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## Clifford Williams, RELIGION AND THE MEANING OF LIFE: AN EXISTENTIAL APPROACH

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*Religion and the Meaning of Life: An Existential Approach*, by Clifford Williams. Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp vi + 189. \$27.99 (paperback).

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No one can fairly accuse Clifford Williams of working out his philosophical views in an ungrounded way. From tramping with hobos to interviewing people who walked away from suicide to writing on the role of desire in religious belief, Williams's work consistently pays attention to how we actually live our lives. Yet his work is analytically clear, accessible to folks outside the ivory tower, and informed by contemporary scholarship. *Religion and the Meaning of Life* is no exception.

William unravels a paradox wrapped around two poles: that we long for meaning in our lives and that we so often don't think about meaning. Both poles of the paradox are connected in theistic belief. He assumes the following: God exists, there is an afterlife with God, morality is objective, and morality's being objective is required for a meaningful life. He does not assume that belief in God or the afterlife are necessary to live a meaningful life but argues for the "enhancement thesis," viz., that meaningfulness in life is enhanced if one holds those beliefs and they are true. Williams connects meaningfulness and the worthwhile but does not identify them. In addition, there is a clear link between the worthwhile and good inner states in the context of the pursuit of a good life.

Chapter 1 asks why we should care about meaning, providing two answers. First, we desire meaning and hence an expectation exists that we should care about it. We have any number of desires that are, in effect, desires for meaning. Some are for intrinsic goods, others for right pleasures. These often overlap. After detailing some of these—non-competitive play, deep friendship—Williams notes deep longings, the sort of yearning attended by wistfulness and even melancholy when one doesn't have the desired thing. It is puzzling, given these deep longings, that one ever feels indifferent to meaning in one's life. Here Williams provides seven reasons why one might feel indifferent: busyness, lack of energy, illness and physical exhaustion, suffering, constricted circumstances, depression, and unbelief in God. Recognizing that any one of us may experience these states occurrently, we shouldn't be surprised that some of us don't seem to care about meaning. On the other hand, caring about meaning is also dispositional and so we should continue to be puzzled about the lack of concern for meaning.

A second reason for caring about meaning: God made us with desires for intrinsic goods and right pleasures and God desires that we fulfill our



desires for a meaningful life. Further, God made us with a capacity for desire fulfillment and fulfillment of such desires is itself an intrinsic good. Chapter 1 continues by arguing that caring about meaning can be fit into both duty and happiness-based moral theories, but it is most at home in virtue theory.

Chapter 2 takes up the topic of boredom, distinguishing everyday from existential boredom. The former is often situative, *viz.*, where one loses interest in the particular thing one is currently doing and hence loses the desire to do it. The latter is the loss of desire altogether, or at least the near-total loss of desire—one can be existentially bored and yet continue to eat. But the most relevant issue is whether one has also lost one's interest in being interested. Existential boredom occurs when one loses interest in nearly everything but finds the situation intolerable because one wants to be interested. Such boredom can bring terror which engenders dread, suicidal thoughts, and agony (among other powerful states). I'll return to those states momentarily. To avoid boredom itself, one may use evasive tactics such as engaging in physical activities not, of course, because one thinks them interesting but simply to avoid boredom. Williams notes two tactics in particular: mental activity or moral/religious activity. Such activities find a home in Sartre's framework of bad faith where one spends one's life evading one's responsibility.

Where evasion fails, however, one may face dread, agony, despair, frustration, rebellion, and suicidal thoughts. Using Camus's Sisyphus as a foil, Williams notes how Sisyphus cannot evade his situation. There is only the rolling of the rock up the hill. Rather, he rebels, disdaining the gods, and, according to Camus, "one must imagine Sisyphus happy." That happiness, though, cannot be true happiness. Of course, such rebellion may be against God. If the rebellion, dread, agony, and so forth are bad enough, one might end one's life. Such an act, however, cuts off the possibility of answering "the call from eternity" to turn away from these negative states and reengage meaningfulness. Williams points to Kierkegaard's proposal of several things that might help: the concern of inwardness, being willing to be transformed, enunciating what one is feeling, quietness, and a longing for God. These are, respectively, a concern for one's current state of boredom, a fervent passion for change, putting into words and owning how one feels, being quiet, waiting, not being distracted by the crowd, and the belief that longing for God makes one more open to hearing from God.

Chapter 3 uses Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* to understand immortality projects and vital lies we use to deny the terror of death, understood both as extinction and meaninglessness. Because of extinction at death, one can never know if one's life was meaningful. In response, we engage in immortality projects, things that will turn us from being small to being large. Making money, the use of technology, and, Williams adds, good projects—ones designed to help others but which aggrandize oneself—are examples. Such projects are often embedded in the "Reward Syndrome" wherein one compares one's projects to others' projects. Becker suggests

that most often immortality projects are one-dimensional when they could be transcendent. But the latter would require belief in the transcendent that Western culture has lost. This leads to the vital lie—self-deception that we can overcome death by our activities.

The solution to all this is rebirth—a death to the self living-in-fear-of-death and rebirth as one who faces the truth. But Becker, according to Williams, says little about engaging goodness rather than simply living in tension with our own deaths and the inclination to lie to ourselves with immortality projects. Following Kierkegaard, Williams suggests that three things are necessary to engage goodness: increased attention to what is good, redirection of one's root desires, and humility.

Chapter 4 engages how to acquire meaning in one's life, considering four philosophical views about the acquisition, viz., achieving goals, being creative, having certain virtues and emotions, and giving and receiving love. Each of these ways is argued to be consistent with a theistic overlay and with each other. Chapter 5 asks whether and how the four ways of acquiring meaningfulness can help defeat thoughts of suicide. Taking on the project left unfulfilled by Camus's thoughts on suicide, Williams engages a pragmatic and helpful approach to those with suicidal thoughts.

Chapters 6 and 7 return to God and life after death arguing that existential boredom can be relieved, new virtues can be taken on, and one can transcend oneself if God and the afterlife are real. Further, one who doesn't believe in either of these should want them to be true because they enhance the meaningfulness of one's life. Here we find the development of Williams's enhancement thesis. Often theists conclude that life without God would be meaningless whereas secular thinkers believe meaningfulness can be rooted without God. Williams argues that belief in God enhances the meaningfulness of life. Meaningfulness comes in degrees and there is an objective value framework. These are important because Williams measures strength of meaning not against subjective likings but the quantity of intrinsic goods.

Chapter 6 argues that, given the above assumptions, the meaningfulness of one's life can be enhanced in various ways, including belief in God. But such a being must also exist to ground an extension of meaningfulness. Further, belief must be of a rich type, including that God is loving, made humans for meaningfulness, and made us capable of loving God in return. The difference God makes in one's meaning "quotient" comes through an additional total context (for how one should live life), additional emotions and virtues (love for, gratitude toward, and awe of God, for example), satisfaction of the urge to transcend oneself (deep relationships with others, including God), and a cure for existential boredom (by engaging the ways of increasing meaning in the context of pleasing one's Creator).

In an "existential move," Williams argues that one who does not believe in God should be distressed. One can deny the enhancement thesis, be indifferent to it (even if it is true) or be distressed by it. Distress is the most rational reaction, for by missing what belief in God brings, one is missing

maximal excellence. Chapter 7 argues for a parallel enhancement thesis, viz., that belief in, and the truth of, life after death enhances meaningfulness in this life. The chapter proceeds by considering how the same four ways in which the meaningfulness of life can be enhanced by belief in God can be increased by belief in the afterlife.

Chapter 8 responds to four obstacles—unconscious motives, the lure of the crowd, dividedness, and constricted circumstances leading to suffering. Sometimes these are overcome, sometimes not. Chapter 9 attends to how we should live so we can die well using Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. To prepare oneself to die well one should be aware and attentive, and develop traits opposite Ilyich. Don't take inordinate delight in the power to crush others, take disproportionate pleasure in the trivial, or have excessive self-regard.

Now some comments and questions. First, the comments. It seems to me that the enhancement thesis is generally correct. I thought for many years that a life without both belief in, and the reality of, God would leave life without meaning. My views have shifted and I think Williams's enhancement thesis closer to the truth. My shift may have something to do with my Christian commitments having wavered of late, but Williams's winsome way of presenting his case is worth the read alone. Second, Williams displays a good deal of insight into human nature in this work. Some of that insight is no doubt learned from reading the existentialists but perhaps more comes from the fact that Williams appears to pay close attention to the people with whom he talks in his day-to-day life. Observations based on those talks are used to good end in enlivening Williams's arguments. Third, the author's style is clear and easy to read, making the book useful to a wide audience, certainly including, say, college sophomores.

Now the critical questions. Williams mentions, in parsing boredom, those bored in that they've lost all desire including the desire to have interests. Such people are not in existential boredom. They wouldn't care one way or another if life is meaningful. Perhaps they might not care even whether they live or die. Such people are, in some sense, far worse off objectively than the existentially bored. Given Williams's existential concerns for real people, I wonder, for such people, would any of the arguments he supplies work? Would such a person be capable of a meaningful life? The truth of much of what Williams says seems to rely on the contingencies of human personality. Are such people just beyond existential reach?

A second question is about the application of Kierkegaard's suggestions for overcoming existential boredom to move toward meaningfulness: the concern of inwardness, being willing to be transformed, enunciating what one is feeling, quietness, and a longing for God. It seems the ability to use such "tools" depends on already having some sense of the meaningfulness of life. There is, perhaps, a hint of circularity here. This is tied to the previous question. The existentially bored must, to be existentially engaged, at least be worried about the fact they are not interested in much. The ability to use these five tools of Kierkegaard seems to presume that

one is sufficiently existentially engaged with interests that one would not, in fact, be existentially bored or at least be prepared to overcome it. But what then is the real difference between the tools and simply being existentially bored?

A final question, and one that is quite personal, flows from my own life. It's always a little shocking to hear about a suicide, even when you didn't know the person. Let the reader be assured that I'm okay. Nevertheless, my late wife took her life after 11 years of suffering with lupus and a host of related illnesses. She was a Ph.D. candidate at Yale in history with a promising career in front of her. She never finished, her illness making her life smaller, seemingly, each day. She left me and our 11-year old son. In her journal entries from the several weeks before she died, she talked about going to see three people: her undergraduate mentor who had died too young from complications of a lung illness, a favorite student of hers who had died in a freak automobile accident six months before, and Jesus who died for us all. So far as I know, she never doubted the reality of God, period. Evil in her own life and that of others intensely bothered her. She planned to dance with Jesus but not until they had a heart-to-heart in which the God she loved explained why there was so much pain in her, and others, lives.

She did not count her life as generally meaningless, but she did count evil as raising questions about the meaning of an individual life and saw that the presence of evil could disintegrate one's soul. Although Williams notes that evil raises questions about his work on meaning, he does not take them up. But I wonder if he shouldn't have added a chapter on the subject. In the end, my wife lost hope, as her final note indicated. But it wasn't hope in God or hope in an afterlife she lost. She merely lost hope of getting better *in this life*. The loss of that hope seemed to undermine her commitment to stay alive and she took continuing in this life to be meaningless or at least pointless. Of course, I did not, and cannot, know her final thoughts, but I knew her well. It appears that she exchanged what she took, at its end, to be a pointless life for a better, more meaningful one. I wonder, what would Williams have said to my late wife had he been able to talk with her before she took her life? I'm guessing Williams might have had some insightful, pastorally real, things to say. Or maybe he would merely have sat with her in loving silence.

It's hard, though, to write a silent book. And indeed, the book Williams has written is not silent but filled with insightful observations, good arguments, and clear presentation.