***Jonah, Alienation, and the Meaning of Life***

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*Exposition of the Problem*

The story of Jonah is well-known. It may therefore suffice to recall just a brief outline of the story: God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh to let the people know that their city will be destroyed if they do not change their wicked ways. However, Jonah runs away from God and attempts to sail to Tarshish. In a terrifying storm, the frightened sailors blame him for the danger the ship is in and throw him overboard. Jonah is swallowed by a big fish. In its belly**,** Jonah spends three days in ever deepening despair. When he reaches rock bottom and is almost dead, he totally commits himself to God, thanks him, and vows to fulfill his wishes for him. The big fish vomits Jonah out, and he now goes to the city of Nineveh shouting**,** "Forty more days, and Nineveh will be destroyed!" The people of Nineveh believe him and repent. God spares the city. Now Jonah is disappointed, even though he has just proved to be a powerful prophet who changed the ways of a large city with a single sentence. He shelters outside the city and God creates a plant that provides shade for Jonah. Then God lets the plant wither and Jonah is lamenting his plight and, frustrated that God did not destroy the city, wishes to die. He does not understand God's ways and why God had pity on Nineveh. As near as he had come to God in the belly of the whale, that is now how distant God again appears.”

Among Christians, the message of book of Jonah is often taken to be that of a God who wishes to save everyone, not just the Israelites. Jonah is portrayed as stubborn, obstinate, disobedient, emotionally unstable, and resentful. The gentiles, however, are spiritually so sensitive that a mere five words in Hebrew by Jonah suffice to prompt complete repentance. The need for repentance is seen as the central spiritual lesson of the book. The messenger who calls for repentance may be weak, unimpressive, and imperfect, but what really counts is the answer to this call.

In what follows we do not wish to follow this common "soteriological" reading of the book of Jonah. We wish to have a closer look at the inner psychological development of Jonah himself and ask the philosophical question whether this process in Jonah illuminatesthe search for meaning in human existence.[[1]](#footnote-1) One may ask whether Jonah is the best biblical text for this undertaking. Should we not rather look at Ecclesiastes or even Job? The figure of Jonah is too weak, too broken and torn to serve as a role model in the search for meaning. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel wrestles with the meaning of Jonah’s story in his "Five Biblical Portraits".[[2]](#footnote-2) He characterizes Jonah as "unhappy, unlucky, always," one "with an obvious taste for failure and tragedy," and as "a displaced person, living in an internal exile. The quintessential anti-hero, he takes no initiative." How could this unhappy character tell us something about the meaning of life? We will argue that he has a lot to offer in this very respect, and we will try to show this in what follows.

*Jonah the Prodigal Son*

However, it is obvious that it is almost impossible to say anything radically new about the biblical figure of Jonah. Over the centuries, many great thinkers have explored nearly all aspects of this story. A recent book by Rabbi Steven Bob bears the title: "Jonah and the Meaning of Our Lives."[[3]](#footnote-3) So, we\* are not pretending to say something altogether new. We rather wish to contribute to a well-established interpretative tradition which reads the Jonah story somewhat parallel to the story of the "Prodigal Son" in Luke 15, even though the parallel is only partial since Jonah seems to be lapsing back into his former self after having been united with the God. Ray Lubeck distinguishes seven interpretative models of the Jonah character (we changed the names of the models slightly).[[4]](#footnote-4)

(1) *Prodigal Son / Pinocchio*: Jonah's idol was self-centeredness. But he could not find meaning by following his ego-related impulses but rather by surrendering his soul to God.

(2) *Psychotic / Neurotic*: Jonah is seen as a psychologically torn, incongruent and restless character. The book is read in psychological terms. Jonah is portrayed as a mentally disturbed individual. He does not achieve authentic self-integration, and the reader can learn from this failure.

(3) *Prometheus*: Jonah is a figure who displays a tragic hubris. He remains true to himself in the face of an over-demanding God. Jonah deserves our respect because he courageously rebels against Divine demands.

(4) *Fall-Guy*: Jonah is a victim of a "set-up" by God. God asks Jonah to perform a prophetic act in Nineveh. But God double-crosses Jonah by not fulfilling the prophecy, thus making him a "lying prophet". The story is teaching the reader the lesson that God is free to do as He pleases and surpasses all human understanding.

(5) *Patriot*: Jonah is a zealous nationalist. He refuses to save the Ninevites which, after all, pose a threat to Israel's security.

(6) *Becoming a Prophet*: Jonah is not yet a good prophet at the beginning of the story. Jonah is an imperfect and suffering prophet who even refuses to take on the role of prophet. In the process of the story, he gradually internalizes the role of a prophet.

(7) *Reluctant Missionary*: Jonah's story is read as a vocation story of a reluctant missionary. Many ministers, priests and missionaries experience their vocation or calling as something external that conflicts with their immediate desires. Gradually they come to learn that running away from the recurring vocation does not bring peace and freedom.

Obviously, as a narrative, the text does not come with a preferred interpretation. There is no hidden objective meaning that awaits being unveiled by us. The meaning of the text is a product of the dialogue of author and reader, mediated by millennia of interpretative tradition and the interpretative creativity of the reader.

Knowing very well that, in principle, our interpretation stands on no firmer ground than many other alternatives, we will nevertheless argue that the first interpretation (Prodigal Son / Pinocchio) is a very promising when it comes to question whether Jonah's life was meaningful. Jonah does indeed find meaning by surrendering to God. We will present a psychological version of this interpretation. Again, this general idea is not new. In his "Rethinking Jonah - The Dynamics of Surrender**,**" James Bull has tried a reading of Jonah along similar psychological lines.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, the connection to the question of the meaning of life and the specific philosophical and psychological resources used in the following analysis will guarantee, we hope, a genuine and independent interpretation of this fascinating narrative.

Referring to another biblical narrative, the story of the "Prodigal Son", as a means of interpretation to unlock the message of the book of Jonah provokes the hermeneutical danger of importing a Christian narrative into the pre-Christian book of Jonah. Timothy Keller's "The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God's Mercy" seems to be doing just this.[[6]](#footnote-6) While we will provide a theistic interpretation, we will refrain from giving the book of Jonah a specifically Christian reading.

We will also not provide an exegesis of the relevant passages in the book of Jonah, because we are defending a philosophical thesis on the meaning of life, which is inspired, not just illustrated, by a biblical narrative. The story of Jonah and God is a narrative about the complex and evolving second-personal (as in I-you) relationship between the prophet and God. Assuming that such inter-personal relationships are a source of genuine knowledge, second-personal knowledge, the task of the philosophical interpreter of the book is to translate some of this interpersonally acquired knowledge into a third-personal philosophical thesis.

*Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*

One philosophical insight the book conveys is that, in the final analysis, no merely subjectivist criterion of a meaningful life can suffice if one wants to claim that Jonah's life is meaningful. Jonah is the least motivated of all the prophets. He finds no positive affect in himself that is associated with the existence of a prophet. He does not wish to be a prophet. He seems to be torn, internally divided, unhappy, and somewhat neurotic. He is nevertheless an astonishingly successful prophet. Some interpreters claim that Jonah is a complete failure as a prophet. This is not true. On the contrary, he is a successful prophet, but he subjectively does not wholeheartedly identify with the existence of a prophet. He seems alienated: a good prophet without really wanting to be one.

If living a meaningful life means doing what one desires wholeheartedly, then Jonah does not live a meaningful life. Does Jonah thus live an alienated life deprived of meaning? No, his life becomes objectively meaningful by the very fact that he saved Nineveh. How much more meaningful could a human life become? What greater accomplishment could be imagined than saving a city of 120,000 souls from certain destruction? But Jonah does - for the most part of the narrative - not achieve an inner state of inner peace or eudaimonia. He does not experience his life as meaningful, rather he experiences alienation, futility, and frustration.

In the philosophical debate about the meaning of life, a common distinction is that between subjectivism and objectivism. Objectivism locates the meaning of life in certain conditions of the world. In a just world, for example, life has more meaning than in an unjust world. Thus, the realized idea of justice is objectively constitutive of meaning because the idea itself is not something purely subjective. Also, the life of a person who pursues justice becomes objectively meaningful to the extent that justice is located outside the internal mental states of the person. The good, the true, and the beautiful are often seen as something inherently worthwhile and meaningful, and as such not agent-relative. Owen Flanagan has argued that finding objective meaning in a material world is the "really hard problem" of naturalism, because naturalism has a really hard time coming up with non-subjective conceptions of the true, the good, and the beautiful.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Subjectivism, on the other hand, allows the meaning of life to vary from person to person, depending on the attitudes of the individual. When Harry Frankfurt speaks of caring and love as the criteria by which the meaning of life is measured, then this is clearly a form of subjectivism.[[8]](#footnote-8) But subjectivism is often counterintuitive. For someone whose whole caring and love is simply reserved for his record collection, this form of "collector's existence" can become the meaning of his life. For someone whose entire care and love is exclusively for his family, it can make sense and be meaningful to ruthlessly subordinate the interests of other people to the interests of their own family. To most external observers, however, both life plans would objectively appear to make only limited sense. Care and love, states of one's own psyche, cannot guarantee that a life is meaningful in the full sense.

We have already stated that Jonah's life has objective meaning because he saved the city of Nineveh. Does his life have subjective meaning as well? Jonah lacks motivation to be a prophet. He does not care deeply about the existence of a prophet. If motivation is based on subjective needs, and meaning is coupled to motivation, then meaning itself becomes something subjective, and then Jonah's life is lacking meaning. Jonah's life is objectively meaningful but subjectively void of meaning. Our analysis could end right here, if the relationship between the objective and the subjective was not more complex and intricate than this simple dichotomy would suggest. The objective can be subjectively relevant if it is not only avowed but internalized and appropriated. But does Jonah really internalize and appropriate the life of a prophet? Or does he rather surrender to God without wholeheartedly caring for the existence of a prophet? And would that not amount to an act of self-annihilation?

One might answer this question by invoking a spiritual paradox: A person who is searching for meaning with little success, can find meaning in life at the very moment when she no longer places herself at the center, or in other words "loses" herself. If one pursues a cause greater than oneself only because one has an inner need to do so, then one is not yet concerned in a pure form with the cause itself. To do something even if there is little or nothing in it for my own well-being, can be a very meaningful experience. There is a form of moral motivation that can work only when one gives oneself completely to something that is more than oneself. No one else has developed this thought more than Viktor Frankl to whom we will return later. First, we wish to present some crucial conceptual distinction**s** that will be needed in the psychological reading of the narrative.

*The Psychology of Self-Determination*

In contemporary psychology we find the useful distinction between "external regulation", "introjected regulation", "integrated regulation" and "intrinsic regulation".[[9]](#footnote-9) In the case of external regulation there is a complete disconnect between the subject's desire and the goal. The goal is only pursued because an external authority will react with reward or punishment. The agent is alienated because she acts only to please the authority. A more difficult case arises if some**one** introjects a goal which is not wholeheartedly desired, but nevertheless intellectually valued. We can speak of "self-infiltration" in these cases.[[10]](#footnote-10) One might pursue a life goal that one accepts as good without deeply desiring it. This is a more subtle form of alienation because the goal is accepted and understood as good but there is no or little corresponding desire. Even if the precious resource of will-power is used as assistance, the goal is still not integrated in the self. A third case arise**s** if a goal is congruent with the self. We speak of "integrated regulation". Here there is no alienation because pursuing this goal is supported by the deepest desires of the heart. Jonah’s motivation as prophet does not easily fit any of these categories. He is not simply acting because he fears Divine punishment (external regulation). He is also not self-infiltrating the Divine will, accepting the Divine command even though he deep down does not want to fulfill it (introjected regulation). Finally, he is also not wholeheartedly committed to fulfilling the Divine will because he does not experience the congruence of the Divine will with his deepest desires (integrated regulation). Up to the very end of the narrative he is struggling with God.

Then why does he even go to Nineveh? Because, in the decisive moment of the narrative, if but for a moment, he stops worrying about himself and asks only what is the objective good that he should pursue, independently of whether he wants it or not. He only asks what God wants of him, forgetting about himself. In these rare moments in life when we successfully do this, we get "lost" in the intrinsic value of the task, independently of whether the task is supported by our actual desires of the heart. We do something because of its goodness, truth or beauty, and literally lose ourselves in this pursuit. This is intrinsic regulation because the value of the action is intrinsic to itself. Is Jonah in the central passage of the narrative finding meaning by forgetting, at least temporarily about himself? This is the question we wish to pursue further.

*Internalism and Externalism of Moral Motivation*

In the philosophical debate on moral motivation, the central distinction is that between internalism and externalism. This is the question whether moral beliefs motivate on their own (internalism) or only in conjunction with some conative state like a desire (externalism). In the light of the distinctions made above, we can now distinguish two kinds of externalism. An agent might do something because she judges it as good and at the same time feels alienated in the pursuit of this good due to the lack of corresponding desire (introjected regulation). This is clearly a case of internalism of motivation in the philosophical sense but an imperfect one. The moral judgement has motivational power. But motivation is weak in this case because there is an inner conflict, a self-infiltration with something that is alien to the person. The strength of motivation will accordingly increase if the valued action is also wholeheartedly desired (integrated regulation). There is another case of internalism, however, where the action is pursued because of its goodness and the whole psyche, the self, is "lost" in the pursuit of this goodness (intrinsic regulation). There is no alienation, not because the good is necessarily integrated in the actual self, but because the agent is absorbed into the good, unifies with the good. Even in cases where the good in question is not yet integrated into the self, an agent might experience these rare moments of being completely lost in an endeavor because it is good in itself. This is an "ecstatic" state. Afterwards it might well happen to a person, if the self is not yet fully integrated with the relevant good, that she lapses back into internal division and conflict. This is the key intuition that we will later apply to the narrative of Jonah.

These different states of moral motivation relate to the experience of meaning. We will experience an action as meaningful when we are acting by introjected, integrated or intrinsic regulation. The difference is a matter of degree, where both integrated regulation (doing something because it corresponds to the deepest desires of the heart) and intrinsic regulation (doing something for its own sake) provide a strong experience of meaningfulness. A painter might paint a certain work of art because she expects a reward (external regulation), or because she accepts the advice of her art teacher (introjected regulation), or because she expresses her deepest self (integrated regulation), or finally because she gets lost in beauty and only expresses beauty itself (intrinsic regulation) with no regard to herself.

The case of integrated regulation has received much philosophical attention. Living a life in a state of such integration provides meaning in the subjective sense described above. The goal that is considered meaningful is pursued because it meets the deepest needs of the heart. In the sense of Harry Frankfurt: I do what I really care about. In contrast, Viktor Frankl has argued that the search for meaning in life is fulfilled when an activity is not primarily experienced as meaningful because it corresponds to one's own inner needs, but because the activity is considered and experienced as meaningful in itself.[[11]](#footnote-11) With these distinctions in mind we can now take a closer look at the Book of Jonah and how the prophet is portrayed in it.

*Jonah, the Unlikely Prophet*

The book of Jonah addresses the question of meaning, exactly because he is portrayed as a depressed person, he is even pre-suicidal, he is on a downward spiral, marked by the word “going down” at key passages in the book, culminating in being eaten alive by a monstrous animal. He clearly expresses that life seems meaningless to him and that he would rather be dead than alive. Escape from the current situation, running away, andbeing discontent are key features of his existence. He radiates a sense of alienation, of not being at home in the circumstances he lives in, even at the very end of the narrative when he wishes to die under the blistering sun. This is very much a situation of many contemporaries who experience frustration in their search for meaning. They can thus relate to this literary figure because Jonah expresses the alienation from God, the sense of absurdity that they experience themselves. Alan Cooper has made the argument that the book’s literary reversals and subversions of motifs and tropes serve to critique and deny the superficial notions of meaning found in common sense.[[12]](#footnote-12) In this interpretation, Jonah is an early existentialist, unveiling the absurdity of human existence.

What makes Jonah’s case so interesting is that in this case it is not the demands of society that lead to the experience of alienation. In existentialism, it is usually the demands of society that lead to an alienated life. With Jonah it seems that the Divine demands on him lead to an alienated life. His relationship with God seems to be the source of his troubles and finally the despair in his life. At first glance, his situation seems to be the radical opposite of what Kierkegaard’s had argued for. According to Kierkegaard, man can reach an authentic unalienated life only through faith, i.e. through a relation to God.[[13]](#footnote-13) Jonah’s alienation, however, at least partly originates from his relationship to God. Jonah is a case of Sartre’s notion of "mauvaise foi" or "bad faith". This occurs when a person is trying to receive meaning from the outside, from someone else, without being able to freely consent to it. Inauthenticity, "bad faith" or "mauvaise foi", happens if a person is not trying to create meaning from scratch out of their own “nothingness” but allowing themselves to be determined by a false or imaginary foundation outside of themselves.[[14]](#footnote-14) Above we had used the term "self-infiltration" for this phenomenon.

As such, Jonah's misery is grounded in his inability to make his own free decisions wholeheartedly. He is feeling compelled to follow something outside of himself, to follow God’s demands to give his life meaning. But he does not want this, and he even tries to escape from it. Being torn in this way between his tendency for freedom and the submission to an alien outside force is leading to a life in bad faith, the feeling of leading a meaningless life. So, for Sartre, it is no wonder that Jonah leads a frustrated, meaningless life in despair. By giving the voice of God power over him, he forgoes the opportunity to live his own life, because even in his fleeing from God, he is still dependent on God.

Therefore, from an atheistic view, Jonah’s life makes little sense. It thus seems that the best way to understand Jonah’s life as meaningful is to resort – against atheist existentialism – to a theory of meaning that values religious experience. Religious thinkers have argued that human life becomes meaningful exactly through and with God. Only in and with God can human existence take on ultimate, indestructible meaning. Of course, some limited meaning is possible without God, but ultimate meaning can only be found in God. Paraphrasing St. Augustine: Our life is meaningless until we find meaning in God. God greatly enhances the meaning in our lives, even if some localized meaning would be possible in a world without God. This is a relational account of meaning that directly contradicts Sartre's emphasis on self-made meaning. God is necessary, not for any meaning whatsoever, but rather for an ultimate meaning. Human thirst for meaning cannot be quenched by earthly springs alone. Only God can give human life, as Richard Swinburne puts it, "a cosmic significance", because a particular human life is rendered meaningful by its inclusion in God's grand plan for all of creation.[[15]](#footnote-15) Only God can thus satisfy the deepest desires of the human heart which transcend the contingency of temporal existence and long for significance *sub specie aeternitatis*.[[16]](#footnote-16)

But even within this theistic interpretation of the meaning of life, Jonah’s life seems to lack meaning. God’s plan does not seem to give meaning to Jonah’s life from Jonah’s perspective. Jonah is trying to run away from God, and even after he consented to God’s plan and spoke as a prophet in Nineveh, Jonah gets angry and frustrated because God’s actions do not make sense to him. Jonah’s plans and God’s plans are not in alignment. Claiming that this discrepancy arises only at the level of surface desires and not at the level of the deepest desires at the heart, does not help much, if Jonah is not aware, at least at some point in the story, that his deepest desires are in accordance with God’s plan for him. And in not being aware of this, he remains in a state of alienation and despair. Can a life be called a "meaningful life" if the person living it is not aware of its meaning? The objectivist would answer in the affirmative. Jonah's life is meaningful even if he is not aware of this. But most people strive for at least some subjective experience of meaning. At the end we will revisit the question whether the relation to God bestows meaning to Jonah’s life in a way that is not entirely objective but is rather rooted in a moment of a deep inter-personal relationship with God that he expresses in his prayer in the belly of the fish. We will, however, begin with an exploration of the question whether Jonah’s life can be deemed meaningful by the standard account of a meaningful life.

*Why Jonah's life is not Meaningful*

The story of Jonah resembles the story of the prodigal son because Jonah first flees God and then, after his flight ends catastrophically, returns obediently to God and does what God asks him to do. However, he does not live in a harmonious relationship with God after he has returned to God. The relationship remains a troubled one because the will of God and Jonah's desires still do not fully match. The story thus does not follow the typical structure of “The Hero's Journey", where the hero is called on an adventure, is victorious in a decisive crisis, and returns completely transformed.[[17]](#footnote-17) The transformation is partial at best. The interpretation of the Jonah narrative within the framework of Jungian psychoanalysis encounters the same problem.[[18]](#footnote-18) If the belly of the whale is an archetype of death, where Jonah loses his old persona, only to be resurrected and catapulted back into the world with a new persona, then we would expect a major psychological change in Jonah after this decisive experience. This does not happen, and in this regard, Jonah is probably not like the prodigal son. What happened in the belly of the "big fish", as the original Hebrew calls the animal that swallowed Jonah? The experience in the fish is the turning point, where Jonah's flight from God comes to an end. The whole narrative can thus be divided in two major parts accordingly: (1) Jonah fleeing from God until the turning point in the belly of the fish, and (2) Jonah fulfilling his mission from God. The end of the first part is found in chapter 2. In the moment in which Jonah is "fainting away" in the big fish he "remembered the Lord", and experiences that "my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple." In psychological terms: the dying of his ego opens the door of his psyche through which God can enter. But does this make sense? Can we really come up with an account of meaning in psychological terms in the case of Jonah? Or is he simply a fragmented, neurotic individual so that only the austere objectivist account of meaning does apply to him? He saved Nineveh and that is all that confers meaning upon his life. To further explore this question, we must probe even more deeply into the psychological and philosophical accounts of the meaning of life.

*Jonah and Theories of Meaning*

We will have another look at subjectivist approaches in psychology and philosophy. As pointed out above, they define a meaningful life as one in which certain subjective mental states are achieved. It is the experience of being in these particular mental states that makes life meaningful. Intra-psychic harmony will lead to an eudaemonic state that gives life meaning in this subjectivist sense. In traditional behaviorist and Freudian psychology this state was portrayed as a homeostasis or equilibrium. When the basic and the more refined needs are fulfilled, then a formerly restless mind can enjoy a peaceful state. At least for a while, until this harmonious state of equilibrium is disturbed by new unfulfilled desires. The basic idea was that life was experienced as meaningful when certain desires could be fully satisfied for some time. The resulting state of happiness and joyful energy was seen as indicator of someone living a meaningful life.

In humanistic psychology and later in positive psychology the limitations of this model became obvious. Instead of desires that could be satisfied in a simple model of homeostasis, it was assumed that there are basic needs that can never be fully satisfied. Self-realization means that a person can gradually actualize these basic needs ever more profoundly and thus become more fully human, but this process never reaches an equilibrium. It is a never-ending process of self-realization. Famously, in Maslow's pyramid the highest needs were those for self-realization and transcendence.[[19]](#footnote-19) Later with McClelland and then Ryan and Deci three basic needs were identified: the power or autonomy need, the competence need, and the affiliation need.[[20]](#footnote-20) For a person to lead a subjectively meaningful life these basic needs would have to be fulfilled. Only then does she engage in what she really cares about at a subconscious level. The individual can never reach a state of equilibrium or satisfaction. Nevertheless, experiences of self-congruence and successful self-realization can be achieved. According to this subjectivist account, a meaningful life is a life that is experienced as mental well-being which results from an inner harmony between the deep desires and the actual activities. To be fair, one has to acknowledge that psychology did not stay entirely in the subjectivist camp. Recently, the account sketched above was augmented by referring to the Aristotelian notion of “eudaimonia”, not only as a state of inner harmony but also as a virtuous life realizing certain objective values. Here psychology leaves the realm of subjective accounts of meaning and ventures into the realm of objectivist theories of a meaningful life.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Let us stay with the internalist picture for a while. In philosophy the internalist picture is exemplified by Harry Frankfurt’s account of “caring”. A meaningful life is achieved if we get to do what we really care about. Meaning is a function of those goals a person deeply and wholeheartedly cares about. The meaningful life is thus also the authentic life where internal caring and external behavior are in harmony. The person is true to herself.[[22]](#footnote-22) If our life is shaped by activities we find frustrating, worthless or plain boring, then life is experienced as void of meaning and significance. How does Jonah fit into this picture?

As argued above, Jonah does, for the most part, not experience meaning in this subjective sense. This can be shown by a quick glance at the three basic needs acknowledged by contemporary psychology.

(1) *The need for power/autonomy*: Does Jonah feel in charge and control? Is he autonomous and independent of control by others? It does not seem so. He is trying to flee from God, he is being thrown out of the boat, he has no power of the fate of the Ninevites … his whole life seems to be in the hands of others.

(2) *The need for competence*: Being good at something leads to an experience of significance and meaning. Jonah might be objectively a successful prophet, but he does not seem to think that he is good at anything. The narrative portrays him as such a hapless character that some interpreters saw the book of Jonah as a parody of prophecy. Jonah is making a fool of himself.[[23]](#footnote-23)

(3) *The need for affiliation or connectedness*: Jonah is in dialogue with God. But at least prima facie it is hard to see how this relationship is a fulfilling one. Jonah does not experience that he is integrated into a purpose that is larger than his ego. He is trying to avoid God and he is thus also trying to avoid a greater purpose in his life. Jonah is fleeing from God, and in the storm on the boat the seamen are praying to Jonah’s God, but not Jonah. After he went to Nineveh, he is angry at God for not punishing the Ninevites and for letting him look, from his perspective, like a failed prophet. At the very end of the narrative, he is still not satisfied with his situation, he is angry with God for killing the plant that provided protection from the sun. He experiences his entire life as worthless. Jonah never reached an inner state of joy and fulfillment that would be necessary for a subjectivist account of a meaningful life, philosophical or psychological.

So, we are left with the question whether we can find meaning in Jonah's life on an objectivist account of meaning. Objectivism claims that obtaining the object of some subjective need or desire is not necessary for meaningfulness. And we had already seen that the conversion of the people of Nineveh is an objective good achieved by Jonah. There is meaning in his life that is not constituted by being the object of his attitudes. Convincing Nineveh to repent and live a more moral life has led to the realization of something objectively good. So even though he never wanted to realize this objective good and never integrated it into his own self, it was nevertheless realized by him. This austere form of objectivism of meaning is somewhat unsatisfying. Should we really call the life of a person meaningful, even if she never wished to realize the good that made it meaningful? Most objectivist accounts of the philosophical meaning of life have stressed that meaning in its full sense is only achieved when the subjective and the objective aspect of meaning come together, or as Susan Wolf has put it: “meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Is there really no attraction in Jonah that leads him to fulfill God's will and preach to the people of Nineveh? If we could detect at least some subjective attraction in him, then we could speak, in combination with the objective good he realized, of an objectively meaningful life in this full sense.

At this point we can now make use of the psychological distinctions introduced above: external regulation, introjected regulation, integrated regulation and intrinsic regulation. It is obvious that Jonah lacks integrated regulation. As prophet he is pursuing goals that are not integrated with his desires. He is lacking wholeheartedness. At best his regulation is introjected. In the second half of the book, after the experience in the fish, he has somehow accepted God's will for him. In this limited sense there is a relatedness of objective meaning and subjective appropriation in his life. But division between his desires and God's will soon reappear. His moral motivation is internal to the moral judgement to obey God itself. But as pointed out above, this would only amount to a rather weak form of internalist moral motivation, because Jonah remains ultimately internally divided, torn between his desires and God's plans. The objective good of "fear of the Lord" in the sense of putting his trust in God has not taken a firm hold in Jonah' soul. There is a significant difference between judging something as good and wholeheartedly wishing to realize this good. The objective good is only introjected, intellectually swallowed but not digested in the depths of the psyche.

But what about intrinsic regulation? As seen above, this means that someone is totally absorbed by a good, so that their desires are no longer relevant. They do what is good entirely for its own sake. The good is realized for its own sake. This does not mean that it is subjectively *desired* for its own sake or subjectively *believed* it to be a good choice: The good is realized just because it is inherently good, without any reference to desires and beliefs. Traditionally the morally good, the true and the beautiful were seen as objective goods that are valuable in themselves, even if one does not really care about them. But did Jonah realize the good, the true, and the beautiful in such a selfless manner? Again: Convincing the people of Nineveh to repent has led to the realization of something morally good. But Jonah did not see it that way. His reaction to the conversion of Nineveh is anger. He just wanted to predict that Nineveh will be destroyed in forty days. He did not even wish to save Nineveh. What about the true? Was Jonah a man of truth, was he a voice of truthfulness in an age of deception? His prophecy comprises a mere five words in Hebrew. He was not a great philosopher or theologian unmasking the lies of his time. Then what about the beautiful? Did Jonah create beauty? His prophetic speech has no literary value. There is no creative artistic achievement here. Again, as a prophetic author or speaker Jonah is more a parody of a prophet than a real prophet. So, Jonah does not seem to be moved by objective values, neither halfheartedly, nor wholeheartedly, nor by realizing these values simply for their own sake with no regard for his conflicting heart's desires.

It seems hopeless to find meaning in Jonah’s life by the standards of any accepted psychological or philosophical account of meaning, except for the objective fact that he involuntarily saved the people of Nineveh. We seem to have arrived at an insurmountable impasse. We have argued that even within a theistic interpretation of meaning, Jonah’s life seems to lack meaning. God’s plan does not give meaning to Jonah’s life from Jonah’s perspective. And in not being aware of any meaning, he remains in a state of alienation and despair. How can a life be called meaningful in the full sense if the person living it, is not aware of its meaning?

In the following we wish to argue that at least once Jonah was consciously handing himself over to the supreme good, to God himself: while he was in his deepest despair in the belly of the whale. He did not do this because he desired or wanted it to happen. For once in his life, he was answering God's call for God's sake, and for God alone. For once his desires were not clouding his view of the Divine. There was internal conflict in him because he "lost" himself and with that all his desires: He became completely immersed in the goodness of the Divine. In the remainder of our argument, much will depend on this possibility of this kind of kenosis, self-emptying, and whether it happened at this crucial moment in Jonah’s life.

*A Kenotic Theory of Meaning*

In this specific context "kenosis" is understood as the self-emptying of a creature to make room for God's presence. To develop this thought, we will refer again to one of the most significant books ever written on the meaning of life. Viktor Frankl’s “Man’s Search for Meaning”.[[25]](#footnote-25) It has sold 16 million copies in 24 languages. It certainly touched on something important, an insight that helped many people, even the likes of Jonah, to find meaning in their life. Reporting from his experiences in Auschwitz, he analyzes the situation of persons who reject all supportive arguments because they deem their situation to be hopeless. The parallel to Jonah in the belly of the whale is obvious. Their attitude to life is: “I have nothing to expect from life anymore”. Frankl encountered this often in Auschwitz and noticed only a radical change of perspective was helpful in this situation:

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We need to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who are being questioned by life – daily and hourly. … these tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from man to man, and from moment to moment. (103-104).

This must be seen in the context of what Frankl called his deepest experience in Auschwitz, when he had lost his dearest life project, the only manuscript of his book, when his coat was taken from him upon arrival at Auschwitz.

Let me recall that which was perhaps the deepest experience I had in the concentration camp. The odds of surviving the camp were no more than one in twenty-eight, as can easily be verified by exact statistics. It did not even seem possible, let alone probable, that the manuscript of my first book, which I had hidden in my coat when I arrived at Auschwitz, would ever be rescued. Thus, I had to undergo and to overcome the loss of my mental child. And now it seemed as if nothing and no one would survive me, neither a physical nor a mental child of my own! So, I found myself confronted with the question whether under such circumstances my life was ultimately void of any meaning. Not yet did I notice that an answer to this question with which I was wrestling so passionately was already in store for me, and that soon thereafter this answer would be given to me. This was the case when I had to surrender my clothes and in turn inherited the worn-out rags of an inmate who had already been sent to the gas chamber immediately after his arrival at the Auschwitz railway station. Instead of the many pages of my manuscript, I found in the pocket of the newly acquired coat one single page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book, containing the most important Jewish prayer, Shema Israel. (152/153).

In the deepest despair Frankl had to let go of all of his carefully crafted words, his life projects, his desires, motives and deepest yearnings. He had to lose himself. Instead, he simply had to listen. *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Eḥad****.*** *Hear Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And thou shalt love thy God will all your heart.*In the deepest moment of despair, he learned that it was not important what he expected from life, but what the giver of life expected from him.

Jonah had fallen gradually in ever deeper despair, several times marked by the word " ירד - yarad" in Hebrew. At the beginning of the narrative Jonah is told by God to “get up” and go to Nineveh (1:2). Instead, he goes down to Joppa, then he goes further down into the ship (1:3), and even further down into the ship’s hold (1:5). Jonah is hurled into the sea (1:17). He was thrown into the depths of Sheol, into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the waves passed over him (2:3). He goes down all the way, the deep flowed around him, seaweed was wrapped around him, he descended to the base of the mountains (2:5-6). But he does not die, God keeps him alive miraculously in the dark belly of a beast - a feeling Frankl might have known in Auschwitz, to be in the dark belly of a beast without being able to die.

And exactly in this experience of being kept alive in absolute darkness, Jonah is able to carry out the change of perspective of which Frankl speaks. He no longer asks what God can do for him, but what he can do for God. The psalm-like prayer of Jonah in the belly of the whale is not a song of self-pity, it is not ego centered, it is a song of praise like Hezekiah’s song of Thanksgivingafter his illness and recovery in Isaiah 38:9-20. Hezekiah praises God:

17 Behold, for my own welfare I had great bitterness;

But You have kept my soul from the pit of nothingness,

For You have hurled all my sins behind Your back.

18 For Sheol cannot thank You,

Death cannot praise You;

Those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness.

19 It is the living who give thanks to You, as I do today;

Similarly, Jonah praises God in the belly of the big fish (2:1-9):

2 I called out of my distress to the Lord,

And He answered me.

I called for help from the depth of Sheol;

You heard my voice.

3 For You threw me into the deep,

Into the heart of the seas,

And the current flowed around me.

All Your breakers and waves passed over me.

4 So I said, ‘I have been cast out of Your sight.

Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple.’

5 Water encompassed me to the point of death.

The deep flowed around me,

Seaweed was wrapped around my head.

6 I descended to the base of the mountains.

The earth with its bars was around me forever,

But You have brought up my life from the pit, Lord my God.

7 While I was fainting away,

I remembered the Lord,

And my prayer came to You,

Into Your holy temple.

When all his aspirations had died, Jonah remembers the Lord, his prayer came to God, into His holy Temple. In this moment Jonah is united with God. There is no estrangement or alienation. In psychological terms: Jonah is intrinsically God-regulated. He is regulated by the intrinsic goodness of God. He experiences that "Salvation is from the Lord" (2:9). There is no self-centered self-realization here. Jonah is saved by God, and Jonah is now able to do what God asks of him without asking whether the Divine wish is in harmony with his own fragmented desires. It is in this change from self-centeredness to God-centeredness that Jonah’s life becomes meaningful and significant. Or in adapting Frankl’s statement: He had to learn that it did not really matter what he expected from God, but rather what God expected from him.
Jonah answers God’s call, he goes to Nineveh and there he achieves something of significance. The people change their ways and are thus being saved by God. He is playing a role in God’s plan, his life achieves, in Swinburne’s words quoted above, "cosmic significance". And Jonah has not become a hero in the process. Not at all: There is no encompassing transforming experience in him as there is in the typical hero stories. In Jonah's case we are told that, after his impressive performance as a prophet, he is still a wimp who wants to die just because the heat of the burning sun is making him sick. He is the anti-hero of which Elie Wiesel spoke. He is still torn and lacks the psychological integration that leads to inner fulfillment. Nevertheless, through him and his actions, God was able to show his kindness and generosity to the people of Nineveh. More precisely, it was his ceasing to worry about himself and his changing the perspective in the sense of Frankl's, his ceasing to ask what life can do for him and his asking what he can do for life, that opened a path for God to fill Jonah’s life with meaning and significance. This moment, where Jonah stopped being self-centered, and where he allowed himself to be totally filled by God's presence, was the subjective foundation for the later actions that gave his life objective meaning (saving Nineveh).

Jonah is still an internally divided neurotic character, but for a brief period of time this is irrelevant. It is not the case that from now on all he cares about is God. Then he would be an integrated saintly figure in the sense of Harry Frankfurt. Jonah is not like that. He is a rather "normal" character who struggles with God all his life. But at the deepest point of desperation, he transcends himself and enters into the "temple of Lord". He is in the presence of the Lord. According to William James, there are "four marks" of mystical experiences: Ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity.[[26]](#footnote-26) The religious experience that ended Jonah's escape from God and opened his soul to God's will is ultimately ineffable. We can only resort to archetypal metaphors, like being in the belly of a fish, to describe it. God reveals himself as the giver of life within this experience. The moment of unity with God in the belly of the fish is transient. And Jonah seems passive because he had already reached the lowest point, the end of the line of his own activities. Thus, there is at least some similarity between what is expressed in Jonah's prayer in the fish and religious peak experiences as described by William James.

The aspect of passivity is crucial in Jonah's situation. He had given up, he was not actively moving towards a goal, he was sinking to the bottom of the ocean of despair. Having had let go of meaning originating in his own desires and motives was the pre-condition for this surprising turnaround in Jonah. It is expressed like the poetry of a psalm in his prayer which represents the climax of the book. The prodigal son coming home.

At the end of his "Spiritual Exercises", Ignatius of Loyola recommends to the god-seeker a prayer which is known in the spiritual tradition as "Suscipe". The Latin word "suscipe" means both "receive" and "take up". This prayer is taken to be the mystical culmination of the entire Spiritual Exercises. The English translation reads:

Take, Lord, and receive Lord all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. Thou hast given all to me. To Thee, o Lord, I return it. All is Thine, dispose of it wholly according to Thy will. Give me Thy love and Thy grace, for this is sufficient for me.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The Suscipe does not ask that my human freedom and my will might be brought into alignment with God's will, rather my freedom and will is returned to God who receives it and takes it up. The freedom and will of the person praying are no longer of central importance: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). The prayer of Jonah in the fish is his Suscipe. And out of this moment of self-dedication to God arises Jonah's power to go to Nineveh and perform the one deed that gave his life objective meaning. He saved 120.000 people. It does not really matter that he was ultimately unable to keep up this level of dedication. It was a "kairos", a passing opportunity that must be seized for it to be fruitful. Stripped of all ego-related and worldly hope, at the deepest depth of despair, Jonah seized that moment of grace.

His life is now not only objectively meaningful, the subjective component lies in this act of dedicating himself entirely to the Lord, if but for a short time. There is a deeply comforting message in this for all of us who struggle with their faith, with God, and the meaning of their lives. Sometimes it is enough to transcend oneself in just one moment that really counts, even if our faintheartedness catches up with us soon after.

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