CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the question

Is it really possible, or likely, as is often asserted, that we can know nothing about the goal of human life? In the wake of this question, many related problems are entailed. Are we free, or compelled, to define the ultimate meaning of our own lives? Can we defy our own nature, from which the very idea of a meaning in life arises? If there were no meaning in life, could we even conceive of the question of the meaning of life? If life has a purpose, then this purpose should certainly be of relevance during life. If death is the absolute end of one's existence or if the goal of life has to be reached before death, then one will surely attempt to live differently. How does one make deliberate choices in crucial situations if one has no idea of the meaning of life? Is it meaningless to die for an ideal? Is the life of heroes who have sacrificed their own life for others a failure? Is survival of absolute value? Can the motivation of a suicidal terrorist who kills himself for religious reasons be understandable in some kind of rational categories?

Whoever writes seriously today on such questions cannot avoid experiencing a feeling of embarrassment. The most frequent reactions that I encounter are skepticism and rejection. Furthermore, even most believers are unable to articulate in any meaningful way *what* it is that they believe. How is this teaching to be understood? What does the skeptic actually reject?

The assertion that it cannot be understood at all raises a claim that logically goes considerably further than maintaining that it can only be inadequately understood. Even a little knowledge of the question can be of great value. If we are lost in the woods, a signpost can be decisive; at least it points in the right direction. The proof for the absolute denial is highly demanding and certainly not fulfilled by simply repeating old negations. A theological statement that negates requires as much demonstration as a positive statement. As is often evidenced in the history of orthodox theology, knowledge of what God *is not* requires a deeper knowledge than

of what God *is*. It is typical for contemporary culture that serious people, including scientists, believe that they know with clear certainty and without further ado that there exists no life after death. They need not bother studying theology; they know it quasi-intuitively. On the one hand, this attitude has the positive aspect in that it shows that a theological position is something that everyman has, but, on the other hand, it also reveals the light-mindedness that prevails in theological matters.

Educated believers in Eternal Life are normally well acquainted with the thesis that it is merely a wish projection or simply a pious imagination for the purpose of distracting one's attention from the responsibilities or joys of this world. Who today is not aware of the Marxist criticism of religion? Rather, one is surprised that these critical objections continue to be repeated.

A careful agnosticism is easier to respect. Applying the principle of Occam's Razor, the believer can take the burden of proof on himself. But it is one thing to argue in favor of one's own belief and another to refute negations. A negation should be falsifiable if it purports to make a truth claim.

The skeptical argument that one cannot imagine a life after death or, better, cannot understand it or cannot even think of it responsibly cannot be answered with the remark, first of all, that the believer need not maintain that our imagination can have any validity in this matter. It is no great feat to realize that the afterlife transcends imagination.

Thinking about it is another matter. If the afterlife could not be an object of thought in any way, then we would have to consider it to be nothing, and then it would be impossible to believe in it. But it is possible to know that something is not understandable, that it transcends understanding – and this can be thought and demonstrated.

A peculiarity of Eternal Life is that it challenges understanding. It attacks the prevalent mindset. For us, it is especially difficult to conceive of because it stands in contradiction to our contemporary understanding of reality. In the long run, this is, in fact, even a plausible reason for positively believing in Eternal Life – not in the sense that I believe because it is absurd but rather that I believe because it challenges my understanding.

In fact, the Christian idea of Eternal Life seems rather to be a provocation, for it teaches that the purpose and result of all of our work consists finally in knowledge of some kind. "And Eternal Life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3). Specifically, it is knowledge of God, which is what we are ultimately striving for in whatsoever we pursue. "All human activity has intellectual speculation for

its end," as Thomas Aquinas dares to put it.[1] This tells the man of praxis that his happiness consists in "theory." "The knowledge of God therefore is the final end of all human study and activity."[2] Life has ultimate meaning only at its end. The "opium" that Christianity has to offer is hardly what the average person today would consider to be a desirable pleasure, not to mention the fact that hell is also a component of Christian eschatology and can hardly be called "opium."

How is a teaching like this to be rendered comprehensible? If Eternal Life is what human beings are really interested in, then the relevancy of an intellectual pursuit of the question should be evident in any case.

It is possible that we have replaced our belief in the afterlife with a belief in something in this world. The popular idea that one's immortality consists in being remembered by others in the future might be an example of this kind of secularization. A similar idea is that we can achieve perpetuity in our works. Of course, this is not a real ersatz for eternity. Remembrance, books, and art works may have a practically unlimited duration, but they are obviously not eternal and offer no really adequate solution to the problem of death. Death assumes the role of the Final Judgment and gives rise to the problem of perpetuity.[3] What in the Christian perspective had been called "acedia" becomes depression in the secularized world.[4]

Max Horkheimer expressed the hypothesis that the idea of society may also represent a secularized form of life after death. The individual lives his own life to its natural end and has contributed in some way to the life of society. Society itself takes on the aura of eternity. An indication of this can be seen in the strength of protests against weapons that could annihilate all mankind. The species seems to contain more reality and importance than the sum of the individual members. Horkheimer states: "The meaning that every action in life won from the thought of eternity is replaced by the absolutizing of the collective, in which the individuals feel integrated."[5]

[1] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c. 25. [2] Ibid.

[3] Rosa, *Beschleunigung*, 288, suggests "that the relinquishment of the idea of a life after death having validity beyond question and supported as a binding cultural component, from which and with respect to which life *before* death receives its meaning and direction, must unavoidably have to put into question the basis of its subjective and cultural meaning . . . If previously the end of one's own life was seen in a perspective with the expected end of the world, which, at the same time, signalized the beginning of 'true time,' both time horizons moved visibly apart owing to the fading of the latter" (emphasis in original).

[4] "It is a question of a psychic condition that is characterized by barrenness and emptiness (accompanied at the same time by an inner restlessness) and a paralysis of the soul as the result of the soul's inability to direct its energy toward a firm, definitive and convincingly worthwhile goal and energetically develop it." Ibid., 388.

[5] Horkheimer, "Bedrohung," 21.

Under this presumption, the possibility that human society could some day be extinguished appears unbearable.

The teleological structure of such ideas at least resembles and is presumably inherited from Christian belief. The final state gives meaning to every action. The expected future classless society serves as the justification for present activity. The whole relationship between the final state and the meaning of life is characteristic. Marxism, for example, justifies present activity on the basis of an expected future state. Daily life does not exhaust its significance within the bounds of each day. Understanding life as a network of final causes, culminating in an ultimate final cause, is possibly a frame of thinking that is simply natural and unavoidable.

More essential than such comparisons is an analysis based on concrete experience. What is the most important aspect of life as we know it? Although this question is not so easily answered, I think that it would be safe to say that reality, or the awareness of reality, is what is most important to human beings. If you imagined a situation in which you could have something desirable – say, pleasure or a friend – but without this being real (in the sense of being more than merely my own subjectivity), what would you prefer: reality with its normal pains and problems or pleasure as nothing more than a feeling or your friend but only as an imagined thought? Are we really happiest when we are day-dreaming? As Augustine remarked: "And how much human nature loves the knowledge of its existence, and how it shrinks from being deceived, will be sufficiently understood from this fact that every man prefers to grieve in a sane mind, rather than to be glad in madness."[6] Since the presence of reality is what I would call "truth," the question is whether one prefers living in truth or in falsehood – regardless of how delightful the falsehood may be. This makes it understandable how Thomas Aquinas can claim that what gives us most delight is the knowledge of divine things, regardless of how inadequate it may be:

> Everything desires most of all its own last end. But the human mind is moved to more desire and love and delight over the knowledge of divine things, little as it can discern about them, than over the perfect knowledge that it has of the lowest things.[7]

Otherwise, this assertion that knowledge of God is the goal of human life would sound incredible.

[6] Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XI, 27. [7] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c. 25.

1.1 Emergence: The causality of Eternal Life

Reality occurs in different modes. Something can become more real. For example, New York can exist in my imagination. But standing in the physically real New York makes the city more real than in my imagination. Eternal Life is a more real form of the reality that I now know. Actually, this is precisely what it is; in other words, not heaven as opposed to Earth but rather the original as opposed to the copy. Eternal Life is not like a prize for a victory – although this metaphor is not impossible. Emerging into Eternal Life means becoming more real – that is, rising to a higher mode of being but still *my* being. The change takes place somehow in our kind of reality. God does not change. This extremely important teaching was expressed by Thomas Aquinas:

> Suppose that two things are not united at first, and then later they are united; this must be done by changing both of them, or at least one. Now, suppose that a created intellect starts for the first time to see God's substance; then, necessarily, according to the preceding arguments, the divine essence must be united with it for the first time as an intelligible species. Of course, it is not possible for the divine essence to be changed . . . So, this union must start to exist by means of a change in the created intellect. In fact, this change can only come about by means of the created intellect acquiring some new disposition.[8]

Admittedly, the notion of emergence does not provide a concrete explanation of how something occurs, but it does, at least, convey the rudimentary knowledge that what occurs is real, that is, a participation in reality.

Reality does not simply exist, it changes and develops. Reality happens. Reality is not merely a collection of realities. It is more like an energy field. It is dynamic; it is moving, evolving. Within it, new realities can emerge. New wholes are more than the sum of the elements out of which they have arisen. The analogy to light is helpful. Light is not just there, it is happening, it is energy – making, as it were, colors emerge in objects. If the light desists, so do the colors immediately.

The idea of a whole is, of course, an analogous notion. There are wholes that are nothing more than a collection of elements; however, it is important to acknowledge that there exist many wholes that are more than their elements. A melody is more than a collection of notes. A word is more than a collection of letters. "Dgo" is not a word, "dog" is. And "dog," again, is more than a word; it is also a notion, possessing meaning, which is more

[8] Ibid., c. 53.

than just the word. Furthermore, a sentence is more than the words of which it is composed; in contrast to words, a sentence can have the quality of being true or false. Out of letters, meaning emerges; out of words, truth. Out of matter, life emerges, an animal being more than the chemicals of which it is composed. Out of living beings, conscious life emerges; out of human life, Eternal Life – which is, so to speak, the meaning of human life, like the notion connected with the word.

As the classical principle, found in Aristotle, asserts: in some cases, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, that is, more than just a heap.[9] In this case, Aristotle concludes that there must be a cause of the unification of wholes that are more than aggregates. He calls the cause "reality" [ἐνέργεια; *actus*], which is more than *a* reality. The cause of the whole that is a human being is then the soul, the primordial act of reality [*actus primus*] of a natural body having the potentiality to live. It is extremely difficult to translate the Greek word *energeia* [ἐνέργεια] or the Latin word *actus* into contemporary language. Should one say "reality" or "actuality"? Since "actuality" is obviously the translation of *actualitas*, which was coined in medieval theology during the lifetime of Thomas Aquinas and used by him as distinct from *actus* – the phrase *actualitas omnium actuum* (although it occurs only once in Thomas's work) is important – I prefer using the translation "reality." One must remember, however, that "reality" is to be thought of in the sense of an act, or actualization, or realization, that is, not as a collection of elements. "Reality" is not simply a universal notion; it is more like a light field, in which colors emerge.

A different approach to the phenomenon of the emergence of organic species in time employs the idea of so-called seminal reasons [*rationes seminales*]. With this notion, Augustine explained how there can be development within creation. Accordingly, when God originally created the world, he instilled things with "seminal reasons" – that is, virtual principles of things later to evolve. With time, they develop into actual being. Evolution is, accordingly, the maturation of quasi-seeds, hidden in matter from the beginning. Consequently, change is simply the realization of what already exists virtually. The concept was possibly influenced by Plato's theory of recollection, according to which knowledge involves remembering what one already knew. Bonaventure is a later defender of this idea, arguing that the forms that come into existence are all present in matter. "The substance of matter," he writes, "is pregnant with everything."[10] This would

[9] Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VIII, 6; 1045 a 8–10.
[10] Bonaventure, *In IV. Sententiarum*, dist. 43, a. 1, q. 4, concl.

be like taking the immortality of the spiritual soul for the cause of Eternal Life, implying that the cause lies within the nature of human beings.

It is more plausible to interpret Eternal Life as a case of what is called "emergence," provided that emergence be viewed ontologically – that is, as a development of being. The result is not already present from the start, but a capacity for it is. Obviously, existing reality contains more realities than have been thus far revealed. It evolves and grows. When an individual grows, reality grows. Reality happens. Light reveals more about reality than, say, a stone. As shown herein, new realities are not merely collections of their parts. In this case, the whole is more than its parts. It may well be that new realities are susceptible to a method of reduction, but evolution cannot be adequately explained by the factors that can be found by reduction. What develops is not predestined in the original elements from which it arises. In view of evolutionary phenomena such as loss-of-function mutations, not all evolution can be explained by reductionism.[11]

The physicist Philip W. Anderson (Princeton University) describes the principle of emergence as a philosophical foundation for modern science.[12] As he puts it: "The watchword is not reductionism but emergence. Emergent complex phenomena are by no means a violation of the microscopic laws, but they do not appear as logically consequent on these laws"[13] – a *potentia obedientialis* (see page 103), so to speak. The method of reduction cannot be reversed, so that developments would be predestined. Anderson notes:

> The ability to reduce everything to simple fundamental laws does not imply the ability to start from those laws and reconstruct the universe. The constructionist hypothesis breaks down when confronted with the twin difficulties of scale and complexity. At each level of complexity entirely new properties appear. Psychology is not applied biology, nor is biology applied chemistry. We can now see that the whole becomes not merely more, but very different from the sum of its parts.[14]

[11] Cf. Brandt, *Können Tiere denken?*, 15–16: "Materialistic reductionism has been overcome by the new emergence research on biological systems. It has arrived at the acceptance of characteristics that cannot be predicted by an individual examination of the physical components (physics, chemistry)."

[12] "This principle of emergence is as pervasive a philosophical foundation of the viewpoint of modern science as is reductionism. It underlies, for example, all of biology . . . and much of geology. It represents an open frontier for the physicist, a frontier which has no practical barriers in terms of expense or feasibility, merely intellectual ones." *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA*, 92 (July 1995), in an introductory paper at a colloquium entitled "Physics: The Opening to Complexity," held June 26 and 27, 1994, at the National Academy of Sciences, in Irvine, CA, 6653.

[13] Ibid., 6653–6654. [14] Anderson, "More Is Different," 393–396.

Konrad Lorenz criticized the notion of emergence because he felt that it suggested that something that had already existed but had been hidden now comes to light. He preferred instead to use the notion of "fulguration" (i. e., the act of flashing like lightning), as though the new quality arose suddenly and without having any preexistence whatsoever.

Emergent wholes are qualitatively different from their individual parts. A sentence is different from a list of individual words. It possesses the capacity to be true or false, whereas a list of words – no matter how many – does not possess this quality (although a phrase may be composed of many words). A word can have a meaning, whereas the collection of letters that has the external appearance of a word may be void of meaning.

A hurricane is an example for emergence. Another example of emergence that is often cited is an ant colony. The queen is not the monarch, giving direct orders and communicating to the different ants what they must do. Instead of there being a hierarchical structure, each ant reacts to stimuli that occur in the form of chemical scent from larvae, other ants, intruders, food, and buildup of waste, leaving behind a chemical trail, that, in turn, provides a stimulus to other ants. Here, each ant represents an autonomous whole, which reacts depending on only its local environment and the genetically encoded rules for its variety of ant. Nevertheless, despite the lack of centralized decision making, ant colonies reveal complex "social" behavior.

Emergence is not magic and neither is Eternal Life a miracle. In a sense, both entail getting something out of nothing. The question that causes problems for physics is naming the cause. Aristotle explains the idea that the whole may be more than the sum of its parts by distinguishing between form and matter. "But if, as we say, one element is matter and another is form, and one is potential and the other actual, the question will no longer be thought a difficulty."[15] With these categories, Thomas Aquinas was able to explain the unity of a human person by viewing the human spirit as the form of the material body. However, these explanations are intended to explain the unity of the whole but do not explain the phenomenon of emergence itself. What brings about the unity?

The temperature of gases is also cited. While gas has a temperature, the individual molecules of which it is composed do not. In other words, the whole has a quality that the parts lack. Organisms have life, but a cell is not a tiger, just as even a single gold atom is not yellow and gleaming. Moreover, within consciousness, we directly experience a kind of

[15] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VIII, 6.

emergence, which may serve as an analogy. When a physical object appears in my consciousness, this is a startling instance of emergence. Out of something singular and material, an entity arises that is universal and can be thought about independently of the original object. For instance, I can see a tree. It is really this tree that is now in my consciousness but without the matter – for example, the wood – in its materiality, although I am including it in my thought. Then I can imagine other trees. Without counting one by one, I can calculate: one tree plus two trees equals three trees – regardless of whether three trees can now actually be seen. Or I am able to compare two trees that are separate in reality; that is, I can see them together in a single apprehension and conclude that one is bigger than the other.

An early exponent of the idea of emergence is Aristotle: "That which is compounded out of something, so that the whole is one, not like a heap but like a syllable – now the syllable is not its elements, ba is not the same as b and a."[16]

Reality should not be thought of as a material cause. It is more like an efficient cause, if one must choose between the two, similar to the way light causes colors. It makes them appear. Aristotle said: "This is a sort of positive state like light; for in a sense light makes potential colors into actual colors. Mind in this sense of it is separable, impassible, unmixed, since it is in its essential nature activity."[17] Actually, I can wonder at the fact that when I open my eyes I see reality, without doing anything other than making myself receptive. Reality is active and affects me.

Wonder is the human reaction to reality, seen in this two-fold way. Wonder arises, according to Aristotle, when we see something as caused without knowing the cause itself. Applied to reality, it means that we see a reality and realize that it has received its reality. We wonder then about the source of its reality.

It is possible that the loss of the body can have the result that the spiritual becomes stronger.[18] Immanuel Kant writes that the soul after death will see the world not as it appears but as it is. He interprets the separation of the soul from the body as the change of sensual perception to spiritual perception. This is what Kant calls "the other world. Accordingly, the other world is not another place, but only another perception."[19] "One remains in this world," he explains, "but has a spiritual perception of everything."[20]

[16] Ibid., VII, 17. [17] Aristotle, *De anima*, III, 6; 430 a.
[18] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, II, c. 80/81.
[19] Kant, "Zustand der Seele," 255. [20] Ibid., 256.

1.2 The happening of reality (Creation)

Reality happens; it is actuality; it is not simply a collection of realities. A reality is not a thing, an entity, but rather an act. Reality itself is not merely the collection, or set, of all realities, that is, an abstract notion for all realities, the name of the set. To think about the afterlife, it is absolutely essential to keep this in mind. The world is in constant motion and change. Change belongs to the quintessence of reality as we know it. The definition of change that goes back to Aristotle is the reality, or actualization, of a possibility. (More precisely: change, or motion, is the actuality of a possibility *as such*.[21]) This characteristic of reality is the basis for our experience of time. The universe exists in time by the fact that it is real and the reality of the world is composed of possibilities and actualities, with actualities always presupposing the corresponding possibilities. Even if everything in the universe comes to a standstill, time will still somehow continue; otherwise, the standstill would not be thinkable.

Although we may not be explicitly conscious of it, we constantly experience existence as something that happens. Existence plays no role in the critical reflection of the natural sciences, although it is the primordial fact. The natural sciences deal with happening in time, but they ignore the fact of the *existence* of evolution. Time itself is not further questioned. Questions of this kind belong to the perspective of philosophy and theology.

The reason why the natural sciences neglect existence is that they investigate change, whereas creating, as Thomas Aquinas understands it, does not cause a change. He compares the creation of a new creature with the addition of a geometric point to a line. This does not cause the line to extend any farther. This is analogous to God's unchangeableness. If God were changeable, then he could become an object of physics. As it is, creation happens without time.

The apprehension at the basis of the idea of creation is the same as the apprehension of self-reflection. Self-consciousness is the apprehension of the act of existing.

The act of creation does not require matter as a presupposition. "This truth divine Scripture confirms, saying: In the beginning God created heaven and earth (Gn 1:1). For to create is nothing else than to bring a thing into being without any pre-existent material."[22]

The causality of being encompasses the entire thing caused, whereas other forms of causality are limited. This aspect makes divine causality

[21] Cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, III, 1. [22] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, II, c. 16.