

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

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## CAN TRANSCENDENCE BE TAUGHT?

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Part 1 of 2

*I HAVE, alas! Philosophy,  
Medicine, Jurisprudence too,  
And to my cost Theology,  
With ardent labour, studied through.  
And here I stand, with all my lore,  
Poor fool, no wiser than before.*

For two professors, the opening words of Goethe's *Faust* have always been slightly disturbing, but only recently, as we've grown older, have they come to haunt us.

Faust sits in his dusty library, surrounded by tomes, and laments

the utter inadequacy of human knowledge. He was no average scholar but a true savant—a master in the liberal arts of philosophy and theology and the practical arts of jurisprudence and medicine. In the medieval university, those subjects were the culminating moments of a lifetime of study in rhetoric, logic, grammar, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.

In other words, Faust knows everything worth knowing. And still, after all his careful bookwork, he arrives at the unsettling realization that none of it has really mattered. His scholarship has done pitifully little to unlock the mystery of human life.

Are we and our students in that same situation? Are we teaching them everything without teaching them anything regarding the big questions that matter most? Is there a curriculum that addresses why we are here? And why we live only to suffer and die?

Those questions are at the root of every great myth and wisdom tradition: the Katha Upanishad, the opening lines of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sophocles' *Ajax*, and the Book of Job among them. Job cries to the heavens, entreating God to clarify the tortuous perplexity of being human. But God does not oblige, and Job is left in a whirlwind, in the dark, just like Faust at the beginning of Goethe's modern remake of the ancient biblical story.

John's grandfather Paul died this spring. He was 99. He was a pharmacist in a time when pharmacists were treated like doctors. Being a druggist in the early 20th century meant that you could still make drugs, which Paul did. Expertly. The medicine cabinets at his home, in central Pennsylvania, were always stocked—belladonna, morphine, phentermine—substances that are not readily available today. He taught his family to believe in the powers of modern science, to believe that chemistry and biology could solve the mysteries, or at least the fatal problems, of human life. And he believed this almost to the very end.

Paul would have never told us straight out what he thought of philosophy or of our choice to study and then teach it. But in his last years, and quite to his grandson's surprise, he suggested that it might not be a complete waste of time. He had lots of questions: Why is there evil? Is there a God? Is there an afterlife? What is the meaning of life? What did Socrates mean when he said that the unexamined life is not worth living? Wrapped in illness before pitching forward into dementia, the elderly man had serious questions.

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big questions that matter most?”***

Clancy’s mom is still alive and thriving, in her 70s. But she recently wrote to him, as though he might actually know the answer, “Is there something I should be doing to prepare for death?” She wasn’t talking about the practical issues of estate management and end-of-life care and all the rest of the scary but sensible decisions we have to help our parents make as they get older. She wasn’t talking about the psychological issue of how one might confront death itself, with techniques like mindfulness training or terror management. She was talking about the most important question there is, the one that made the ancient Greeks so notoriously anxious about the inevitability of the end of life: What comes next, and how can I be ready?

The immanence of human finitude—the fact that we’re dying right now and not in some distant future—should create the impetus for philosophical reflection. Most philosophers know this in some abstract sense. The Platonic dialogues are set against the backdrop of the trial and death of Socrates for a reason: The difficulty of facing death is that it comes with the sudden challenge of giving a good account of your life, what Plato called an apologia.

When dying finally delivers us to our inevitable end, we would like to think that we’ve endured this arduous trial for a reason. But that reason cannot, unfortunately, be articulated by many of the academic disciplines that have gained ascendance in our modern colleges. Why not? Why shouldn’t an undergraduate education prepare students not only for a rich life but for a meaningful death?

Biology offers certain answers about how we live and die. It can describe apoptosis, autophagy, necrosis, and general senescence, the programmed death, dismantling of, injury to, and deterioration of cells. But those descriptions, like the terms they trade in, seem abstract, alien, detached from the experience of living and dying. When a 98-year-old asks, “Why am I in pain?” the biologist has answers: vasoconstriction, dehydration, toxicity. The evolutionary biologist might say that pain is an adaptive response to the world’s dangers. But those aren’t the type of answers that will satisfy a dying man, or Faust for that matter. Faust’s “Why?” is voiced in a different register, one that aches for a cosmic or existential answer.

Might cosmic answers be found, then, in the heavens and the study of them? Faust, escaping his library, emerging into the night's open air, screams his questions at the stars. In our modern way, we do the same. We ask astronomers and astrophysicists to explain the evolution of the universe, the way that all things come into being and are snuffed out. But in regard to the meaning of this cosmic dance, physics itself remains silent or, at least, inexplicable. Faust's foray into the night air terminates abruptly when the Earth Spirit answers in its terrifyingly opaque way. In the face of that, the little man simply cowers. Despite our star-directed sciences, it's no different today.

The problem with the physical sciences—or with the catchall that Faust called “medicine”—is that when it comes to the difficulties of mortality, scientists are committed to a particular methodology, which necessarily avoids satisfying existential answers. End-of-life issues are subjectively felt; there is a singular quality of experience to each passing life. This is what Heidegger means when he claims that death is a person's “ownmost possibility.” When an old man asks, “What is the meaning of life?” he simultaneously queries the infinitely more particular question: “What is the meaning of my life?” Which is also the question: “What might be the meaning of my death?”

Any satisfying answers would have to address what this meaning might be from the inside, in terms that could be subjectively felt. The physical sciences, on the whole, are wed to empirical, objective investigation, to examining things from the outside. They are numb to the felt sense—the frustration, regret, terror, guilt, uncertainty, relief, joy, peace—that prickles a life that is listing toward the grave.

This is not to say that Western philosophy and theology do a much better job. According to Faust, they don't. Theology is the study of religion, not religion itself. Theology, true theology, has the pesky consequence of disrupting belief, not solidifying it. If you are looking for answers about the meaning of life, the type that allows you to sleep at night, one should not turn to a theologian. Reading Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* is not, even for the most devout, a touching or reassuring experience. It is a logical justification for belief that one already has, but has any dying atheist read it and become a believer? There is a reason that proofs for the existence of God are assiduously avoided by many teachers of the philoso-

phy of religion: They are dead boring, the type of tedium that can actually convince one that there isn't any grand purpose to life. Go ahead, read the *Summa*. Persuade us that it is gripping—or even convincing.

Moreover, as Kierkegaard argued, rationally knowing that God exists as a consequence of some proof is different than believing that God exists in the relevant way. It's a bit like the Oracle tells Neo in *The Matrix*: “No one can tell you you're in love, you just know it. Through and through. Balls to bones.” If there is any consolation in faith, it won't come from what someone else has told you.

Traditional Western theology lacks what Faust eventually craves: a handle on the human experience. As a discipline, theology does not spend most of its time exploring the inner, felt sense of transcendence, what William James called the “varieties of religious experience.” Theologians often skirt the felt need, the experiential craving, for transcendence.

Who needs transcendence? We suspect that human beings do. Of course, it is notoriously difficult to say what transcendence is. But we take Josiah Royce seriously when he suggests that the need for transcendence is real and experientially felt by most people at one point or another. It is experienced, according to Royce, as the obverse of feeling completely, utterly, and totally lost. The prospect of losing one's life or mind brings this transcendental need into sharp focus. How else to make sense of, overcome the terror of, having your toenails grow, die, and fall off; the experience of losing one's mind; the experience of scratching one's arm till it bleeds; of not recognizing your loved ones; of slowly sloughing off flesh until nothing is left? Theology doesn't go there. But we do, headlong, unstoppably. And we would like to know that it hasn't all been for naught.

Western philosophy has often followed theology in erring in similar ways. For much of its modern history, it has lusted after the observational powers of the sciences. As modern science took over Europe, it put serious constraints on the love of wisdom. Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Hume, Kant—the titans of modern philosophy were, like the bench scientist, bent on describing existence rather than plumbing its deepest meanings.

At best, their rational systems masked the anxiety that Faust experienced, one that stemmed from the sense that despite the pretenses

of reason and logic, human life was at its core largely irrational. We live only to suffer? That makes absolutely no sense. At one point, philosophy, according to Socrates, was a preparation for death, a way of getting one's existential house in order before it was blown away, or because it needed to be in order for whatever might happen next. But this original intent faded in philosophy's growing desire to become a branch of math or science.

Completing the first part of *Faust*, in 1806, Goethe wrote at a time when the rationalism of Descartes had flourished since the mid-1600s but was about to come under attack. The rationalist could ascertain truths about math and logic, like  $X=X$ , but could say pitifully little about the natural world. What rationalism gained in certainty, it gave up in descriptive power. Empiricism—the works of Bacon and Hume, for instance—had also had its day, but its models of the natural world were addressed chiefly to practical concerns. While science provided certainty on smaller, provable points, it lost certainty and even the power of imaginative conjecture on some of the important, larger ones.

Goethe wrote in the aftermath of these theoretical failures and, indeed, on the heels of another German, Kant, who had done his best to unify, and therefore preserve what is best about, rationalism and empiricism. Of course, according to Goethe, Kant had also come up short: In trying to wed the two principal theories of modern thought, he generated yet another abstract system that had little to do with the bone-and-marrow realities of men and women.

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