

A CONVERSATION IN THE AFTERNOON

by Richard Schlegel

Herbert called, "Come in," in response to a knock on his office door. He raised his eyes from the book on his desk and turned in his leather-covered swivel chair to face Martha as she entered. Her question—"You said you would have some time this afternoon?"—indicated that she did not wish to intrude on her professor's work. Herbert replied, "Indeed I do," and arose to place a chair for her by the end of his desk.

"The view is a splendid one today," Martha began. The windows of the office looked out on a campus lawn, bright in the May sunshine and bordered by a curved line of trees and shrubs. Some ornamental cherry trees and a row of lilac bushes were in blossom. Herbert agreed, and thought of his good fortune in having had, for many years, congenial surroundings in which to live and work.

Martha smiled. "I don't know what to do," she said, "about the opportunity to work with the University Center in Detroit. In many ways it's what I want to do. I like to teach, and I think I would enjoy working with the mixed adult and student groups that I would have there. But it means giving up my Ph.D. program."

"I would be most sorry to lose so bright and pretty a student, and yet I have sensed that you are not altogether happy with the prospects of another year or two of graduate study."

"I suppose that is correct," Martha answered. "I believe that study and research are the best things a person can do, and yet I don't seem so satisfied in directing my life altogether in that way as do the completely dedicated students. Perhaps there is more in me that calls for people and action in my day-to-day life."

"I suppose," Herbert said with some sympathy, "that you judge that you do have enough education now for the work in Detroit?"

"Oh yes, I think so. The teaching hardly goes beyond the freshman-year level. But," Martha continued, "it means that I plunge into something that is, well, sort of immediate in today's world, rather than going on here in ways that always seem to me to be tied more to the finding of faraway goals. You know, the eternal verities."

Herbert smiled a bit, saying, "The eternal verities must certainly

Richard Schlegel is professor of physics, Michigan State University.

be as easy or hard to find in one human situation as in another." He went on lightly to ask, "Whatever you do, you do not expect, do you, to find an eternity or immortality?"

Martha's reply was serious. "I have long since given up the simple notions of heaven that I was taught in Sunday school. But I don't know for certain about immortality. It seems to me that what we do may have some significance beyond our own lives, since we add our bit to the changes of nature. After all, one species evolves into another. I think that what we make of human beings—whether we succeed or fail—is of importance for what comes after us."

"Mmmm—I don't suppose this can be denied; and do you see the work with underprivileged people at the University Center as being part of a contribution to success for man in our day?"

"I suppose I do see it as a way of doing my part in keeping something going that is very wonderful," Martha replied.

At this moment there was another knock on the door, and, even as Herbert called his, "Come in," Lewis entered; clearly, he and Herbert were on easy terms with each other. "Sit down," Herbert said, "and help us out. We have just touched on what meaning one might give to immortality."

"Well, I last thought about that," Lewis responded, finding a chair between the desk and the windows, "when I read William James's essay on it, a few years ago. I did not think he made a very good case. And surely, the eventual deterioration of any given living organism, taken with the close dependence of thought on proper biological functioning, is an answer to any claim for immortality."

"I think," Herbert added, "that James does mean to call into play a domain that is different from that in which biological activity occurs. He thought, apparently, that in his investigations of spiritualism he had some evidence of another realm. But I don't think most of the world finds such evidence to be compelling."

"If there were that realm, and if it were different from the one of life as we know it, would that not be a funny kind of immortality?" Martha asked. "If being immortal means a transformation into something quite different, then what is immortal is not ourselves as we know us."

Lewis said with some emphasis, "That is a telling point. I presume James would expect that some part of us that always has been in the realm of immortality continues to exist, while the rest of the body does not. But now we are brought, of course, to the concept of the immortal soul. I don't think it comes within the net of modern developmental biology or psychology."

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Herbert countered with, "There may well indeed, Lewis, be things that are not in that net. But even though there be, I would argue against immortality in another way. We can hardly believe that there is selective immortality among human beings; surely, if it is for one it must be for all. We think, then, of the wide variations among people—variations in extent of awareness, in physical abilities, in health, in maturity, and in span of life. If every human being is to be immortal, regardless of these differences, surely we cannot deny immortality to other animals of the natural world. For we do know that the human species has appeared as a natural development from other species, and we see continuity between man and animal in virtually every human property. So if we accept immortality, we must give it not only to every human being that has ever lived, but also to every animal that has every existed. Somewhere, then, in the realm that we postulate for immortal life, there must be the individual collection of attributes and experiences that make up this person, or that dog, or this bird—and likewise for every living organism of the past."

Martha added, "This means every insect, every fish, every amoeba, too, that has ever existed."

"I think so," said Herbert. "I see no basis at all for excluding a single worm burrowing in the grass, or any one of the gnats that dance about a street lamp at night."

"Then," Lewis put in, "you must go to every organism in the universe. The living entities of other planets—if such there be—must have their immortality too."

"I see no reason why not. And," Herbert continued, "that leads me to my concluding point. The continuity between living organisms and nonliving matter is impressively evident, just as is the similarity of basic structure and process as one moves from species to related species among living things. The complex molecular structures which make up living organisms can be synthesized artificially from inorganic materials. We do not yet make a living unit in the laboratory, but at the level of primitive biological entities the borderline between living and nonliving does not seem to involve any kind of large jump or change in properties. Indeed, the very fact that transformations between organic and inorganic go on so freely in, say, the utilization of food—and in the two-way flow generally between an organism and its environment—shows us that living and nonliving are not inseparably different parts of nature. So, I say, we must give immortality to the processes of the natural world generally. But now we do come to absurdity. If every event, every

configuration of the world is to be immortal, we must be continually setting up—in the imagined realm of immortality—a copy of the entire universe; and every copy, with one corresponding to every instant of the universe, must go on forever as an immortal universe.”

“What do you mean,” asked Lewis, “by ‘processes of the natural world generally?’”

“Well, I mean that if there is immortality for any living mite that has as much as a second of existence, the properties of being which give it that immortality must also operate for any interaction or process that occurs amidst the stuff of the material world. And so we have to find immortality for any conceivable thing we wish. I suppose we don’t come to a logical inconsistency, but we do come to an incredible conclusion: that there is a realm of being in which the entire natural universe is in some way preserved, not just as a double, so to speak, of itself, but as an infinite series of universes, such that every event, as well as every living cell, has unending existence.”

Lewis laughed and said, “You do pull the immortality doctrine a long way, Herbert. Still, I think your argument is a pretty good one.”

“Are you saying that we don’t find it reasonable for immortality to be a property of nature—it just doesn’t fit in with what we have learned about man and his world?” Martha asked.

“Yes, I think that is my assertion,” Herbert replied.

“But,” Martha said, “there are some things in nature that persist indefinitely. Even life itself, in a way. Man’s few hundred thousand years are not so inconceivably long, by comparison with a lifetime. But there has been life for maybe a billion or two years on the earth. And didn’t some species of dinosaurs persist for hundreds of millions of years? Even today, some of the existing plant and animal forms have not changed much for maybe even a billion years. I’m a little bit of a biochemist, and the replicating forms of molecules in living things have almost, it seems to me, a kind of immortality in nature.”

Herbert’s reply showed a lively interest. “Perhaps we should think of the basic entities of nature—the atoms themselves—as having a natural immortality. That would give us something.”

“Oh no, that won’t do,” Lewis quickly interposed. “The atoms are not immortal; they change under radiation or chemical combination into ions that are different from the neutral atom. Worse still, we know that under the high temperature conditions of the interiors of stars—and perhaps that is where most of the matter of the universe

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is—the atoms are largely stripped entirely of their electrons. With extremely high temperatures, even the atomic nuclei may be disintegrated. We now have even on our own planet the fission processes in nuclear energy release by which heavy atoms are split into smaller ones. Then too there is fusion, the combination of lighter elements into heavier ones, and this certainly occurs in the stars. There just is not any permanence for atoms; to the nuclear physicist it is commonplace that any given nuclear species can be transformed into something else.”

“Yes, of course, you are right.” Herbert assented. “And, as I think of it, we cannot even attach properties of permanence to the neutrons and protons that make up the atomic nucleus, or to the other component of atoms, the electrons. For these particles, too, can disappear as radiation, or be created from sufficiently high energy electromagnetic waves in pair-production processes.”

“So,” Lewis added, “it appears that we have nothing—even on the levels of purely inanimate matter—to which we can point and say, ‘Here is something that is immortal.’”

“Well,” said Herbert, “we could talk about an unending existence of the universe in time, but that seems rather far from the human immortality with which we started.”

Martha spoke up, somewhat hesitatingly. “Couldn’t we again consider the forms of life? The individual animal, or plant, is surely not immortal, but it reappears again and again. Isn’t it obvious that something is very permanent? After all, even in a living organism there is exchange of material, so that the atoms of one year have largely been replaced by other atoms five years later. The replacement by a newly developed organism in a later generation is a more drastic kind of alteration, but as a result of one individual member following another a given species does continue to exist, sometimes for eon after eon.”

“Subject, of course,” Herbert replied to Martha, “to alteration of the species, and sometimes even to its extinction. Conversely, there is the appearance of new species. But you make a point, and it seems that we must look not to the individual instances for that which endures indefinitely but to some property which they share. There are, actually, many kinds of structure and organization in the natural world, aren’t there? Besides the myriad forms that come to mind from the domain of living things, one can think of, for example, crystal structures that appear over and over: a crystal may be dissolved and disappear, but elsewhere a new one, virtually exactly the same, is forming itself from similar atoms. In the astronomical

realm, too, the individual star or galaxy is evanescent—even though its lifetime may be of the order of billions of years. Yet, there is the permanence of form that is manifested in the similarity of the organization of matter in any star; and the galaxies of a given type have the same structure.”

“You might equally well look to the atom,” Lewis pointed out. “There the pattern that gives us ordered structure and behavior among the perhaps countless number of atoms of a given kind is especially impressive.” He went on to say, “Does this mean that we come to a Platonic philosophy? That the world of sensible matter is one of change about which we can have only approximate knowledge, but that behind it, so to speak, is an eternally existing realm, mirrored by concepts that we can understand clearly and mathematically?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Herbert said. “I don’t think we gain anything by imagining a realm that is different in kind from the natural world in which we live—and which we study. It is nature that is the object of our understanding, not a domain which we fill with entities which are not in our world.”

“Oh, but Herbert,” Lewis objected, “you would be the first to point out that much of which we know in science is achieved only by inference. We do not see the electrons, or”—he pointed out the window—“the Ice Age glaciers that once covered this landscape; we only infer that they must exist, or have existed.”

“That is true enough,” Herbert replied. “But there is a difference between hypothesizing entities that are part of the world you study through interactions with it and setting up a world that is apart from the natural domain. There is no route to confirmation or denial of existence in this latter case.”

“Well, surely the forms about which we are talking do interact with the natural world,” Lewis said.

“Yes, indeed they do,” Herbert agreed. “But this is just my point. We must leave them in that world, and not devise another and different one in which to put them.”

Lewis nodded, and, looking toward Martha, was quiet for a few seconds, and then said, “Martha, you wanted to look to forms and patterns for immortality. Does it seem to you that you find it among them? Some people, I know, gain comfort in the thought of their ashes being part of the roses to come in another season, but this hardly seems to be very much by way of personal survival.”

Before Martha could reply, Herbert spoke up. “I think there is more than you see in it, Lewis. The permanent forms of the atoms

are far different from the character of our own personality or our store of memories. But they assure us that we have been part of an ordered universe: that there is pattern and rationality. When we die, not all is ended, even though man himself or our very earth should disappear. For, to repeat, that of which we are made is like that which can be formed everywhere in the universe. I've not before thought of it in terms of permanent forms, but it has long seemed to me that our ultimate security is in our being not an odd phenomenon, but rather existing within the enduring, substantial pattern of the natural world." But now Herbert turned to Martha, with an, "Excuse me; I did not allow you to reply to Lewis."

Martha smoothed her hair back from where it had fallen over her cheek. "It was well to have a minute to think," she said. "I guess that I, too, feel that knowing I am a part of nature gives me assurance. Sometimes a period of being outdoors in natural surroundings brings happiness just in the fact of my existence. But I want to say, also, that I have something more specific in mind. It seems to me that there is in the continuous existence of people an immortality of which I am a part. I suppose mothers, and fathers too, feel some of this in a literal, biological way as they see their children live, but this isn't essentially what I mean. It is rather that there have been people before me and there will, I hope, be people after me; and some must be very like me, with the same kind of thoughts and feelings. Even though I will die, I can know that others will be doing what I have done—not exactly, but in a general way. So am I not immortal, in my being part of a stream of lives that goes on indefinitely? Oh, I realize that the precise 'I,' with the mole on my left arm and my memory of what it was to go to first-grade school in my Illinois town, will disintegrate away after perhaps fifty or sixty years. But since others will be living approximately as I have," and her voice stressed the "approximately," "how can I think that my death is an end of life?" She paused a second, and then went on, "Usually it is pleasurable for me to think this way, but sometimes it can even be uncomfortable, for if I am unhappy I tell myself that not even death would bring a release. Even though I, the person who is sitting here, would feel no pain, there are those who would. So, it does go both ways. There is the joy of knowing that what I do will be repeated, not in just the same way, but I think with still the pleasure and enthusiasm that I feel on a good day. But I must say the same for pain and sorrow."

Lewis broke the momentary silence that followed Martha's state-

ment. "What you say means that if we are to have death, the very last person must die. Or, maybe the one, last living thing?"

"I think," Martha answered, "that it is only with other human beings that I have the confidence of life continuing much as I have known it. But I agree, to some extent it would be so even with the other forms of life—perhaps the differences are less than we think."

Herbert now spoke again. "We become immortal, then, in the degree that we feel our ego to be bound up not with our own particular experiences, but with the lives of people everywhere. For the person for whom there is virtually only one life, his own, there can indeed be no immortality, since then his death is the end of life. I think, Martha, that what you have spontaneously felt and expressed is a theme in much ethical and religious thinking: that by regarding other people to be of importance, we increase our own share of humanity. And you have suggested that it is even a way to immortality. That idea, too, is not without suggestions in religious thought, at least in our Christian tradition."

Herbert thoughtfully turned a pencil held between thumb and forefinger of both hands, and then continued. "But it is interesting that you introduced your notion to us not on ethical grounds, but on the basis of the continuing of a pattern of life, in contrast to the impermanence of an individual organism. Of course, the appearance of new human beings, generation after generation, can hardly but suggest to us that there will continue to be other people, and gives us, I suppose, a warrant for a possibility of immortality of mankind, just as it would for any other continuing species. It does not seem clear to me, however, in what way it follows that a person's feeling of being alive should be associated with the lives of others."

"It is not quite my 'being alive,'" Martha replied, "that I was relating to awareness of my fellow human beings. What I am referring to is a direct sense that human awareness is not something that only I possess. And so it cannot be my own feelings alone that make up the goodness or badness of life—even though, I admit, I suppose that most of the time I am taking them that way. It does seem clear to me that the death that comes with an end of awareness for me is not an end of human feeling and thinking. Here, the long continuity of life that I see in recurrences of biological pattern is reassuring to me. Surely, I can say to myself, there are others who will be as I have been. Even my happiest moments will occur again and again—perhaps even in a way that is a little better, and that thought can make my aging and dying even less unpleasant to me. It is my time

now, and I want to make the most of it, but I know that what I have will go to others—if we live and care for the future as we should.”

Herbert nodded assent to Martha, and then after a second or two continued his comments. “Perhaps it is commonly only the lives in one’s immediate circle that have a sensible influence. But one can see that human life is continued largely by those with whom one has no immediate attachment or association. You observe this, Martha, and it is in accord with a feeling that lives remote from your own are human lives nonetheless. Are we speaking of a generalization beyond the immediate sympathy for those close to us; of a perception that the universality of life is a guarantee that what we individually lose in death does not take all that we love out of existence? I think we are, and we need both the natural facts about replication of life and some individual feeling of unity with other persons if any kind of conviction about immortality is at all to be warranted. But you have pointed out that both of these necessary elements can exist.”

“It is rather nice,” Lewis said, “that you have found immortality to be something that one can gain, or not, by one’s own efforts. I believe Shakespeare put it exactly: ‘Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, Which we ascribe to Heaven.’ The persisting stream of life is one with which you can identify yourself, or, you can choose to regard yourself as independent of it. We have always thought of immortality as not having to do primarily with the physical aspect of our persons. Now, Martha and Herbert, you give me an immortality that obviously is tied up with my outlook, philosophical and emotional. If I wish it, I can have it by coming to understand in a sympathetic way—even empathetic, I should say—what Martha has told us: that others have much the same life that we do. And yet, there is the appealing feature that the conviction that one might gain about immortality does not rest solely on turn of mind; for one can look to the natural world and see that human life does continue, even though there is deterioration and death.”

“Yes,” Herbert agreed, “I believe that Martha has led us to a satisfying point of view. We’ve found that by somewhat changing the concepts in terms of which immortality is usually discussed, we seem to come to a more meaningful possibility for it. You’ve often heard me say that the hard questions in science and philosophy are solved only when we find new ways of asking them. If we speak of immortality as being a matter of one’s body and soul, or both, I think we agree we quickly today must come to the result that the body perishes all too rapidly. And of the disembodied soul, well, of that we have little evidence indeed. So, there is no immortality. But now

we emphasize that mankind lives even though individual persons pass away, and that each should be able to see that much of what has been dearest to him will also be given to other lives. In this way we soften the 'never' for immortality, and change it to a 'yes, in that our life experiences go on in a generally similar way among our fellows.' "

"It is to be admitted," and Herbert smiled a little as he said this, "that many people may find the immortality that we offer to be less than hoped for. I think we should realize that even the gaining of that undeniable bit of life which comes with one's allotted years does require a concentration on one's own welfare. Especially, this seems to be true when a person is growing and forming his or her own self. This is a time when normally there is a lot of one's life ahead. Perhaps it is a fitting concomitance that the mature man or woman should have increased regard for others and see significance, not only in what happens to himself or herself, but also in the stream of other lives which, hopefully, goes on indefinitely."

Lewis stood up, and said, "There is, I think, another point to be considered. But we've been talking a long time, and there will now be coffee in the conference room. Shall we have some there, or can I go down and get something for all of us?"

"Let's walk down and each bring back a cup," Herbert answered. "Then I can pick out the kind of cookie that I want with my tea."

After a few minutes the three returned, settled in their chairs, and found a place nearby for their cups.

"What I have in mind," Lewis resumed, "is the matter of alteration in a species. Doesn't such a change, Martha, to some extent remove the basis that you see for immortality in the reassertion of life with each new generation? We know that a given species—a natural pattern for life—does not always persist unchanged, and certainly will vary, or else perish, with sufficiently strong changes in environment."

"I hadn't thought of man's becoming so different that I could no longer feel that he knew life as I do. And," Martha added, "remember, I did say that if the experiences of life were better than mine, then surely I would all the more feel that what I valued was continuing, even after my death. I hope that changes in mankind will bring life that is more intensely felt and happier than it is today. So, change could mean that the kind of immortality I have talked about becomes more attractive."

Lewis readily agreed that it could. "But," he continued, "the change might go the other way too. I think that what we know about

the past history of life on the earth does not give any guarantee that our human species will avoid catastrophe—particularly considering how thoughtlessly we are tinkering with factors of nature.”

“You as a philosopher do take a long view,” Martha replied. “I am satisfied with thinking of the people that succeed me, and the generation that comes after those, and so on for as far as I can easily envision. But even on a long time-scale I can cite the continuing of life in some form over billions of years; and now that evolution has brought forth a being so complex and intensely aware as man, I do not see why we should expect an alteration to a less able and less persistent form of life.”

“I suppose,” Lewis answered, “that the new powers of man have shaken my faith in even a short-term persistence—but still, this is not the point I want to make; anyway, you may well be right, that nature has built in enough safety factors and sense of survival to carry us through. I think my concern is with the notion of a value that you seem to give, Martha, to an enduring mankind. I can suggest, for the sake of argument, that various biological species come and go, each with its own kind of consciousness and behavior, and there is no further significance to be gained from this fact. In contrast, Martha appears distinctly to wish that human life will continue and to feel that she herself gains by its doing so. Perhaps I should say my problem is not so much, ‘Will mankind continue in existence?’ but rather, ‘What objective reason have we for wishing it to do so, beyond the lives of ourself and those close to us?’ ”

Martha had a look of shocked surprise on her face. “Can there be any question,” she asked, “about our wanting life to go on—our own and that of others? There is a goodness just in living. In fact, comparatively, what else is there that is worth anything?”

Herbert broke in at this point. “Of course, Martha is right in her emphasis on the immediate goodness of life; our feeling about it is a condition of nature, I would say, just as is the value of food to a hungry man, or, for that matter, just as is the behavior of a stone in the presence of a gravitational force. But Lewis, I believe, is now raising another question. He is asking whether or not there is any purpose in the natural life that we see, and, I suppose, he is specifically asking the question for human lives.”

Lewis said, “Yes, I will make my query that way. Suppose that we accept that the indefinite continuation of life in time—even with evolutionary changes—can be said to give each man an option for a kind of immortality. I still want to ask if any purpose is served

thereby. I hardly think it is, and immortality then becomes, I regret to say, not so meaningful after all."

Herbert raised his hand toward Lewis, moving it a bit to emphasize his point. "I think you ask too much and misconstrue the meaning of purpose. Forgive my saying so, but this is ground which I have often been over myself; for, especially when I was younger, I often worried about the purpose of 'it all'; about the meaning of life. What I gradually came to was an analysis of purpose that made my questioning seem to be without much sense. For, what do we mean by the purpose of anything other than how it functions in the operations of some larger system of which it is a part? The flywheel delivers angular momentum in the brief intervals when the motor is ineffective, the sweet scent attracts the bee which will pollinate the flower, the housewife prepares the meals so that the family may eat, and so on. In a simple machine, a part may have only one purpose, that is, one function. But a person, obviously, has many functions—in his family, his work, his community, and in respect to his own interests or goals. So, the person lives with many purposes. Of course, though, one wants to push on with the analysis. After answering, say, the question of one's role in a family, one can ask the question about the purpose of the family; and then, one goes on to the purpose of the society of men that is sustained by the family, and so on. But as one goes to the larger systems, the knowledge that one has of details of structure and operation generally becomes increasingly vague. As a result, the question about purpose becomes decreasingly meaningful. When one makes the extension to the entire universe, obviously one cannot ask its function in a larger scheme, since it encompasses all that is. Unless you are willing to specify some goal that transcends the natural world and which you can say gives a purpose to all of nature, there simply is no meaningful way to use the concept of purpose for the whole universe. And my experience has not brought me to any knowledge of a transcendent goal."

Lewis replied, "I follow what you say, and your argument seems to be valid. Yet, to me it is not very satisfying. What you have done, it seems to me, is simply to say that as we push the question of purpose further, beyond our immediate goals, we find that we know less and less about what the purposes are, or, as you say, about what their functions are in the larger domains of which they are a part. And then finally you bring me to a blank wall; there can be no ultimate purpose, because purpose no longer makes sense when we

are asking about it for the whole of all that exists. Don't we just come to what I earlier suggested: we may be part of a life that goes on indefinitely in the universe, but no discernible end is served thereby?"

"But I insist," Martha now said, "that we do find purpose in life. We don't have to set it out in a hierarchy of systems; we simply find it in what we see that we must do to live and to satisfy what we want in our lives."

Herbert spoke before Lewis said anything further. "I think," he said, "that if we look a little more closely at what I said about purpose we can both better satisfy Lewis and see the point, Martha, of what you have just said. It is for what we do, for the setting up of goals and the making of decisions, that we must know about purposes. We may know what will result from this or that action, or what will be gained by it; but we still must answer questions about whether the action has a function that we wish it to have in our total system. Sometimes the answer is not an easy one. My automobile, I know, will carry me to the lake, and in doing so its function, or purpose, is an admirable one for my life. But I know that also it functions as a source of atmospheric pollution, and this is to be deplored. So, I think questions of purpose are often definite, and certainly of first importance; but also, they may involve contradictory goals or values. Martha, for example, came in this afternoon to talk about a question of purpose: How do the effects of her staying here as a graduate student compare with the expected results of the teaching program that she is considering? But when one begins to ask questions about large units of which he is a part, it may well be that there is no longer information that allows the question to make much sense. Returning to what I said earlier, we can see that it is proper and necessary for a person to ask what role his activities have in a community, and he can see the answer, partly at least, in what are the effects of what he does. To go on and ask about the role of the community in the nation, and of the nation in the world, is likewise important. 'Is the well-being of men furthered?' we might ask. But the next broader question, 'Is man fulfilling his role in nature?' is not so clearly meaningful, although I think not without substance. We might suggest, for example, that he is not if he is so despoiling the earth that other animals are driven to extinction. But when we come to the further query, 'What is the purpose of the entire family of all living things?' we have little information that can guide us to an answer, for we do not know the function of living things in a more inclusive system. But I want to emphasize that we

have come a long way, by the time we get to this last question, from the pressing problems of decision or justification that man faces. The purposes of which Martha speaks are the immediate ones of finding ways to live, of gaining friendship and love, of building decent societies, of writing books and songs, and so on. These are things that we want to do, and we can usually see how to do them so as to fit into a pattern of somewhat consistent purposes."

Lewis was not satisfied. "I think, Herbert, you are still giving too short shrift to the larger questions. I know too that I drive my car to get where I want to go and that I keep my job to get my salary to keep my life going and so on. What I don't know, though, is why all this goes on at all. If I am in good health, and have not eaten for five hours, it is apparent that a good meal satisfies a need. It is not equally obvious that life, or the natural world generally, is satisfying a need."

Herbert replied with a slight bit of impatience. "But what I have said, Lewis, is that we see the purpose in terms of knowing the need. You see the purposes of the various things that you do in your life. To ask that same question for the entire universe is to go completely beyond our competence: we cannot possibly know the answer for that which is so incredibly complex, and perhaps even infinite."

Martha now spoke again. "I wonder," she said, "if I could put the matter this way. We are told in psychology that man is a purpose-seeking animal. This is certainly true, and it is the case that nature provides him with a great abundance of purposes. There are the obvious ones of keeping his life processes going and reproducing his kind; these he shares with many other kinds of living things. But he finds other purposes too. He makes things, he improves himself, he competes with others, he wants to play, he likes to set up social organizations. There are an amazing number of things that he wants to do. Some of these, too, are done by other animals. But man wants to meditate, to understand, to relieve suffering, to make life better for others. It is in his nature—or maybe I should say it is in nature—that he wants to do these things, all of which give him purpose. So it is in this way that he learns what is the purpose of the universe: through the goals that arise out of his natural being. I know, it is not only a matter of natural endowment; there is the just-as-necessary part from education and human culture. But I think purposes are most intensely felt, and ideals are highest, when people are in the full biological vigor of youth. Doesn't this fact show to us that natural factors and purposes are closely tied together? Nature is presenting purposes just as she is presenting strength and

health. And one last word—I don't understand why people seem to associate nature with the crude or obvious and culture with the subtle. Of course, there are the less finished aspects of life, but they are no more or less natural than are the deep unselfishness or finest understanding that that man sometimes will have. Nature shows all the purposes of the universe in giving men such varied possibilities."

Martha seemed a bit breathless after her long statement. "You have thought very well on these matters," Herbert said, "and I think I firmly endorse in general what you have said."

"Well, all right," Lewis granted. "But if these purposes are everywhere, why don't I know the answer to my question? Why has Herbert had to tell me that I cannot know anything about ultimate goals?"

"You do presumably know your own purposes, Lewis," Herbert said. "That is the important point for any person. But perhaps I was hasty in saying that one can perceive nothing about the final purposes. Surely, one cannot expect that the immediately given goals of which Martha has spoken will tell us outright of an ultimate universal goal, although I think they may lend elucidation. The purposes that develop for a man are for the individual him and not for the cosmos. Still, it may be that a metaphysical construction can lead to at least a plausible view of how life fits into the scheme of things. I say 'metaphysical,' not because I think natural science fails to tell us about nature, but because I see no way at present in which science suggests a closed, completed system of the universe: a system which itself provides a reason for there being life in it, or, also, even for there being the system itself. Possibly some day we shall find, with all the firmness of scientific knowledge, that our universe is a system that explains its own self. But if we do, I daresay it will be science that is much more cognizant than at present of the total experiences of mankind. Until that day comes, if it does, in order to do the best we can we must go to metaphysical constructions. You well know that I tend to be critical of metaphysical speculation—but I recognize, too, the validity of the philosopher's assertion that we can hardly live without assuming some basic metaphysics."

"You mean," Martha asked, "that we might believe a religious justification for why there is a universe?"

"Yes," Herbert answered, "it may well be in religious faith that we find the answer to the ultimate question that Lewis asks. Of course, if so, then the answer is buttressed with all the sense of certainty and enrichment that is characteristic of religious feeling. Or, for some there may be an answer in a sophisticated metaphysical construction,

as given in a philosophical system. And a skeptic's opinion that there is no meaning to be found is itself a kind of metaphysical position."

"In what party do you put yourself?" Lewis asked of Herbert. "I suppose the last," he added.

"No, Lewis, I would not want to say 'no meaning is to be found.' I have not myself come upon any insight that is very satisfactory to me; but, as I said, I would hope that as we learn more we might see how to ask the question in such a way that we can answer it." Herbert paused a bit, and then continued. "Returning to my earlier emphasis, I would say that I have come to think that the question is important, but not so very important. It is one for consideration, for dispassionate investigation, but I think it is not one that affects people's well-being as much as they might sometimes think. It is a sense of knowing your own purposes that is important—the doing of things that fit in with what you basically are and want to be. I think this means one must have some idea of how one relates to the larger pattern, but not that one must know an explicit final goal for mankind. From time to time one still may ask, 'What is the ultimate purpose?' but I don't think happy and effective living depends on the answer."

"I have noticed," Martha said, "that when my friends are most disconsolate about the state of the world, and perhaps complaining about its having no meaning and no sense, that it is often their personal affairs that are actually troubling them."

"That is right," Herbert agreed. "Surely we want to say that affairs of the world may genuinely worry us, for they are part of our individual affairs too. But the college sophomore who believes he has discovered that life is without meaning is almost certainly suffering from uncertainty about what purpose he personally has in life; or perhaps he has a bad conscience over what he should be doing about his goals."

Lewis now spoke up with the liveliness that comes with a new approach. "I see what I think is a helpful analogy. You probably know that experiments have been carried out on human subjects in which they are isolated from all external stimuli of any kind. They might be kept in a bare room, absolutely insulated from all sound and physically restrained, with nothing whatsoever to occupy themselves in mind or body. The result is that in a few hours they actually begin to have symptoms of abnormality: hallucinations, vertigo, general malaise. Man obviously is an organism that is accustomed to living with a flow of incoming sensations, and, except when asleep,

to be responding to these as well as keeping busy on present activities. Now, similarly, we often say that it is when persons do not have enough to do that they complain of there not being purpose in life. Thus, we put middle-aged people in virtually perfect physical security in a comfortable suburb, give them money to live on, with next to no work to do, and, finally, with no strong interest built up from youth in any community, intellectual, or other achievement. What happens? They are like those strapped to a pallet in the soundless box; no purposes arise in the rounds of their lives, and they begin in a sickly way to ask questions about the meaning of life. In fact, I don't suppose I should point a finger only to the affluent suburbs: I have felt the disease here in the university too."

Herbert smiled at Lewis's last comment. "I suppose," he said, "that an intense preoccupation with questions of purpose quite likely may indicate a state of less than perfect health."

"I would say so," Martha offered, "when there is so much to be done."

Lewis gave Martha an approving look. "It is fine that you feel that way. But," he asked, "have you no fear that striving for the perfect society will not simply bring everyone to the boredom of a life that exerts no pressures and sets no demands?"

Martha answered with another question. "We are far from that society—how can one think of *its* problems, when there is everywhere so much that is wrong with what we have?"

"I guess it's a matter of what we choose to see and emphasize," Lewis replied. "Even in the troubled United States of today there are large numbers of people for whom the rooms in which they live are not letting in much noise."

"Lewis's problem is not a trivial one," Herbert said firmly. "Perhaps, in a way, it is the problem of civilization. How do you channel activity once the basic life problems have been solved? Martha gave us part of the answer when she indicated that each person must look to his own nature. I think it hardly needs saying that we can trust to the richness of the world that there will be no shortage of worthwhile activities. We think at once of the problems of man's living with himself and other men. Then—and this is not unrelated—there is the continuing exploration of the natural universe, plus all the problems of our learning to live in it without reducing its natural qualities. And I've not mentioned the arts of living, nor art and philosophy and religion."

"We know, though," Martha said, "that people need help in letting interests take hold of them and directing their lives toward

activities that are meaningful. I think that things like curiosity, and the desire to improve one's self, and even to love and to be helpful, are latent in the natural person. And the whole natural world is here as the playground. But people get blanketed off, somehow, from the activities that they really want and that can help them. They get caught into meaningless webs of little surface activities or pleasures, some of which are not very good for them."

"I would think, Martha," Herbert said, "that the role of nurture and education is largely to help people grow into the fullness of living that comes with the other kinds of activities, those that are deeply meaningful."

"I agree heartily," Lewis concurred. "I am almost uncomfortable, though, with so much talk about purpose and doing. Aren't you ever going to allow people just to do nothing?"

"Yes," Herbert replied, "we want occasions for that too: simply to enjoy and to do nothing more. But our topic of discussion has been purpose."

"And how," asked Martha, "are we to relate that to immortality?"

"Well," Herbert said, "I think that we have had an instructive conversation. We have seen that both immortality and purpose in a sense are natural properties of our world. The succession of lives gives one, and the natural desires that men have give us the other. Yet, we have also seen that it is in one's choice to take on a mantle of immortality or to be enlivened by purpose."

"It is appealing that we have those options," Lewis said. "It is still true, however, that men die, and that some lives seem to be wasted."

"Let us take it," Herbert answered to Lewis, "that we are pleased that man is allowed the flexibility that nature does give to him. Think how different we are from a stone in the field, or from a lower animal whose course is virtually set at birth."

At this point Martha jumped up. "You must excuse me," she said. "It is my turn to shop, and unless I get to the supermarket soon there will be no dinner for four girls at our apartment tonight."

It is time too for me to go home," said Herbert, looking out of the window and noticing that the sunshine on the leaves was showing the bit of gold of late afternoon.

"It is satisfying, I suppose, for you two to have your domestic concerns," Lewis said, "but I shall have a long cool drink at the Faculty Club before dinner."

"I'm glad you came in, Martha," Herbert said to her as she walked toward the door. "We rather wandered from your original question, and probably did not help you very much."

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“But it’s been a wonderful afternoon, talking as we have,” Martha replied. “And I think my problem was quite well solved, even before I came in.”

Martha exchanged good-byes with Herbert and Lewis, and left the room. The two men chatted briefly, commenting on how much Martha had stimulated their thinking. Then Lewis also left. Herbert ordered his desk top somewhat, and then he too left his office, looking forward to reviewing the conversation in his mind as he walked home.