



# **APEIRON**

VOLUME 4, APRIL 2006

## APEIRON

**Apeiron:** *unlimited, indefinite*

1. The *arche*, that is the beginning or principle of all things was, according to Anaximander, the *apeiron*, the unlimited. The term is capable of various constructions, depending upon how one understands the limit. 2. More generally, indetermination, i.e., without internal limits, and so without beginning or end . . . 3. An undergraduate journal of philosophy for students of all majors at Washington College.

## Forward

The ideas of the great philosophers seldom remain dormant on dusty bookshelves. Their ideas traverse our lives disguised in practical garb. They often force a return to consciousness in theoretical form when crucial decisions are made. Prominent intellectuals of the last century declared the end of both religion and the Enlightenment. Our young century is seeing the great philosophical and religious debates of the nineteenth century return to the public sphere, with an intensity once hardly thought possible.

The Utilitarian calculus made known by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill now influences practical decisions affecting millions, as do the appeals to the inviolability of the person, as seen in Kant. Joseph Priestly, the great chemist and also a Unitarian minister, is believed to have pioneered the principle of “the greatest good for the greatest number” to relieve the wretched poor of Britain. William Spencer in this issue considers far different applications of this famous principle in his review of a contemporary satire on Utilitarianism in health-care ethics. The moral uncertainty of our age raises the question whether any moral absolutes remain and whether they can be grounded in appeals to reason. Derek Schatel looks at some applications of Immanuel Kant’s famous categorical imperative.

Controversies between science and religion in the West are as old as the Pre-Socratics. Back on the front pages of newspapers and in book review sections are new versions of the great nineteenth century debates involving Scripture, the Theory of Evolution, and scientific materialism. David Hosey in his article leads us to his vision of a proper intellectual clearing on some of these matters.

Emerson’s quintessentially American dream of endlessly recreating the self is now the stuff of soft-drink advertisements and popular discourse on personal development. Adam Kuriloff in his work returns us to the European Existentialist masters and their assessment of the temptations and limits of the conscious subject.

I continue to be humbled and amazed (but never surprised) at the superb quality of analysis and debate of which many students at Washington College are capable. This fourth volume of *Apeiron* brings the reader only a sampling of that quality, in our customarily simple and unassuming format.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Timothy Huston, who died as a passenger in an automobile accident this past summer before his junior year. His article on John Locke and personal identity concluded our April 2005 issue. Its fine quality earned the article a reprinting in the October 2006 issue of *Dialogue*, a national student journal of philosophy. Our thoughts remain with Tim's family and friends.

The editors, Bill Spencer and Derek Schatel, braved the pressure of their own deadlines with senior theses and graduation to produce a very fine volume. Thank you and enjoy.

Peter Weigel

## Introduction

In this, our fourth annual edition of **APEIRON**, we are proud to present a broad spectrum of topics which are thought provoking and challenging. These essays contend with issues that, despite being hundreds of years old, still play important roles in our daily lives, and help provide a foundation for the ways in which we interact with the world.

The editors would like to thank Professor Peter Weigel for his invaluable time, patience, and guidance during the completion of this volume.

*The Editors*

Co-editors: William Spencer and Derek Schatel

Faculty Advisor: Peter Weigel

Cover Design: Robyn Nuttal

## Contents

Affirming the Question: Infinity and the Compatibility of Science and Religion.....	1
by David Hosey	
Arguing with Kant's Third Example of Common Duty.....	8
by Derek Schatel	
Protean Consciousness: Freedom through Negation.....	15
by Adam Kuriloff	
The Survival Lottery: An Attack on Utilitarianism.....	26
by Bill Spencer	

## **Affirming the Question: Infinity and the Compatibility of Science and Religion**

David Hosey

When it comes to the debate over the compatibility of science and religion, the battle lines in this country appear sharply drawn. The continuing argument has been marked by fierce invectives and unwavering convictions. Those who argue that religion and science are incompatible come from both sides of the science and religion divide. At first glance, there appears to be little in common between those who hold science to be the only legitimate source of answers to questions of creation and dogmatic religious believers. At the root, however, both are operating on a surprisingly similar assumption about the universe. On closer examination, this assumption can be said to contradict other basic premises of both positions. I suggest that strict followers of both the scientific view and of the religious view presuppose that knowledge about the universe is potentially finite.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, dogmatic scientists hold that science can discover the answers to all existence questions, thus presupposing a finite amount of information. Dogmatic religious believers seem to hold that God can be threatened by scientific knowledge, indicating a conception of God in which a finite amount of knowledge or power can somehow be “taken away” by human endeavor. By more closely examining this presupposition of finitude, it is possible to call these extreme positions themselves into question.

The proponents of the scientific view of the universe are frank in their contention that knowledge of the universe is finite. In such a view, there is no such thing as an existential or religious question—there are only scientific questions. This argument is plainly articulated by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins: “Religions make existence claims, and this

---

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that there are both scientists and religious believers who do not hold this dogmatic view and who believe that religion and science can be compatible.

means scientific claims.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, all that exists can ultimately be traced to scientific understanding. For a scientist attempting to perform an experiment, the assumption that all claims about the universe are scientific is a perfectly rational one to make, as one must assume that the object of study is empirically observable. The problem arises when this functional assumption is expanded to a general view of the universe and then argued for dogmatically.

The contradictory aspect of this basic assumption of scientific dogmatism is highlighted by the argument known as Hume’s Fork. The Fork is a basic presupposition of modern scientific positivism. It sets up two ways that one can know about the universe: all knowledge is either logically true, such as in a basic mathematical formula, or it is empirically observable, such as in a scientific experiment. Other beliefs cannot claim to be legitimate knowledge. In order to understand the problem with a dogmatically scientific outlook, one must only apply Hume’s Fork to the assumption that all existence claims are scientific claims. One finds that this assumption is neither provable *a priori*, through pure reason, nor is it empirically observable. Nor does it appear that anyone will ever be able to prove this assumption. Although it is certainly true that science has made great leaps forward in a relatively short time over the past hundred years, the statement “now everything there is to be known about the universe is known” seems to be incoherent. If one premise of the dogmatically scientific view, that there is a finite limit to knowledge of the universe, contradicts another basic presupposition, that of Hume’s Fork, then one can say that this view is logically incoherent.

Another way of formulating this contradiction is to point out that Hume’s Fork does not verify itself. It is a presupposition, but one that is neither deducible *a priori* nor empirically observable. As a presupposition, the Fork operates well, when used in conjunction with the functioning of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard Dawkins, “Science Refutes Religion,” in *God Matters: Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. R. Martin (New York: Longman, 2003), 431.

scientific method. When taken as a basic truth about the universe, however, the self-contradicting nature of the Fork becomes problematic. If there are no existence claims that are not scientific claims, and the Fork cannot be said to be a scientific claim, then it must be rejected by the very worldview that relies on the Fork for its existence.

If all of this is true, then there is a major flaw in a strict scientific outlook on the universe. However, given this, is the only option left open that of strict religious interpretation? When one turns the same discerning eye to this option, one again finds a contradicting set of premises. Unlike the scientific position, the religious position does not state outright that knowledge of the universe is in any way finite. In fact, possibly the best summation of the religious hypothesis, provided by William James, firmly states a belief in that which is eternal and thus infinite:

[T]he best things are the most eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. “Perfection is eternal,”—this phrase of Charles Secrétan seems a good way of putting this first affirmation of religion, an affirmation which obviously cannot yet be verified scientifically at all... The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this supposed focus on the eternal, however, one discovers that the fundamentalist Christian makes the contradictory assumption that knowledge and power are finite.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright, (New York: Oxford University, 1998), 470.

<sup>4</sup> It is with great reluctance that I use the word “fundamentalist.” As a Christian believer, I hold the fundamental principle of my religion to be the eternally saving power of love, which has little to do with creation in six literal days or any other meta-scientific proposal. Nevertheless, the word “fundamentalist” is widely in usage and is

The current debate between Darwinism and Creationism is one obvious example. Some religious believers seem oddly threatened when some aspect of God, such as creation in six literal days, is removed from the realm of religion and assigned to science, in this case in the form of the theory of evolution. Now, there is only one way that, given the existence of the Christian God, such a God's power could be lessened by any scientific discovery. That way is as follows: God knows a vast amount of things, but every time humans discover a new thing, God knows less things and thus has less power. Therefore, God holds a finite amount of knowledge and power, which can somehow be "taken" from God by science.

It is of incredible interest that the "fundamentalist" religious viewpoint, which is traditionally associated with a view of God as ultimately sovereign and all-powerful, can thus be said to be limiting the power of God by assuming that the advancement of science takes away from the majesty of the Divine. A God that was truly all-knowing— in other words, having an infinite and eternal sum of knowledge— could never be threatened by any gains in human knowledge. In fact, we could say that the more humans know, the more meaningful words and phrases such as "infinity," "eternity," and "all-knowing" become. This is hardly a new idea; it was expressed by Thomas Aquinas who wrote of the importance of the exercise of human reason to achieve a more truthful understanding of God's transcendence of human reason.<sup>5</sup> The more we understand, the more significant it is to believe that there will always exist that which we cannot understand.

To clarify this viewpoint, it is only necessary to imagine primitive humans huddled around a campfire, senses highly tuned to sense danger in the largely unknown world around them. For these early humans, belief in something greater than their reason could still be quite limited, as relatively little could be said to be known to the reason of these beings. For modern

---

utilized here for the purpose of identifying a certain view of the universe.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I c.5-8, trans. Anton Pegin (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1955).

humans, however, any sustainable conception of God or of the divine would have to be greater than our own vast scientific knowledge. We can, using some imagination, stretch this argument to include the vast terrain that future scientific discovery is sure to cover, terrain which is most likely incomprehensible to our comparatively puny understanding. Thus, much as one can observe the contradictory nature of a strict scientific view of existence, one can also observe that one presupposition of the strict religious view—that God is infinite and eternal—contradicts with another premise—that scientific discovery threatens the sovereignty of God.

If the position that science and religion are incompatible is questionable from both the scientific and the religious standpoint, then we are left with the compatibility of science and religion. Furthermore, it is reasonable to argue that by refusing to hold an incompatibilist view of science and religion, one actually enriches both the scientific quest and the religious quest. If there is an infinite amount of knowledge, then there will always be more for science to explore and discover. In a similar way, if there is an infinite amount of existence, the religious hypothesis will continue to become more meaningful, and not less so, as science continues to expand the realm of human knowledge. In fact, it can be suggested that advances in modern science can create a deeper understanding of religious doctrine, providing new language and new metaphors to discuss the continuity of creation and the interconnecting links that bind the world together.

It would seem, then, that the compatibility of science and religion is our best option. However, there are criticisms of compatibility that deserve to be answered. As Dawkins points out, given science's obvious purpose of expanding human knowledge, it is not always clear what exactly the purpose of religion is, as it often appears ineffective as a moral arbitrator.<sup>6</sup> However, judging a religion by using specific examples of the shortcomings of religious answers would be as foolish as judging science by specific examples of scientific failures. That religion often fails to answer questions of existence, i.e., why

---

<sup>6</sup> Dawkins, 432.

something exists at all, rather than nothing existing, is of course true. Similarly science sometimes fails to answer scientific questions about how things happen or how processes work. However, of the two, religion is *designed* to answer questions of morals, values, purpose, meaning, and spirituality. Science is designed to answer a completely different set of no less important questions.

This might be, a dogmatically scientific believer could reply, but why ask why there is an extant universe at all? Is there any necessity for the religious hypothesis? It is in response to this argument that Richard Swinburne poses his famous thought experiment. Swinburne describes a scenario in which a hapless victim is kidnapped by madman and told that his or her fate rests on the simultaneous draw of ten identical cards from ten separate decks by ten separate card shuffling machines. The cards are shuffled and drawn and, incredibly, ten identical cards are drawn. The madman, responding to the victim's surprise, responds that this is not amazing at all, as there is no way the victim could be alive to observe the draw unless this result had occurred. However, Swinburne argues that "the victim is right and the kidnapper is wrong... there is something extraordinary in need of explanation in ten aces being drawn."<sup>7</sup> Swinburne's thought experiment was originally intended to defend the design argument for the existence of God against those who felt that the order of the universe did not need to be questioned. However, taken as a simple affirmation of the human ability to question and wonder at our own existence, Swinburne's scenario is a powerful endorsement of the necessity of the religious question. No matter how our scientific knowledge of the world advances, we are driven to ask more questions and to continuously marvel at the pure fact of our existence. We even feel compelled to wonder at our capacity for wonder. The human drive to question and to wonder might indeed be eternally valuable, and a universe in which it is helpful to be involved in the eternally

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard Swinburne's thought experiment referenced from: Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 92.

valuable is a universe that has room for the religious hypothesis.

There is no doubt that the debate between the compatibilism and incompatibilism of science and religion will continue, as will the perceived conflict between science and religion. There is little that this argument can do to change this fact. However, it is at least reasonable to believe that there is no need for humans to limit themselves to a finite view of the world, whatever form that finite view takes. As Michael N. Nagler notes in his introduction to the “Isha Upanishad,” there exists a “verifiable infinity of consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> It would be a shame to accept any outlook on the universe that, whether through science or religion, attempts to limit this infinite reality. Surely, we should not allow the richness of existence to become so impoverished. If we are rational beings, this would be the ultimate denial of truth, and if we are spiritual beings, this would be the ultimate sin.

---

<sup>8</sup> Michael N. Nagler, “The Inner Ruler: The Isha Upanishad,” in *The Upanishads*, trans. Eknath Easwaran (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri, 1987), 206.

## Arguing with Kant's Third Example of Common Duty

Derek Schatel

Kant's categorical imperative serves to create a command applicable to all human beings: a statement of what we ought to do in a situation. Our actions should be in conformity with the idea that, through our will alone, we can make those actions universal law. In other words, we should only take actions that we can fathom as universal. This means that in a universalized world every rational being can adopt this action and it will hold true. In his argument for the categorical imperative, Kant proposes four examples of 'common duties' in life that support his imperative. His third example involves developing one's talents: an individual finds himself in possession of a particular talent that he could see as beneficial to the whole of human society, but is faced with either developing that talent or pursuing a life of leisure and idleness. This rational being sees that it is his duty to pursue the development of his talents rather than leisure, because they were given to him for a purpose. Furthermore, were he to create the universalized maxim that all people, when faced with this dilemma, should choose idleness, then human society would cease to progress. He must choose the course that, when willed, would create a world in which people are treated as ends and not merely as means. Thus, by developing his talents he is benefiting society at large, and treating those around him as an ends in themselves, or the receiver of his talents.<sup>1</sup>

This example suffers on multiple levels *within* the categorical imperative itself. It must be noted that the argument must take place inside the actual rules and rather the consequences, because the categorical imperative is deontological and not consequential. That is, the categorical imperative and its examples say that the rule itself is what determines the good, and not the consequences of it. Were one to simply assess the example based upon the consequences

---

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Christine M. Korsgaard, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 31-33.

determining right and wrong, rather than based upon the rule, arguing the point would be all too easy. One need only say that the talents being developed lead to something catastrophic, and so it isn't a duty to develop them because they might lead to something bad. This is unimportant: for Kant, the rules are all that matter. Hence, I will attempt to the best of my ability to create an argument against the third example using only the rules as Kant has set forth.

Consider the following example: an individual finds himself in possession of a talent that makes him remarkably adept at assassination or genocide. He is startlingly successful in all manners pertaining to the elimination or destruction of other human beings. Furthermore, he sees what he is doing as a good thing: he assassinates rival political leaders for the heads of state, or he sets into motion actions to kill off a whole ethnic group that may be threatening his own. He is faced with the problem of either pursuing his talent of killing people, or pursuing a life of enjoyment. If he uses the universalized maxim of always developing one's talents for the betterment of society, he would undoubtedly choose to continue their development. This action conforms with the common duty. It is this hitman's *duty* to kill others, because he can't let this talent go to waste, and by developing it he is being a generally useful individual for others, and treating them as an ends in doing so.

Now, this same hitman must take his specific talent (that of killing others) and apply the categorical imperative to *only that talent*. In the world of the universalized maxim, all people who possess a talent for killing others should pursue this talent of killing rather than pursuing leisure. This cannot be a universal law, because the individual cannot will this. Were everyone who could kill another to actually pursue this course of action, society would cease to function. In the Kantian application, you would be treating those people as means only and not as ends, because with everyone dead there would be no one to receive the benefit (be an end) other than the individual himself. There are some talents that, although their possessor may consider them a benefit when applied, often do not benefit the society and so cannot hold as a universal law when assessed specifically. Though this duty can be a universal law in the

general sense, when it is defined in specific talents, it cannot hold up.

The idea that talents take such a diverse range also creates some problems with this example. Kant does not clearly specify what a talent is, so the reader is left to only take the broadest sense of the word. A talent, then, can be anything for which any rational being has a particular aptitude. These can range from mundane talents, to legitimate ones, to detrimental ones. Mundane talents can be considered something almost bordering on leisure or a hobby: being very good at putting together jigsaw puzzles, or adept at constructing models of the Starship Enterprise. A legitimate talent (though the term is subjective) would be something like being a remarkably good writer or artist, an insightful philosopher, or a brilliant physicist. Detrimental talents, again, are those that could really potentially harm society, like the hitman's proficiency with killing. According to the common duty of developing one's talents, the individual must conform with the duty of pursuing his particular talent if it can make him a useful person rather than letting it go to waste. This raises the question of what is defined as useful or rather, who defines it. Since, according to the categorical imperative, the duty is good in and of itself, it doesn't matter what the results are, and so no one can really set a standard. In other words, moral law is determined by reason *a priori*, and not experience, so standards of worth as set by society are unimportant. This leads to the conclusion that since society cannot (through experience) determine which talents are important and which are not, they are all useful, or it is up to the individual possessor of the talent to decide. The individual possessor will always say that his talent is worth merit: so the man who is really good at jigsaw puzzles will say that his talent is useful to mankind in some way, and that it will be his duty to pursue it.

This raises two problems. The first is that pursuing mundane talent development cannot comply with the categorical imperative, because the man who is pursuing his aptitude for puzzles isn't really helping anyone but himself. There is no one to receive the ends of his labor, and in fact people only become a means to this development (he needs

someone in a retail establishment to sell him the puzzle so he can put it together).

The second revolves around Kant's assertion that the categorical imperative acknowledges all men as lawmakers in a realm of ends. Consider an individual who possesses multiple talents: he is both an exceptional writer and very good at putting puzzles together. He must choose one talent or the other to develop. Another individual is only good at puzzles, and would choose that over writing. When he universalizes that maxim, he says that everyone who must choose between the talent of putting together puzzles and the talent of writing will choose puzzles. As a lawmaker, he can will this maxim onto others in this realm of ends. Thus, the man who is conflicted between both of these talents must choose the puzzles rather than his writing. This man may one day have written a profound novel to change the outlook of the world, but this is inconsequential because the categorical imperative concerns itself with the rule itself rather than its consequences. However, the rule itself (developing one's talents) is flawed here in that it creates conflicting duties at the specific level.

Yet another difficulty with this example is that Kant wording assumes that all talents will be equally received and considered. Consider this example, again in the field of writing, where there is heavy competition. Suppose there are two writers, one who writes what can be termed popular fluff that appeals to the current social sentiment, and the other who writes profound philosophical fiction. Both are given an opportunity to be published by the same publisher, but only one will receive publication. Given popular tastes, the first writer's writing would be chosen. The publisher is concerned with making money, and something that appeals to current trends is guaranteed to succeed. However, in doing so, the second writer would go unheard, though his writing contains substance and could thoroughly benefit the spread of ideas and intellectual discourse. In the case of both writers, they are pursuing the development of their talents. The first writer has talent in writing popular fiction, the second in writing thought provoking experimental fiction. Both would be benefiting society in some way, one in providing enjoyment for the

masses, the other in providing deep insight. They would both be treating people as ends through their writing in just this way. Both would be falling in line with the common duty given. However, one writer (the one who gets published) is pursuing his own talent to the detriment of the other writer's talent. He is not considering the second writer as an end, but only as a means (competition) to overcome on his way to success.

Now suppose I am this first writer, but I am aware of the second writer's work and the situation we are in. I have a great understanding and appreciation for the kind of writing he writes, knowing what good it can do, but knowing at the same time that I could not possibly write something similar (it is not within my talents to write that way). Is it still my duty to continue the development of my talents, knowing full well that if I do, the other writer's possibly more significant work will go unnoticed? This raises a difficulty, namely, Kant says that moral law is derived from reason and not experience, so we cannot place any qualifiers on the "goodness" of either work. However, this is completely ignoring the subjectivity an individual might feel, and the fact that both must continue to carry out their duty to developing their talents again creates a conflict. Yet another universal maxim can be created that everyone who finds his own ordinary work (as he has consciously self-judged it) to be impeding another individual's more profound work must mute the development of their own talents in order to let the second individual flourish. However, this not only contradicts the first common duty of universally developing one's talents, but it also can't be willed, for people are greedy and will act out of self-love in a scenario like this, and not out of moral duty.

One final difficulty with this example is that it considers all talents to have an end for other people. Kant explicitly states that a given action can be considered morally good if one of its requisites is that it treats other people as ends *as well* as a means. Whenever we develop our talents, we no doubt take some sort of pride in them. Though the writer writes for the satisfaction and growth of his audience, it is not without reason that he will also take satisfaction for himself in having created

something that so many people are digesting. He is using them as a means, yet also an end.

However, there are some individuals whose diverse talents do not see people as an end. The jigsaw puzzler and genocidal assassin work well again as examples, but an even better one might be the idea of the egoistic professor. Suppose there is a college professor who teaches a class in Post Modernism. He uses the entirety of class discussion time to discuss what he himself has written in his books (books that bolster his own self-image rather than contribute any sort of intellectual worth to the academic community), does not consider anything his students say as being worth any merit (and if on the odd chance they do say something provoking, he takes it for himself as his own idea), and when the time comes for term papers, he arbitrarily grades them against what his own ideas are on the subject, rather than any new ones they set forth.

This professor possesses a talent in studying and analyzing works of post-modernist literature, yet when he uses this talent (to write a book or teach a class) he is doing it entirely for himself. His students glean nothing from his class, nor does the intellectual community, as his analyses are verbose and esoteric. Student discussions and term papers are means for him to get new ideas and also justify his current ones. However, it is still his duty to pursue the development of these talents, because he has a rare gift for analysis, and he can rationalize that he is providing something useful. Though his actions conform with the common duty, they do not conform with the categorical imperative. His duty to his talents in turn requires him to treat people only as means and never as ends. A clear contradiction arises between the nature of an *a priori* categorical imperative and the example used to justify it.

In this argument I have attempted to criticize Kant's third example of a common duty by providing suitable contradictions between this duty and the categorical imperative itself. First, developing one's talents in the general sense as a universal law conflicts with developing them in the specific sense, as specific talents may violate the categorical imperative and cannot be universal. Secondly, the diversity of talents in the world would involve talents that don't necessarily benefit

society as per the definition of this particular common. Thirdly, the idea of all men as lawmakers in a realm of ends creates a conflict between the worth of talents, because there is no one to decide absolutely what is talent, but it is left to the individual whose perspective may be skewed. Furthermore, Kant's example presumes that all talents are equally considered, when at times some talents go unheard, and a conflicted individual who realizes another's talent will often be forced to deny that other person to pursue his own talents, thus treating him as a means. Finally, there are some talents that can in no way treat others as an ends and revolve solely around the means the individual uses to gain egoistic satisfaction from the use of those talents. Ultimately, though Kant's third example may satisfy the categorical imperative on a very general level, once it is dissected there are numerous interpretations of it that violate the very imperative it attempts to support.

## **Protean Consciousness: Freedom through Negation**

Adam Kuriloff

Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Jean-Paul Sartre maintain that the particular person<sup>2</sup> is free when he negates his own inclination to be reconciled with the world. I will argue that the particular person is free insofar as he is aware of the ineradicable absurdity between himself and the world, and that by negating his inclination to become part of the world, he revolts against the great error<sup>3</sup> and against the delusion that this absurdity can be placated. Thus, the particular person has a protean consciousness, a consciousness which is always and continuously in opposition to becoming a thing in the world. This consciousness is free to choose for itself and is, therefore, completely and solely responsible for all that it wills.

### **Albert Camus**

Let us begin our discussion regarding the possibility of an existential freedom through negation by coming to terms with the notion of consciousness as Albert Camus presents it. In the “Myth of Sisyphus,” from his book the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus articulates how there is something tragic in consciousness. As evidenced by the heroic figure of Sisyphus, the tragedy of consciousness comes from man’s being fated to live his everyday existence with the awareness that freedom from the absurdity of his condition is impossible and that any hope for reconciliation with the world is unfounded.<sup>4</sup>

If the particular person were not conscious of his own absurd condition, however, then he would not be standing out from the world, but rather would be in the world, and all of his suffering or torment would never be subject to his own

---

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this essay I will frequently use the phrase ‘particular person’, but I will not provide a definition for it, for reasons that I hope will become clear by the end of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Richard Polt (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 33-34.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), 312, 315.

reflection. This is because reflection demands that there is a conscious subject who stands over and apart from the objects in and of the world. So, without consciousness, the particular person's existential condition is not tragic, for if it were, he would be in the world. Moreover, without consciousness, his condition is not absurd, because all would be settled, i.e., he would never be able to compare himself with the world, because he is the world and the world is he, which is reconciliation through identity.<sup>5</sup>

Can consciousness be described without reference to absurdity? For Camus, man always lives in absurdity, but he is not always conscious of this absurdity (or at least most are not). Sisyphus, for example, works at rolling *his* rock up a mountain side for all eternity, but only at one moment in this ongoing condemnation to a meaningless exercise does he become aware of *his* fate. Consciousness, in this case, is when man becomes aware of his absurd fate. This is neither consciousness of something (for example, in the way a fisherman is conscious of the fish he is reeling in), nor is it consciousness of oneself, or self-consciousness (for example, in the way a fisherman is conscious of his desire to reel in a fish); rather, it is consciousness of the impossibility that the *something* out there will or could ever be reconciled with *oneself*. In other words, there is the awareness of the impossibility of transcending. Consciousness for Camus, or at least the consciousness that is of primary concern for the existentialist, can only be described with reference to the absurdity that is the alienation of the particular person from the world.<sup>6</sup>

Camus' initial description of absurdity is remarkable in that it attempts to shed light on the particular person's condition without supporting it with a metaphysics. He does this by describing the absurd condition with words like "feeling," by illustrating the absurd condition as it relates to the particular

---

<sup>5</sup> Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 46.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," 13, 18, 38.

person stuck in the quotidian, workday life, and by relating the absurd condition to the existential experience of the particular person himself. After he gives this account of the absurd, he says he has “managed to circumscribe the absurd from the outside.”<sup>7</sup>

Camus describes the feeling of absurdity in Sisyphus’ life as being one of suffering, toil, angst, dread, futility, sorrow, and the rest. Sisyphus’ work accomplishes nothing and leaves him unfulfilled, but nonetheless he is fated (or condemned) to labor forever. One might object to this metaphorical portrayal of the human condition by saying that, although we might suffer day-in and day-out and see no meaningful fruits or products of our labor, someday, at the very least, we will die, and all our suffering will end.

To this, however, Camus says that man is committing philosophical suicide by claiming that there is always a tomorrow, always a future that will justify every misery, every pain of yesterday and today. He is positing a metaphysical reality, a supra-sensory other-world, or an ideality, where the misery and pain of everyday life can be exchanged at a fair price for a share of eternal happiness. Camus calls this groundless positing of a metaphysical reality by philosophers an evasion and a leap.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is the setting up of an artificial reconciliation between the meaninglessness of today with the blind hope for a meaningful tomorrow. By characterizing Sisyphus as working and suffering eternally, Camus outlines the condition in which the particular person can never make a leap or evasion by rationalizing his existence to the possibility of a new existence tomorrow. At the heart of this condition of absurdity is what can be termed a *total* alienation from the world— a *total absurdity*, which no effort by any person, however cunning and optimistic, can ever overcome.<sup>9</sup>

If man is fated to live an absurd life, how can he ever overcome this condition and become free? He cannot. The

---

<sup>7</sup> Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” 30.

<sup>8</sup> a reference to Kierkegaard’s notion of a “Leap of Faith”

<sup>9</sup> Camus *Myth of Sisyphus*, 312, 315.

alienation from the world that he feels is beyond his control. What is within his control, however, is his ability to negate the inclination he has to posit another world, a world which is intended to vindicate the existence of this meaningless one. In other words, the particular person can revolt against his fate, never attempting to reconcile himself to it; otherwise, he would be reduced to making an evasion or a leap, which Camus considers tantamount to committing philosophical suicide, or suicide by philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

Once again, Camus describes freedom in terms of the particular person, and in doing this, he asserts that the freedom under discussion is not the prejudicial freedom presupposed by philosophers, but instead is in part a personal feeling of freedom in the most immediate sense, not in some mediated or metaphysical sense. For example, the claim that the existential condition of total alienation can be overcome and that one can be free from such absurdity is a metaphysical claim, whereas the description that I am free from imprisonment is a particular assertion.<sup>11</sup>

In revolting against the total alienation of one's own life from the world, Camus claims, the particular person produces meaning in his life. All of a sudden, after turning away from evasion and toward an awakening by means of negating this absurd reality, the particular person has effectively said, "Fate, my life is now mine. I am responsible. I create my own values".<sup>12</sup> And so, despite the total alienation of the particular person from the world, he can now truly create and have his own freedom, meaning, and happiness.<sup>13</sup>

### **Fyodor Dostoevsky**

For Camus, consciousness of the absurdity of one's life is tragic, but for Dostoevsky, consciousness has none of the glorified trappings of heroism and tragedy; instead, it is a state

---

<sup>10</sup> Camus, "Myth of Sisyphus," 29, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Camus, "Myth of Sisyphus," 50.

<sup>12</sup> Camus, "Myth of Sisyphus," 48.

<sup>13</sup> Camus, "Myth of Sisyphus," 315.

of humility and shame.<sup>14</sup> The illness or ‘dis-ease’ of consciousness comes in part from the fact that the more aware one is of the condition of the world, the more one is incapable of acting in that world, for every possible action becomes the object of greater and greater scrutiny, which goes on unremittingly.<sup>15</sup> The thoughtful inactivity of the acutely conscious man is sharply juxtaposed with the thoughtless activity of the dully conscious man, which Dostoevsky identifies with the everyday, normal man. His consciousness is at peace with itself, and all is settled. His world is the “Palace of Crystal”.<sup>16</sup>

The Crystal Palace is a metaphor and symbol of every metaphysical and idealistic construction made by philosophers. In this Palace, the dully conscious person resides and finds a safe haven away from the absurdity of his own condition, which he will never truly experience. In the Palace, the dully conscious person has complete self-assuredness and never doubts or second-guesses his actions. In the Palace, all has been rationally organized and nothing under the sun is left unknown. Thus consciousness, if it exists in the Crystal Palace at all, has the very simple task of doubting only that which is not in accordance with what has already been accepted. All consciousness here is above ground, revealed, de-mystified, sterile, at ease, reconciled, and determined.<sup>17</sup>

Below the surface, where the sun has never reached, the lone underground man, with his acute consciousness, with his dis-ease, revolts against the very notion of his doubting consciousness becoming crystallized above ground and its being forced into conformity. The underground man is revolting to save himself from becoming an ideal; he is fighting to preserve his particularity by negating the universal; he is

---

<sup>14</sup> Not always though, as doubt persists in every claim made by the underground man.

<sup>15</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Notes from Underground,” *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 65.

<sup>16</sup> Dostoevsky, “Notes,” 59, 79.

<sup>17</sup> Dostoevsky, “Notes,” 79.

defining himself as being indefinable, as a Proteus of sorts, who can take on and become any form he chooses.

As for Camus, absurdity for Dostoevsky has to do with the divorce between man and the world; unlike Camus, however, Dostoevsky accentuates the extent of this divorce and the inability of man to transcend it by suggesting that, from the perspective of the underground man, once someone acts, he is thereby bringing the absurdity of this relation to the fore, and such action is always inauthentic and self-deceptive. In action, man asserts one possibility over all others.<sup>18</sup> In order to maintain and uphold this absurdity as an existential condition, according to Dostoevsky, one must doubt or dwell in possibility, passionately revolting against the Crystal Palace and all that it represents.<sup>19</sup>

What the Crystal Palace represents is rationality. Thus, in negating the Crystal Palace, the underground man is anti-rational, or, as the narrator calls himself, irrational. This is not to say, though, that the underground man does not use his reason. On the contrary, the underground man must and does use his reason in his discernment of infinite possibilities. He thinks much more than the so-called rational man of the Crystal Palace.<sup>20</sup>

Dostoevsky stresses the importance of consciousness over the importance of absurdity, since, to him, absurdity is the condition of both the underground man and of those living in the Crystal Palace, but the power of an acute consciousness is strictly the faculty of the underground man.<sup>21</sup>

The underground man with his acute consciousness of himself, the world, and the absurdity between the two is free when he negates the world of actuality in favor of the world of

---

<sup>18</sup> When the particular person makes such an assertion, he is limiting and enslaving himself to the what-is and renouncing the what-if.

<sup>19</sup> Dostoevsky, "Notes," 56, 65, 68-9.

<sup>20</sup> Dostoevsky, "Notes," 65, 73.

<sup>21</sup> Dostoevsky, "Notes," 59, 71. Camus maintains, however, that there is an existential moment when man becomes aware of the absurdity of his own existence. For Camus, then, absurdity plays a key role in bringing one *to* consciousness.

infinite possibilities. This freedom can be felt at moments of horrible pain and suffering, when the meaninglessness of suffering becomes most pronounced. At that time, one can even find enjoyment in the freedom of knowing that attempting to reconcile oneself to the pain, i.e., ascribe meaning to it by acting on it, is a futile gesture.<sup>22</sup>

Part of what freedom means to Dostoevsky, however, includes the acknowledgement that any acting in the world is a way of renouncing one's own freedom. Surely, freedom in this instance is not a physical, moral, or metaphysical freedom, but instead is a particular person's freedom, as it is a particular person's freedom for Camus as well. Yet, even if the underground man is relegated to a subterranean existence of infinite possibilities, he may still become a denizen of the Crystal Palace, should he choose, while the rational man of the surface is necessarily condemned to remain forever in his own hollow idol, which he engineered himself—“living” entombed in the ascetic ideal of self-sacrifice.<sup>23</sup>

No one would dispute the fact that some actions must be performed in everyday life, but perhaps for Dostoevsky the necessity that some actions must be performed has been exaggerated by those who are constructing the Crystal Palace to such an extent as to include a value judgment about action, namely, that doing, working, striving, toiling, and so forth, are good, while inactivity, especially laziness and sloth, is bad.

The freedom of the underground man is incomparable with the metaphysical notion of the freedom of will; this is because the former is a primordial freedom, and the latter a post-primordial freedom. That is, the freedom of the underground man presupposes that the particular person is not a fixed “I”. Like Proteus, the underground man's identity is ambiguous and indefinite, which means that he is never the same when he wills something.<sup>24</sup> The freedom of will, which has been called post-primordial, on the other hand, presupposes that the person who

---

<sup>22</sup> Dostoevsky, “Notes,” 57.

<sup>23</sup> Dostoevsky, “Notes,” 56-7.

<sup>24</sup> If he can be said to will anything at all, for some consider any willing whatever to manifest itself immediately as bodily movement.

is freely willing is a fixed “I”. It might be concluded, then, that the primordial freedom of the underground man is qualitatively different from the post-primordial freedom of will, and that such a freedom as the underground man has, unbound to an identity in such a way, seems to present a greater amount of personal autonomy.

### **Jean-Paul Sartre**

The first definition of consciousness Sartre provides in his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*, is similar to Camus’ own interpretation of consciousness: “A being, the nature of which is to question its own being, that being implying a being other than itself.”<sup>25</sup> This definition suggests that consciousness concerns itself with its own being, only to uncover that it can never transcend or be reconciled with the other being that its own being implies. Reconciliation at this level would mean that one’s own being does not imply another or other beings, but only implies itself.

Sartre’s second definition brings forth the irreconcilable nature of consciousness: “Consciousness is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, how can conscious-being have nothingness?

Conscious-being can have no-thingness when being is for-itself and not in-itself. When being is for-itself, it is presumably existing *detached* from the “other” or the world; otherwise, it would not be for-itself but for-others. Since it is detached from the others, from the world, from the things in the world, or from thingness—the quality of being a thing in the world—consciousness can be said to have no-thingness, or have no quality of being a thing in the world, but it is nevertheless a being albeit not a thing.

Later, however, Sartre further qualifies his description of consciousness with a third definition: “Consciousness is not

---

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism,” *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 241.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism,” 241.

what it is.<sup>27</sup> By this, Sartre is saying that consciousness is not a being, because the being that is consciousness exists only insofar as it is aware of its own being, which itself is only being insofar as it is aware of its own being, *ad infinitum*.

At this point, some of those traditional philosophers from antiquity, such as Aristotle, would likely object and would say there is a law of contradiction for a reason: how can consciousness both be and not be what it is? Yet, Sartre would say to them that that is the very point. The reason why there is a law of contradiction is to force the for-itself of consciousness into the in-itself of the world or of actuality or of ideals, which would then fit with their presupposed epistemological model of explanation. Everything would be determined by the rigor of logic, and autonomy would become a self-deceptive claim.

What is absurd for Sartre, then, is not the alienation of man from the world, although that certainly is the case, but rather the elusive nature of consciousness itself, which bears *within* itself that same *outward* alienation. In effect, man is alienated from himself, his own conscious-being, in the same way as he is alienated from the world.

By no conceptual leap or imaginative stretch, one can see that from the third definition of consciousness Sartre provides, viz., “consciousness is not what it is,” that man the conscious-being is not what he is. Sartre says that, after turning inward and questioning the fundamentals of one’s own being, the conscious-being will uncover the possibility of an *infinite regression* within his own existence, where the antipode of the in-itself is revealed for what it is and is not. The infinite regression is the play that occurs between becoming a for-itself from an in-itself, and vice versa. Only negation checks this self-deceptive play.<sup>28</sup>

What is most remarkable about this description of consciousness is that from this interpretation of an inherent absurdity within consciousness itself, Sartre lays his foundation, if it can even be called such, for his ethics of responsibility. His ethics is only possible, however, if the

---

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism,” 259.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism,” 254.

absurdity of consciousness remains in flux by the constant negation of the in-itself, by saying no to becoming a thing in the world. Constant negation of the in-itself, it might seem at first, is a way of distancing oneself from oneself. Yet, even this formulation would not hold water for Sartre, who goes to great lengths to demonstrate how man cannot be divided up into elements, as the psychoanalysts do, but must remain a unity.<sup>29</sup> What, then, is a preferable formulation? Perhaps: The particular person distances himself, through negation of the in-itself, to the point of utter alienation from the self-deceptive notion of his being having thingness, from the *hope* that he will one day be able to reconcile himself with the rest of the world.

Unlike the theologian's conception of man, which maintains that man is created by God, like a watchmaker makes a watch, with a definite purpose and form, with an essence, the atheistic existentialist's view of man is that such a "conception of man" only comes *after* man has made himself and has become conscious of his own being and the absurdity inherent therein. The particular person's existence is primordial and protean: his existence is freedom. In what follows, Sartre describes this new telling of the story of Genesis:

What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world— and defines himself afterwards. . . . Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.<sup>30</sup>

Later, he becomes what he "*purposes*," making a spontaneous movement in which he becomes what he supposes he ought to be. The particular person makes himself, and as his own creator, he holds all responsibility for himself. However oxymoronic it may sound, freedom is the bedrock on which man asserts what he is and how he ought to be. If this is so,

---

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," 248.

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," 290.

then the existential freedom of man to make himself what he purposes is prior to all metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology.<sup>31</sup>

How can someone make himself? Who is making whom? From the infinite regression of the conscious-being, from his Proteus-like origin, from his existence, from his freedom, he spontaneously makes his own essence and his own laws, living by them with the anguish of always being responsible for his own actuality in the world. Truth and morality become immediate, lived, and part of the particular person's experience.

### **Conclusion**

God is dead, and now man is dead; that is, man *per se* is dead. The particular person, the conscious-being, however, has been liberated from his inclination to reconcile himself with the world, to dwell in the Crystal Palace of actuality, to become an in-itself, and he is thus free by negating such a possibility, by revolting against it. Moreover, he has created an abundance of meaning in his life by taking full responsibility for all that he is and does.

---

<sup>31</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," 290-1.

## **The Survival Lottery: An Attack on Utilitarianism**

Bill Spencer

This startling essay, John Harris's *The Survival Lottery*, starts from a number of basic assumptions.<sup>1</sup> The first is that any course of action we take as a society must be concerned with the net outcome, the bottom line. The second, which follows directly from the first, is that if there is a course of action that can be taken to produce a better net outcome, we should not hesitate to take it. From these, John Harris, speaking through the voices of two terminally ill patients, argues that allowing terminally ill patients to die when there is anything that can be done to prevent these deaths is murder. While this might seem reasonable at first glance, it is an argument with serious ramifications, and the result is a striking argument against a utilitarian view of ethics.

The scenario Harris presents us with is this: in a future time when organ transplants have been perfected and those who receive them are guaranteed to survive, there are two patients in need of transplants. Patient Y will die without a heart transplant, and patient Z will die without new lungs. If there were organs which matched their blood types available and the doctors did not perform the transplants then it would be neglect, malpractice, and most would say nothing short of murder. However, there are no suitable organs available from cadavers for these two, and yet Y and Z say that this is not an acceptable state of affairs. They both have the same blood type, and they declare that their doctors should take the heart and lungs from a healthy living person of the same blood type in order that they might both survive. This exchange would surely kill the formerly healthy person, but it would save two lives at the expense of one, whereas not taking the healthy organs would condemn Y and Z to death. Is the doctor to whom Y and Z are making their appeal to be held responsible for their deaths if he refuses to treat them? Harris seems to say yes.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Harris, "The Survival Lottery," in *Contemporary Moral Problems*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. James White, (Minneapolis/St. Paul: Wadsworth Publishing, 2005), 181-186 .

The basic argument is that Y and Z are just as innocent—that is, they have done nothing to deserve death—as the healthy person, whom we will call person A. It is mere chance that Y and Z happened to have diseased organs and A did not. Yet we often interfere in so many other areas of human life to eliminate or lessen the fickle effects of chance. Thus, by refusing to take the organs from A, one is effectively refusing an available lifesaving treatment, which is equivalent to murder. Y and Z would not have the doctors simply haul a passerby off the street and harvest his or her organs of course. This would traumatize bystanders and cause terror in the general population, as well as make it much less likely that anyone would ever go near a hospital, so Y and Z propose a solution. Everybody would be given a sort of lottery number, and whenever there is more than one patient of the same blood type who need different organs that are not readily available, a suitable donor is selected randomly by a central computer.

This system would lessen the side effects of terror and mental trauma, and distribute the chance of death evenly throughout the population. While the fear of being selected would still be present, the likelihood of it happening would probably be less than that of getting in a car accident, the risk of which most people cope with easily every day. Also, the simple fact is that under such a scheme people in general would be more likely to live longer lives. For every two people (at a minimum) who are in dire need of an organ transplant, only one person would die. It is likely that more than two people will be saved or helped by each donor who is selected, which makes the plan that much more beneficial. It is true that more elderly people will need organs than anyone else, which might create a society dominated by the elderly, but the computer program could be designed to maintain a certain age distribution which is deemed optimal if this becomes a problem. This might create problems of favoritism the likes of which this system was created to avoid, but let us leave that for later. A final qualification Y and Z propose is that people who are responsible for their own condition, such as chronic smokers with lung disease, would not be eligible for organs taken from the lottery. They admit that it seems unjust to kill

health conscious person A so that people W and X can continue chain smoking and binge drinking.

Many obvious objections to this system are found not to apply. It can not be argued that the laws of the society in which we live does not require us to kill innocents in order to save lives, as long as one does not rely wholly on the rules of the state when considering matters of morality. The mere fact that a third party has never been brought into situations such as these before does not preclude us from doing so now. Saying that the lottery proposed by Y and Z is unacceptable due to the fact that it promotes the active deaths of innocents is begging the very question that is being put forth, namely, whether one innocent person actively killed is better than two or more innocents passively dying when they could be saved. The objection that actively killing is more morally reprehensible than passively letting die is likewise begging the question, unless some concrete reason for why this should be so is provided. Because we know there is something that can be done, and because the lottery would produce a larger net rate of survival, we can not have recourse to the argument that there is nothing doctors could do to save Y and Z to dispel responsibility for their deaths.

Were one to object to this system by saying that it turns individual and unique human lives into value numbers in a system in which the end goal is to have as many healthy units as possible, Y and Z would ask why A's unique life is more worthy of respect than the two of theirs. If one were to say that this lottery would mean playing God, Y and Z could respond that we have the ability to change things, and to choose not to is also basically determining who will die and who will live. A seemingly promising objection is that of self-defense; any person who is chosen in the lottery should be able to object to giving their life because of the natural affinity of every creature to fight for survival, and there is an instinctual feeling that no person should be forced to lay down their life for others. This objection is countered by the fact that greater good arises out of the lottery, and Y and Z would claim that if A lives then it is at the expense of Y and Z; therefore, patients Y and Z are acting

in self defense by promoting the lottery just as much as person A is by objecting to it.

Harris then imagines a world where this program had been implemented. No person would have an absolute right to life or freedom from interference, but people on average would be likely to live longer lives. Furthermore, any person who absconds to avoid having their organs harvested would be deemed a murderer and pursued accordingly. While we may not prefer to live in this world over ours, Harris submits that the morality of those who do live in such a society is admirable, and no more barbaric or cruel than our own.

Still, are the ill effects produced by such a program of random harvesting of organs mitigated by the final result? A great deal of fear and distress would remain, and the apprehension of unwilling donors seems a nasty and terribly shady enterprise. In response to this, Y and Z might say that this is mere squeamishness, and that the suffering from terror would be less than the suffering endured by those in need of transplants if they were left to die. Also, death is distressing to every person when they experience it, especially premature death, and so it would be reasonable to limit the occurrence of this as much as possible. Harris suggests that a long period of education and propaganda might serve to further reduce the terror and distress felt by the public; being chosen in the lottery would be an honorable service performed for the good of the country, much like military service. Also, having an impartial lottery would remove the decision of who should live or die from the hands of doctors, and would prevent any person from taking control of the process.

Harris goes on to stipulate that, because the main concern of this program is complete equality, the pool of eligible donors could not be limited to those who are already in need of organs or likely to die. Such action would essentially be treating those unfortunate enough to need transplants as a subclass within society whose lives are worth less than those of the people who are lucky enough to be of sound health. We could not argue for selecting from only those who are likely to die soon, because that is disregarding the fact that many of them might be helped by a transplant. Also, other terminally ill patients who can not

be saved by transplants but have healthy organs could not be singled out, because it could be said that their final days are worth just as much to them, if not more, than the many days of life that would be lost if a healthy person were chosen. Also, someone would have to decide how imminent death would have to be in order to deem them terminally ill, and medical predictions of this type are notoriously inaccurate. In all of these cases, a subgroup of society is being discriminated against, which precludes our treating these alternate scenarios as viable options.

Two objections remain to be dealt with in this essay, and both are absolutist positions. The first is that a distinction in fact does exist between letting Y and Z die and actively killing A, and this distinction is the malevolence that Y and Z express towards A. Nobody is intending for Y and Z to die, whereas Y and Z are certainly intending to kill A, indirectly at least. This objection brings out one of the major factors making us uncomfortable with the survival lottery, and that is the question of intention. When people die of chance ailments it is unfortunate, but there is no will intentionally killing that person; even if the view is held that there is some such intentional will (that of some higher force possibly), the question of why this will chose to kill this particular person is unanswerable. In the survival lottery there is very much an intention, a will that kills the donors despite the fact that their selection is still random. Also, the question of why is very much applicable in this situation, and the answer which any bereaved relative or friend will find is that a few strangers needed their loved one's organs more. Regardless, it could be replied that Y and Z do not intend to kill A, and neither do the doctors who remove the organs; they just wish to produce the greatest good, and the death of innocents is an unfortunate result.

The final absolutist argument is that the survival lottery violates some principle of common decency, that it is macabre to even consider implementing such a system. Those who argue this point claim that this scheme bespeaks a blunted sensibility and a corrupted mind, but proponents of it would say just the opposite. Y and Z would probably proclaim the

survival lottery the most humane and reasonable course available, and that such objections are the product of a closed mind, one that is not responsive to reason. The further question is raised, more by Harris than by the imaginary patients, of whether our squeamishness towards this proposal is merely a product of habit and socialization and not some inherent moral compass. If we stumbled upon a society where the survival lottery was commonplace and accepted, would we still be able to maintain our intuitive indigence?

This is the ethical case for the implementation of a survival lottery. The trick that has been performed here is the creation of responsibility for the lives of those who could be saved by means that are accessible only through normally abhorrent practices. This responsibility is then placed on society at large, which makes a random selection of donors the most reasonable solution. Utilitarianism allows us to choose in favor of the greater net outcome, and in this case the lottery would both allow a larger number of people to survive longer and would create a lower chance that any person would die, and this chance would be distributed evenly throughout the population.

Harris admits that the practical considerations of actually implementing such a plan would be quite daunting. First of all, there is the matter that there are no surgical procedures that can guarantee survival of the person receiving the organ, which would leave open the possibility that A is killed and Y and Z still die. This is why the survival lottery remains a thought experiment, and not a potentially viable plan. Also, deciding who was dying from a chance affliction and who was responsible for their illness would be difficult and probably time consuming, and there are many different ways that someone can contribute to an illness. The line between responsible and not would be a troubling one, and even if a person was deemed innocent enough to receive a transplant there is no telling if this could be determined in the short time that they have left. Finally, there is the possibility of abuse. No matter how fail-safe the computer program that chooses donors was made, anybody who was motivated enough might find a way to abuse or manipulate it to their own ends. It would be a

terribly powerful weapon if someone managed to take control of it in such a way.

One objection that was not addressed in the essay was that this plan guarantees the survival of those who actually are subject to afflictions which could be treated by transplants, and puts everyone who is healthy at risk instead. Thus it seems to be creating a subset of society who would be singled out, namely everyone who is healthy or afflicted in a way that could not be solved by transplants. It is true that after the surgery is performed then the formerly terminally ill person goes right back into the pool of potential donors, but that does not change the fact that everyone is at risk of dying except those who are in dire need of organs. Also, no organ can be moved from body to body an unlimited number of times, for surely it would cease functioning after so many transplants. Because of this, it would be unwise to put a transplant recipient back on the list of possible donors for the organ that they received, effectively lessening the chance that they will get selected.

Also, there is the issue of determining an age limit for transplant recipients. This practice, suggested in order to prevent the organ-needy elderly population from becoming the dominant group in society, would essentially be assigning values to different age groups, making younger citizens more desirable than the older. While this seems scandalous, it does have practical ramifications— if most of the organs are going to elderly citizens, then the elderly would start to comprise a larger and larger percentage of the population, which could conceivably lead to negative population growth, and even the eventual downfall of our society as a result of too few births. However, this could lead to the argument that similar accommodations should be made for those who have illnesses that destroy organs, making frequent transplants necessary— we might have to limit the number of transplants they can receive. If this were not done then surely they will become a large percentage of the population as well; they will not be able to be donors because of their illness, but they will require such frequent transplants that those who have illnesses which frequently caused organ failure would be much more likely to survive than those who are healthy.

Moreover, we would have to exempt a certain number the doctors and nurses who were capable of performing transplants, as well as those who could maintain the computers which selected the donors and essential public servants without whom our society would cease functioning efficiently. The list would surely grow as a result of practical need, and a special court would have to be created to rule on who could be exempt and who could not. This would result in loopholes through which those who knew the laws, or who had enough money to pay the right lawyers, could escape. These unavoidable considerations eliminate the notion of equality and randomness that Y and Z tried to emphasize, and cause this scenario to become less and less viable.

If one accepts the morally relativistic arguments put forth, and ignores the severe practical issues, then there is little recourse that can be had against this proposition. However, there is still a problem in the appraisal of how much terror and anguish would be caused by the implementation of the survival lottery. Not only would the populace in general be fearful of selection in the lottery, but those who received organs would be highly susceptible to guilt and anxiety regarding the fact that their new organs were harvested from a healthy living body. Even if the source of the organs were withheld from the recipient, the possibility that the donor was a healthy living one would likely gnaw at the conscience of many organ recipients, decreasing the quality of life for many after the transplant was complete. The likelihood that a prolonged propaganda campaign would ease or eliminate these negative emotional effects is small, but the possibility that it might succeed is frightening. If we as a society were to become desensitized to the random killing of unwilling citizens for a utilitarian greater common good, it would likely deaden our empathic response to killing in general if any benefit can possibly be gained by it. This would surely set a dangerous precedent that would manifest itself in other aspects of society, and would devalue human life. While Y and Z would argue that letting the two of them die is more callous than killing one innocent to save two, the moral and emotional force of active participation in the death outweighs the perceived benefits. This is, admittedly, a

slippery slope argument, but one that should still be carefully considered.

Furthermore, the desensitization process would surely take massive amounts of time and effort by the government. This time and effort might be better spent helping people come to terms with the reality of their own deaths, thereby helping to eliminate much of the anguish that the survival lottery seeks to avoid. This would be no easy feat, of course, but it would be no more difficult than encouraging wide scale acceptance of the survival lottery, and it would produce a much greater result; regardless of whether someone can be saved by an organ transplant or not, the harsh reality is that every person must face death sooner or later. If the anxiety associated with death is confronted and eliminated, then the need for a survival lottery—which only postpones this fear—is eliminated as well.

A final analysis of this essay shows that it is completely satirical, judging by a few key statements. For example, there was one point where Harris said that of course a suitable euphemism would be coined for the people who were being killed for their organs. Maybe they would be those who were called upon to “give life” to others. This smacks of sardonic commentary, though it is possible that the author is entirely in earnest. Another instance which gives the impression that this essay is satire is when Harris had Y and Z ask “Why... should their living or dying be left to chance when in so many other areas of human life we believe that we have an obligation to ensure the survival of the maximum number of lives possible?”<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of whether or not this essay is satire, it forces us to reexamine the utilitarian viewpoint that the maximum good for the most people is desirable. It plants in the reader’s head the notion that regardless of the benefit, there are lines which should not be crossed. This can also be seen as an attack on social welfare, the idea of taking from everybody and giving to

---

<sup>2</sup> John Harris, “The Survival Lottery,” in *Contemporary Moral Problems*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. James White, (Minneapolis/St. Paul: Wadsworth Publishing, 2005), 181.

the needy. If we use tax money to feed and house the poor and unfortunate within our society, then we should be able to use the same logic to justify the use of a universal organ pool to heal those who need organs which are otherwise unavailable. The basic thought being challenged here is that the needy are needy because they have been dealt a shoddy hand by either fate or chance (whichever you prefer), and that we have a duty as a society to improve this situation. However, if this is in fact the real goal of this essay, it fails by making such a strong case for the survival lottery argument. It is tempting to dismiss outright the proposal set forth in this essay, but it is not viable to dismiss such an argument based on gut instinct if no reason can be given for the rejection. It is difficult to dismiss the logic of the proposition which is put forth, but in the end it seems that the survival lottery would not result in the greatest common good, and therefore can not be justified under utilitarianism.

When the consequences of such a system are drawn out, it becomes apparent that the detrimental emotional effects outweigh the benefits, and that the practical troubles preclude any possible usefulness of the system. Social welfare programs do not carry this emotional impact, and do not suffer from the same issues of execution, though they do suffer from some—and so the arguments that weigh against the survival lottery do not heavily affect social welfare programs. Thus in the end, the argument that the survival lottery implicitly brings against utilitarianism and social welfare programs carries little weight. Despite this it remains a valuable thought experiment, one which will hopefully remind all who encounter it the importance that empathy plays in ethical considerations, whether we like to admit it or not.

## **Contributors**

**David Hosey** is a junior majoring in international studies.

**Derek Schatel** is a senior majoring in philosophy.

**Adam Kuriloff** is a junior majoring in philosophy.

**Bill Spencer** is a senior majoring in philosophy.