither would it concern itself with the petty problems of men, being far too advanced to find interest in such affairs. This, however, serves to illustrate the difference in the value systems of the two philosophers: Aristotle sees happiness stemming from service to society, by employing logos to carry out one's duties as a citizen; while Aquinas directs his attention toward service to God, through the means of loving one's neighbor. Additionally, Aristotle seeks approval, praise and reward from his peers, while Aquinas seeks approval, praise, and ultimately reward from God.

Aquinas and Aristotle differed only slightly in their concepts of the essence of God (as opposed to His manifestation). To Aquinas, God's essence was His

existence. Aquinas saw God as the 'First Cause', a concept substantially similar to that of Aristotle's 'Unmoved Mover'. (Working backwards in time, they both supposed that if everything has a cause, there would be an endless circle of creation. Since this is an impossible tautology, there must be something which was responsible for the first event, and this something is termed 'God'). But according to Aristotle, the essence of God is pure contemplative thought (this is also a tenet of the Buddhistic faith). This follows necessarily from his theory that only intellect is capable of existence outside of a body; therefore God's essence must be pure intellect.

Aristotle wrote in De Anima that reason alone "is capable of separate existence...being in its essence an actuality...this alone is immortal and eternal." (In this he is referring to the 'nous', man's natural intuitive reason or intellect.) In other words, the soul, being dependent upon the body for its actuality, is therefore inseparable from the body; only those things which are actualities of no body (i.e., 'nous' as described above) can be capable of separate existence.

In his description of man's potential for survival of death, Aristotle gives us a very bleak picture. Perhaps this is why Aristotle so fervently pursues a recipe for man to attain happiness while living; he believes that man

has no hope for an afterlife in which each person retains his individual personality. S.E. Frost Jr. writes of this concept of Aristotle's:

"[Aristotle held that] creative reason...existed... before either body or soul were created. While passive reason, or the matter part of the soul, is connected with the body and will perish when the body is destroyed, creative reason is not influenced by the body...and will continue to live after the death of the body. This creative reason is a spark of the divinity, a part of God, which comes into the soul from without...Since all but creative reason perishes with the body, personal immortality is impossible in Aristotle's system. The only part of the soul which survives death is actually part of God and simply returns to God."

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This interpretation of Aristotle also essentially encompasses the beliefs of Buddhism. It could be a coincidence that the two developed parallel philosophies, but that there was some sort of influence between Aristotle and Buddhism seems to me unmistakable. But which came first? Since Buddha lived about 500 B.C., it is possible that Aristotle heard of the Buddhist philosophy somewhere in his travels. Neither would it be surprising if the developing Buddhist religion had adopted some of Aristotle's thought to create for their budding religion a foundation which would appeal to logic (of course, Aristotle's philosophy appealed to St. Thomas and other theologians of the Western World also).

Buddhists have a curiously Aristotelian flavor to their concepts of life, the soul as pure consciousness, and the meaning of life. Aristotle wrote that "if one of a pair of contraries naturally exists, the other, if it is really contrary, exists also naturally". For instance, hot can only be called hot as it relates to cold;²¹ therefore death can only be called death as it relates to life. Perhaps, as hot fire meeting cold ice converts to steam, which assumes new form and dissipates, so life and death may combine to assume a new form that ultimately dissipates. The Buddhists believe in just such a soul, one whose individuality evaporates into the Universe to become one with all humanity; believing, like Aristotle, that the soul, which pre-existed the body, is non-individualistic, and that personal immortality is impossible because the soul simply returns to it's origin, which is divine consciousness. Robert Lifton writes of Buddhism: "This communalization of the soul and absence of any sharp concept of the immortal individual soul contrasts [sharply] with the Judeo-Christian tradition....it has to do with one's sense of being part of the cosmic and eternal."

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The Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of the Buddhists, said in an interview for Life magazine:

"....What is important is to see how we can best lead a meaningful everyday life, how we can bring about peace and harmony in our minds, how we can help contribute to society.

...According to Buddhism there are a limitless number of universes....In this vastness, can we ever know why we are here? From the Buddhist point of view, our consciousness has the potential to know every object. Because of obstructions we are, at present, unable to know everything. However, by removing these obstructions gradually, it is ultimately possible to know everything.

...It can also be said that the essence of life is the search for happiness and the fulfillment of one's desires. All living beings strive to sustain their lives so that they might achieve happiness. As to why the self, wishing for happiness, came into being, Buddhism answers: This self has existed from beginningless time. It has no end but for it to ultimately achieve full enlightenment."

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In comparison to Aristotle's philosophy, we see in the foregoing passage the following Aristotelian overtones: obligation to society; fulfillment in pure contemplation (full enlightenment by realizing the potential to "know everything"); and the conscious intellect pre-existing the body, and surviving death. This last similarity is highlighted by Frost's comments, above.

Like Marx (who did not believe in an afterlife), Aristotle thought that happiness must be found during this lifetime. Aquinas thought that "some participation in happiness can be had in this life, but true and perfect happiness cannot be had in this life....since [happiness] is the complete and sufficient good, [it] excludes all evil and fulfills all desire. Now in this life all evil cannot be excluded. The present life is subject to many evils which cannot be avoided....". He goes on to say

that the ultimate good should be permanent, and the goods of this life are only transitory and therefore cannot fulfill the ultimate good, which we know to be happiness. Therefore, there must be some other existence in which the ultimate good can be obtained, and hence the argument for the traditional Christian afterlife.

Both the Greek concept of Hades as a place of "moldy mansions" and shadowy apparitions, and the Sumerian vision of an underworld with a "house where they sit in darkness, where dust is their food and clay their meat....over bolt and door lie dust and silence",²⁵ portray death as a dismal but eternal afterlife somewhere within earth's crust. That there should be such striking similarities is not surprising: "the world inhabited by Greek bards and Assyrian scribes, in the eighth and seventh centuries, was small enough for there to have been some contact between them; and the trading voyages of Greek merchants and adventurers provide a likely setting for the exchange of stories." Perhaps because the only thing that Greeks²⁶ could look forward to in the afterlife was companionship (thus Patroclus begs Achilles for a speedy burial so he can enter Hades), Aristotle places such emphasis on his treatises of friendship; but never once does he even suggest that such friendship may transcend the grave. We can infer this, however, from that portion of Homer's "Odyssey" in which Odysseus sees the spirit of Achilles

striding through the meadows with Patroclus at his side; and from the hope Socrates expresses in the Gorgias of being able to associate, after his death, "with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer" (whom he had not known in life, because they predated him).²⁷

Like Achilles, Gilgamesh has an "over-riding preoccupation with fame, reputation, and the revolt of mortal man against the laws of separation and death."²⁸ The Greek afterlife was one in which a man was robbed of his vitality and became a bloodless, shadowy apparition. Most Greeks did not believe in an afterlife in which man would reap rewards and honor (since the gods rewarded or punished man during this lifetime by bestowing good or ill fortune upon him according to his virtue). Because of this, obtaining honor and reward during this life received tremendous emphasis. This is why, in the Iliad, the heroes are so intent on winning "meeds", and prizes for their prowess in various contests. Aristotle, while addressing man's curiosity about the potential of surviving death, failed to give adequate consideration to man's fear of death. Aristotle assumed that the contemporary Greek would face death bravely: if he feared, he must not show it. Many of the warriors of the Iliad begged Achilles to spare their lives; obviously they did not want to die. But the paradigms of bravery set an example by refusing to quail before death: while even

Hector and Achilles wanted to remain alive as long as possible, they were resigned to the fact that man's fate is death; better, since one must die anyway, to die nobly on the battlefield. In the Sumerian Gilgamesh, Enkidu (dying of illness) said: "I shall not die like a man fallen in battle; I feared to fall, but happy is the man who falls in the battle, for I must die in shame."

Perhaps one of the reasons Aristotle gives little thought to death is that he accepts its inevitability, and therefore classes it among those things which are not worthy of deliberation, since it is not within man's power and cannot be changed.

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, man's stated purpose is to be merry and enjoy himself. Says Siduri:

"Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to?
You will never find that life for which
you are looking. When the gods created
man they allotted him death, but life they
retained in their own keeping. As for you,
Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things;
day and night, night and day, dance and be
merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes
be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish
the little child that holds your hand, and
make your wife happy in your embrace; for
this too is the lot of man."

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In many ways the 'merriment' recommended is similar to that of Aristotle, who believes in pleasure in moderation (the right pleasures, in the right amount, at the right time), and Siduri counsels pleasures which would fall within the realm of virtue if exercised in moderation. Gilgamesh's reply, however, illustrates the point in which

I find Aristotle's philosophy to be singularly lacking, in his failure to give adequate consideration to man's fear of death:

"How can I be silent, how can I rest, when Enkidu whom I love is dust, and I too shall die and be laid in the earth....Because of my brother I am afraid of death, because of my brother I stray through the wilderness. His fate lies heavy upon me....I am afraid of death."

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Gilgamesh eventually comes to terms with his death anxieties by finding meaning in human accomplishments, such as the great wondrous wall he has built around his city. Like the heroes of the Iliad (Hector says "thus will one say, and my fame shall not be lost"), he must attach meaning to life in order to accept the inevitability of death. Otherwise, life would be futile. Happiness and life are inextricably intertwined, totally dependent one on the other; man would not wish to live unless he has hope of being happy, but he cannot be fully happy as long as he knows he must die. This is the paradox that Christian theology attempts to resolve.

In the Jewish tradition, man's purpose is to obey God's rules and to glorify God (this mirrors the obligation that the Greeks felt toward the Olympic gods). However, logistical problems occurred in trying to justify that sinners and non-sinners alike receive the same reward, and "Jews began to question the justice of a God who demands obedience in life but delivers the wicked and

the faithful alike to inert oblivion. The answer that evolved was resurrection: the just, like the prophet Elijah, would be restored to the bosom of the Lord and the wicked would feel the flames of an everlasting Gehenna, or Hell. This view prevailed in rabbinic literature.....

[However,] Rabbi Terry Bard (director of pastoral services at Boston's Beth Israel Hospital) sums up the views of many Jews: "Dead is dead", he says; what lives on are the children and a legacy of good works."

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Thus we see that the existentialist argument, existent in the days of the Old Testament, has been revived in the modern day. In Chapter 2 we have seen the applicability of Aristotle's views on friendship in a timeline beginning with the Epic of Gilgamesh and extending through the Middle Ages. Additionally, we have seen in these works a companion theme of the fear of death as man's primary motivation. This will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3, as we continue the timeline into the 20th century.

CHAPTER 3

"For every movement takes time and is for the sake of an end, and is complete when it has made what it aims at. It is complete, therefore, only in the whole time or at that final moment."

--Aristotle

In Sacramentum Mundi, Karl Rahner adapts Aristotle's philosophy to apply to the meaning of an individual's life. Only in the moment of death is each lifetime finished and complete; death gives finitude and perspective to life by making all choices irrevocable. According to Rahner, death forces each person to make a final stand either for or against God, compelling an end to ambivalence. Death "means the definitive end of our state of pilgrimage...[it is] the event which gathers up the whole personal act of a human life into one fulfillment". At that final moment when life is

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complete, man must either die cursing the darkness, or, like Christ, "falling into the hands of the living God: 'into Thy hands I commend my spirit'."

35

However, Aristotle gave inadequate consideration to the impact of man's realization of his finitude, perhaps believing it to be unworthy of deliberation since it is not within man's control. Rahner wrote: "Knowledge, even

if mostly an implicit knowledge, of the inevitability of death...intrinsically determines the whole of life. In this knowledge death is always present in human life and only by this does life assume its full gravity..."

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Interestingly enough, the existentialists agree with this premise; Heidegger thought that "Confronted with nothingness, [man] is anxious, but this anxiety enables him to become aware of his existence." Ernest Becker
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wrote that "of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his fear of death" and Freud believed
38
that this fear of death is at the root of all mankind's anxiety.

By contrast, psychologists such as Viktor Frankl (the founder of logotherapy) believe that it is not the fear of death that motivates man, but the fear that life, and by inference death, has no meaning. Frankl wrote that "this striving to find a meaning is the primary motivational force in man." Moreover, both Becker and Frankl believe
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that when man fails to affix meaning to his life, the result is neurosis: either in depression as he experiences a loss of all possibilities, a complete finitude which ultimately becomes despair; or in schizophrenia as he experiences too many possibilities, too many demands from others that he fulfill a potential which he himself cannot envision. Thus man must affix meaning to life, or the result is dysfunction. Frankl calls this "existential

frustration", and believes that it is a spiritual affliction rather than a psychological one.

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Becker thought that the problem of affixing meaning to one's life "after all is said and done, is the only real problem of life, the only worthwhile preoccupation of man: What is one's true talent, his secret gift, his authentic vocation? In what way is one truly unique, and how can he express himself in this uniqueness, give it form, dedicate it to something beyond himself?"

41

Similarly, Frankl writes: "Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it....Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked." In other words, each person's life is what he chooses to make it. Frankl thought that man would be called to answer for his own life, and would have to accept responsibility for the choices made; in this he is Aristotelian.

42

Another dysfunction which can result is that of existential anxiety, the fear of death as annihilation of the individual. Peter Berger wrote of this: "the middle ground, which we take for granted as normality and sanity,

can be maintained (that is, inhabited) only if we suspend all doubt about its validity. Without this suspension of doubt, everyday life would be impossible, if only because it would be constantly invaded by the 'fundamental anxiety' caused by our knowledge and fear of death. This implies that all human societies and their institutions are, at their root, a barrier against naked terror."

43
According to Berger's theory, the fear of death is not only integral to the moral development of a society, it is the hidden neurosis on which all societies are based; the banding together of humans against their common foe, death. Aristotle's view of society, as discussed in chapter 1, was far more noble.

Classic Existentialists (such as Heidegger) called this 'fundamental anxiety' the experience of being "held out into the nothingness". To be human means to be mortal; death is inevitable for everyone and therefore your own annihilation is assured, a certainty. Such is the resignation that Achilles feels towards his death. Heidegger attributed such anxieties to the fear of isolation, of the slipping away of all meaningful connection; death is the impossibility of any possibility of relationship to other beings. But in this, the existentialist sees total freedom from the will of others;

to Sartre, "hell is other people". The existentialists seem overly affected by the neurosis of the schizophrenic,⁴⁴ seeking freedom from the responsibilities and demands imposed upon him by other people (as Becker describes schizophrenia; see above). Thus this existentialist argument might be rejected as the product of philosophers who themselves possessed somewhat dysfunctional personalities, and instead subscribe to Aristotle's belief that friendship is requisite for a happy life ("Man is a social animal"). I agree with Rahner and Frankl that man has a basic urge for connectedness,⁴⁵ for the stability that is derived through association and relationships with other people.

Some physicians believe that this longing for connectedness may cause a person to whom it has been denied to become physically ill in order to obtain the attention he craves. Norman Cousins writes in his book Anatomy of an Illness: "As long as humans feel threatened and helpless, they will seek the sanctuary that illness provides." In considering the modernist view of⁴⁶ existentialism, one must consider that it may be a response to the psychological ills imposed upon two entire generations who suffered through world war, the Holocaust, and 'nuclear anxiety' (fear of the potential for mass annihilation via nuclear weapons). Heidegger and Sartre developed their theories in the first half of the 20th

century. However, Frankl developed his theory (which recognizes man's existential fears but believes in an ultimate meaning anyway) as a direct result of his experience in the concentration camps of the Holocaust. Berger and Becker both wrote at a time (1960's and 70's) when their views could be expected to have been greatly influenced by maturing under the shadow of the nuclear threat; and Lifton devotes huge portions of his book Denial of Death to the post-traumatic syndrome of those Japanese who survived the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Aristotle himself was essentially an existentialist: "death is the most terrible of all things; for it is the end...". Aristotle, in his pursuit of happiness,
47
proceeded on exactly that assumption: that we should live life fully, for we pass this way but once. For Ernest Becker, the question of man's search for meaning seems to translate directly into man's yearning to transcend death. Two of the means he sees to accomplish this are in what he calls the "heroic" and the "creative" solutions. In the heroic solution, one tries to attain immortality via permanent implantation into the memories of the living; through his deeds, the hero hopes to remain alive in name if not in person. Because people fear death, we glorify those who are brave in the face of our greatest terror,

those who tempt Death because they hope to cheat it, facing death nobly. Such heroes were Achilles, Hector, Patroclus and Gilgamesh.

The will to creation is found in such human yearnings as the desire to leave behind children, in whom man achieves immortality via the continuation of his descendants. Robert Lifton (The Broken Connection) believes that art is the artist's striving for immortality by usurping God's creative right: "more than any other activity, art escapes death". The lasting piece of art is the "baby" that will live forever and carry on the artist's name. Becker calls this "the creative solution", and sees it as another example of discovering and manifesting one's uniqueness in order to enrich mankind. Aristotle also believed that the creation of art was a virtue that enriched society.

Aristotle preceded the modernist view in his treatment of death as personal annihilation, as evidenced by his opinion that only the impersonal 'nous' may survive death. In this explanation, Aristotle does little to alleviate what Henri Frankfort called the 'overtones of anxiety', which Frankfort believed are brought on by the "haunting fear that the unaccountable and turbulent powers [personified in the Iliad by the fickle gods] may at any

time bring disaster to human society." Perhaps Aristotle
 49
 seems to ignore death because he accepts it as man's
 limitation. Instead of dwelling on "that which cannot be
 changed", he (like Marx) seemed to hold the view that
 happiness is found in this life, not the next. This seems
 the classic Greek view, as illustrated by the attitude of
 the warriors of the Iliad; while they feared death, they
 knew that death is man's fate, it cannot be changed and is
 useless to struggle against, so must be accepted and faced
 bravely. (The Shinto religion also places high value on
 the brave and noble death, which explains the phenomena of
 the 'kamikaze' warrior and the Samurai in the Japanese
 culture).

Existentialism lays bare man's worst fears. It
 forces us to face that which we wish to avoid. It calls
 "true" exactly that which we all hope to be false: that
 death is the end of our existence. Berger writes that
 "Man's 'no!' to death---be it in the frantic fear of his
 own annihilation, in moral outrage at the death of a loved
 other, or in death-defying acts of courage and self-
 sacrifice---appears to be an intrinsic constituent of his
 being. There seems to be a death-refusing hope at the
 very core of our humanitas...". The existentialists call
 51
 that hope mere illusion. Perhaps man's ignorance of the
 truth is his greatest protection; if our destiny really IS
 nothingness, better not to know.

But since no one knows what happens at the moment of death, all theories are equally unprovable. This inability to offer substantive proof is like searching for an elusive creature in a forest of trees, seeing brief flashes and glimpses of it but never being quite able to discern it. Berger calls this the "rumor of angels"; he believes that transcendence is implied by everyday, mundane events. In bringing mystery out of the nothingness and into reality, these intuitions are like signposts along the way; the brief insight we are afforded into the workings of the great Creative Mind is like a rumor that cannot be confirmed. To be "held out into the nothingness"; to face this void with courage and faith; to confront the 'fundamental anxiety' of the stark terror which is inherent in our fear of potential annihilation and yet learn to live in spite of the doubt, is to transcend death in this lifetime.

CHAPTER 4

While to a great extent I agree with many of Aristotle's concepts, I nevertheless feel obligated to point out those areas in which other suggestions seem more plausible. Regardless, with the exception of his failure to address death anxiety (which may be excused due to the era and culture in which he lived), I am filled with admiration for the completeness of his philosophy, which has more than withstood the test of time.

In regard to the virtues, their definition as a mean between excess and defect and the value system which Aristotle ultimately sets out are both practical and useful. Using the virtue of charity as an example, it is true that the benefits of charity vary with the circumstances, the abilities of the giver, and the character of the taker. Continuous charity is perhaps misplaced if the taker is able to help himself, but will not; on the other hand, it is unfitting for a rich man to give too parsimoniously, or for a poor man to give until he cannot provide for his own family. Similarly, a man who has a family to support and risks his life unnecessarily is both irresponsible and foolhardy; but if

he risks his life for a good cause, such as the defense of his country, he is both brave and a responsible citizen. The other virtues can be similarly analyzed, and Aristotle sets these things out well.

Nonetheless, the assumptions on which Aristotle bases some of his other theories are questionable. For instance, he asserts that all things have a purpose, but on what grounds? Do we accept it as true: DO all things have a purpose? In the typical comparison of a chair (the purpose of which is to serve as a seat), we are asked to ignore that a chair, being a lifeless thing, does not have the capability for self-determinism.

Aristotle assumes that because no other beings reason except man, then that is man's reason for existence. This seems unlikely. What then, would be the reason for the existence of a rabbit? Perhaps man is not to be separated from the animals, but that all living things have a similar purpose (to live), or possibly no purpose at all (as the existentialists claim), or possibly a purpose determined by some Supreme Being. Aristotle also automatically assumes some function of life which is termed 'the soul'. What if no soul exists, but is only an invention by those who wish to believe that some aspect of our existence survives death?

A much simpler answer would be to state that man's purpose is pleasure, as modified by reason (or practical

wisdom). In this model, reason is actually a virtue which man hones, and which is relative to each individual; reason might be construed as a tool which man uses to achieve his goal. For instance, idiots have the capability of being happy, even though they may have very little reasoning faculties. The same is true of persons who are mad, who may be very happy despite living totally outside of reality; their fantasy world may be subject to an orderly reason of their own making. Not every person finds happiness through contemplation; many people detested their freshman philosophy class, and would have nothing more to do with it if they could possibly avoid it.

To define man's purpose as pleasure also matches the findings of the ancient writer(s) of the book of Gilgamesh, in which Siduri counseled that the lot of man was to make merry, enjoy food and drink and song, cherish his children, and be happy with his wife. The biblical "Song of Solomon" arrives at the same conclusion. Indeed, this seems to be the chief rival to Aristotle's theory. If we accept "pleasure" (modified by reason, to prevent hedonism) as a purpose that is common to all men, then a man who finds real pleasure as a woodworker has achieved his goal of happiness. To keep Aristotle's theory intact, we would have to say that he is not yet happy because he

has not maximalized his capability for 'theoria'; he only thinks he is happy, because he doesn't realize that he is not. But the truth is that many people ultimately ascribe significance and meaning to their life through methods other than contemplation.

Here we see an example of the Greek experience differing from the modern experience. In the culture in which he lived, Aristotle would perhaps say that craftsmen attain happiness not through contemplation, but through using their reason to manufacture products for the common good of the city-state. The notion of the common good is no longer so prevalent in Western society, where fulfillment is a personal quest. However, in speaking with foreigners from Arabic, Asian and Oriental cultures, it is difficult for them to comprehend such Western problems as homelessness in an affluent country, because in their cultures the family forms the basic building block of a society where charity is dispensed by one's own relatives. As a result of this heritage, individuals in these countries will make great sacrifices, even their lives, for the common good.

Ernest Becker claimed that the problem of affixing meaning to one's life is actually the problem of discovering "one's true talent, his authentic gift, his authentic vocation", and this seems to state the entire

crux of the matter. Aristotle found happiness in philosophy because that was what he liked to do; the woodworker finds happiness if that is what he prefers to do; and many people are miserable in life because they are stuck doing something which they don't enjoy in the least. Krishnamurti, the Indian guru/philosopher, believed that most people choose their livelihoods just to earn money, and that this creates conflict and unhappiness. On this subject he said:

"...unless you find out for yourself what you really want to do with your whole being, you will end by doing something which holds no interest for you, and then your life will be miserable [and] you will seek distraction... I think this is the real key: to love what you do."

53

Perhaps men are meant for different purposes, according to their preferences. Aristotle tries to allow for this by making his philosophy relative to the individual. But in other ways, his philosophy fails to acknowledge that people have different predispositions to excel in certain areas of ability. The Greeks seemed to think that men had more control over developing their skills than we believe today (for example, many ballet dancers, though they study and work very hard at their craft, will never achieve the perfection of a Baryshnikov). The terminology which Aristotle uses may lead us to construe art as a function of 'nous', or the

intellect that grasps first principles. If this is one of man's basic functions, then all men should be capable of great art, when in fact they are not. Neither does it seem to be properly classified under poesis, or productive knowledge, for while some aspects of art can be enhanced through learning, the basic skill seems more of a gift or knack. The classic arts (painting, music, sculpture, etc.) are not necessities of life, and the beauty they add to life seems to me more like a "fringe benefit" bestowed upon man by some greater power.

Krishnamurti posed the question not as "what is man's purpose" but "what is man's true work?" His conclusion is much like that of Aquinas; Krishnamurti thought that "the true work of man is to discover truth, God; it is to love..." Thus, reason may be used as a tool to achieving the desired goal, but happiness is ultimately found via love. This seems to be the conclusion of most religious philosophers (others think man's work is to serve God, in which love follows necessarily from the command to love one another; moreover, different individuals can serve God by different means).

In their view toward friendship and love the Greek experience is also an insufficient simile for the present-day search for meaning. Again we must look at the historical and cultural context of their era: since women were considered inferiors, the highest form of friendship

was between two men. Apart from the myths that tell of great love between men and women, the Greek writings that address love are mainly speaking of love between two male friends. In the post-Christian era, the New Testament began a heavy emphasis on God as love, and the virtues of loving one's neighbor. The highest form of love was between God and man, the second most sacred that between man and wife.

Many people manage to suppress thoughts of death their entire life. Some are afraid to face the void of their lives by exhuming the bones of long-buried potential which was sacrificed to attain money, power, or prestige. Others always expect that it is someone else who will die, not them; like those in Tolstoy's novel who heard of the death of Ivan Ilyich, they feel "the complacent feeling that it is he who is dead and not I---each one thought or felt 'Well, he's dead but I'm alive!'". Usually it requires the death of someone close to them, or a brush with death themselves, for people to seriously consider if their life has meaning. This is the position in which Ivan Ilyich found himself; dying, relecting on his life, and questioning his values and accomplishments.

Since I am a member of a group that is solely for surviving victims of cancer, I am able to report first-hand upon Ivan's vantage point (Tolstoy is amazingly

accurate in his portrayal of the mental state of someone whose life is threatened). I also have as resources many others who shared the same experience. Those who survive report that facing death "gives a perspective that can only be gained from having your very life threatened".⁵⁶ Many see their illness as a benefit, in that they are given a 'second chance' to do the things they always wanted to, but put off doing. One man said that the realization of his own mortality was the catalyst that allowed him to "ease up on himself"; he finally gave himself "permission to be imperfect".

57

Faced with the prospect of death, the natural reaction, like Ivan Ilyich, is to turn inward and begin to take stock of one's life. Amid concerns about the possibility of an afterlife and their qualifications for gaining entry, people's greatest fear seems to be not the prospect of their own annihilation, but for their separation from those they love; people assume new importance in their lives. One overachiever who survived cancer reported:

"I had by this time convinced myself that life was precious, and that I hadn't done enough with mine...Fame, glory---they don't mean that much to me anymore. They used to mean a lot. And I am ambitious, but not for ephemeral things like that. I'd much rather be at home with my family, my wife, reading a book or taking a vacation. It was not an entirely bad experience. I don't recommend it; there are other ways to learn lessons. This is a severe way, but it's very effective."

58

Aristotle thought that only 'nous' might survive death; yet love, which is of the mind and not contingent on the body, might also be capable of surviving death.

Krishnamurti, in describing fear of death as fear of the unknown, said that if we could be assured of carrying over with us our friends and family, we would no longer be afraid.

59

A more logical approach to man's purpose might be to first assert that man's purpose is that in life which man values the most highly. While some people who have no friends or relations might value wealth, or pets, or other possessions most highly, the majority of people are, as Krishnamurti pointed out, most sorry to leave their friends and family; therefore affection/love must be man's purpose. That Aristotle thought reason, perfected in contemplative thought through philosophy, was man's purpose is not surprising, because he loved philosophy. The argument that love is one of the highest expressions of reason, because it is one of the most reasonable things a person can do, is not sensible. People love their children not because it is reasonable to do so, either to perpetuate the species or to ensure the immortality of the parent, to ensure the child's protection while they are maturing or even because that child is always loveable, but because it seems inherent in man to love. It would be

strange for us to allow Aristotle to label emotions as passions that must be controlled by reason and then allow him to exclude the emotion of love as a special case and call it the ultimate manifestation of reason. As many people know, love can defy explanation, much less logical reason. Often it would be better for one not to love a certain person, but that rarely stands in one's way. Moreover, according to Aristotle affection must be mutual for friendship (the Greek ideal of love) to exist, and love is not always mutual but nonetheless exists for the person who feels it.

It seems to me that, in order to achieve happiness, man's needs must be met in four areas: he must be healthy, wealthy, and wise, and also loved (by friends and/or family). The necessity for health is self-evident; suffering decreases man's capacity for happiness because it is distracting. Wealth means that he must have enough money to meet his basic needs for clothing, food, etc. By wise, I mean that he has a need for intellectual activity, either through study (theoria), work (poesis), or career (praxis). He also has emotional needs, which encompass the need for connectedness (to Aristotle, a dependence on society), love (Aristotle's emphasis on friendship), and spirituality (religion, or meaning for one's life). Aristotle would assign health and wealth as external

goods, but recognizes their necessity nonetheless; however, he would assign spirituality to the realm of theoretical knowledge, or contemplation.

However, the things with which spirituality concerns itself can never be proved or known. George D. Prentice writes in "Man's Higher Destiny":

"It cannot be that the earth is man's only abiding place. It cannot be that our life is a mere bubble cast up by eternity to float a moment on its waves and then sink into nothingness. Else why is it that the glorious aspirations which leap like angels from the temple of our hearts are forever wandering unsatisfied?....Why is it that bright forms of human beauty presented to our view are taken from us, leaving the thousand streams of our affection to flow back in Alpine torrents upon our hearts? There is a realm where the rainbow never fades; where the stars will be spread out before us like islands that slumber in the ocean; and where the beautiful beings which now pass before us like shadows will stay in our presence forever."

60

These sentiments echo those of Berger, who believes that, since our hearts are constantly yearning after something more, this implies that something more exists.

As Socrates expressed in the Apology, to think that one knows what one does not know is to think that you are wise when you are not. Thus we are left with the two opposing viewpoints of those people who arrive at a faith in immortality that cannot completely be explained, and those who are continuously terrorized by being held out

into the nothingness. Most people vacillate in endless limbo, somewhere between these two extremes. Aristotle and the Oriental religions seem to embrace a less extreme position that believes in an impersonal immortality in which intellect survives, but the individual's unique personality is not preserved. Instead, one joins a sort of "cosmic cloud" of humanity....

"Do not stand at my grave and weep.
I am not there, I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on snow,
I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush,
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight;
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there. I did not die."

CONCLUSION

"He who lives alone is either a beast
or a God."

--- Aristotle

In this paper I believe I have provided evidence which tends to reject Aristotle's theory of logos as man's purpose and reflection of the divine image; and, while utilizing those portions of Aristotle's philosophy which seem to me correct, have set forth and defended my own theory of agape as man's imitation of the divine. It is through agape that man realizes his humanness; logic and philosophy do not allow one the connectedness by which man applies meaning to life. Meaning can only be attached to an individual life in relation to the lives of other humans; else we have no standard by which to measure ourselves.

In some ways Aristotle's thought still applies, especially the value system he lays out with virtue as a mean. In Aristotle's day, doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right amount, in relation to the right person was an extremely difficult task; in today's more complex world, how much more so. His lesson that each person must first learn to be their OWN best friend before

they can befriend someone else means also that one must first love oneself in order to love others; but we cannot so immerse ourselves in love of others that we allow ourselves to be trampled upon. Yet, I believe that Aristotle had a more specific application in mind: we must first learn justice before we can treat others with justice.

How much should we help other countries? How much charity should we as individuals contribute? Should we give even to those who could but don't work, or would this do more harm than good? Is equality of education necessary, and are we obligated to provide it? Are all men REALLY created equal, and do they have the same rights? Should we drop the bomb? Is abortion OK, or is it murder? Should murderers receive capital punishment, or is execution merely murder legalized? These are issues with which we struggle every day, and are of the utmost concern in our modern moral dilemmas. Aristotle's philosophy gives us a measurement of values that is not black and white, but allows for the shades of grey in which moral choice is often draped.

It is very difficult to try to explain to an inner-city youth why he should respect the property of others if no one has ever respected his property. If someone else stole from him, he learns that in order to get what

one needs or wants one just takes it if one is able. Why should one show pity or kindness? Such principles are abstract, and are more realistic if felt than if known. It is by giving of ourselves to others that we learn to live outside ourselves and thus discover a universe that is other-centered. Kindness is part of being human; one cannot explain why we "should" be kind to one another without relying upon intangible reasoning.

Love is another such unexplainable tenet: desire for connectedness is simply a natural phenomena. Perhaps such emotions as kindness and love are necessary to ensure man's survival and the continuation of the species. Aristotle's philosophy on agape is not relevant in the present day because of the more equal position women now enjoy, as well as the religious taboos associated with homosexuality. Yet there is no logical explanation for the fact that people in the grip of such emotions are frequently moved to irrational acts (such as risking one's life to save a stranger in peril), and as such create an anomaly in Aristotle's rational system. If reason is man's purpose then why, in our last moments, do we yearn to stay with our friends and loved ones, and not to continue philosophizing? Perhaps we humans, who can love each other only imperfectly, long for the perfect love of God.

Ultimately, "proving" man's purpose is beyond the capacity of man's understanding. No concrete evidence exists, yet wars are fought for the sake of illogical ideologies. Perhaps man's purpose is to be curious, to provide Creation with an appreciative audience, to question with an open mind. It is when we think we know what we do not that we divide ourselves into factions, countries, armies. As Oliver Cromwell said:

"I beg of you: think that you may be wrong."

APPENDIX A

FOOTNOTES

1. Emily Dickinson, untitled: "Because I Could not Stop for Death", in the Oxford Book of American Verse, p. 439.
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8. Ibid, book 1, chap. 7, verse 1097b12.
9. Ibid, book 6, chap. 1, verse 1139a24.
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17. Ibid, book 8, chap. 12, verse 1161b20.
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29. Ibid, p. 93.
30. Ibid, p. 102.
31. Ibid, p. 102-103.
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