**Finding Meaning In Life**

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Assignment Description: Consider Nozick's philosophy regarding the meaning of life. Nozick dismisses claims that life is meaningful due to God. What does he suggest makes life meaningful instead? Then consider Kierkegaard's philosophy regarding death. Both thinkers suggest that transcendence is what makes life meaningful. Are their claims complimentary or contradictory? How so? Fully support your answer.

A common feature of the human race is the ability to rationally think about the world. Barring any mental handicap, we are able use this ability to think about all of the wondrous things that exist, including ourselves. We search for and assign meaning to our observations. In the following, I will explore the path to meaning presented by Soren Kierkegaard and Robert Nozick and how despite differing terminology they come to a similar conclusion on how we transcend our finitude and establish our meaning in the world – with the help of a little girl Annie. I will also explain how Kierkegaard, despite his Christian faith, would agree that Nozick’s conception of a relationship with God would indeed be a path leading away from transcendence.

1. – Annie

At the start of my exploration, Annie is a very inquisitive young girl. She observes the world around her, learning everything she possibly can. By observing parents, siblings, grandparents, pets, and friends in childhood, she will begin to see these others as different from her own self. They are all able to act on the world totally independent of her thoughts. Everyone is different from her, but she is also able to act on the world in a similar manner. She can draw, sing, laugh, and build, just like the others in her life. She is a self among many selves. She once observed that her brother can feel pain when he crashes his bike; she imagined this must be similar to pain she had experienced from trying to jump the space between the sofa and recliner in the living room.

One morning, Annie found her goldfish Orange floating in the fishbowl. Her mother told her that Orange died and would not be able to stay in her room anymore. A funeral was held in the backyard, after which they took a trip to the pet store to get a new goldfish. Annie thought that dying must certainly be something that happens only to pets and also means that a new pet will come in its place. It seemed to make sense – that must be what happened to the neighbor’s dog, since they got a new one – until a few months later when Annie’s grandmother died. She asks her mom when grandma will be able to come back new, and this is when Annie begins to learn that death means not coming back. At this point she comprehends that she is different from these others, but similar enough that whatever happens to them can also happen to her. Annie can and will die.

2. – Soren Kierkegaard

The questions that Annie will ask of herself and those around her on the subject of death are similar to those explored by
Christian Existentialist Soren Kierkegaard. In his ontological exploration, an exploration of being and existing in the world (Barry 55), Kierkegaard looks into the dual existence of human nature as both object and subject. Annie, at a very young age, was able to see others as different from her. She was one among many. She knew that, since her grandmother died, she too would die. This objective view allows her to come to the realization that everyone she knows will also die (59).

From the finitude of a limited lifetime, Annie may feel compelled to look for further meaning as she grows. She has her own preferences and reactions to the events in the world around her. She is her own person, special and unique. But how can it be that she will die just as everyone else will? What does that say for her experience of life? There has to be something more.

Kierkegaard is said to agree with a philosopher named Otto Rank in his observations that we as humans search for a means of attaining immortality as an escape from finitude. “Rank saw humans as driven by a need for cosmic significance – a need to transcend their finiteness and attain some kind of immortality. We have a need to feel that life matters, that we are both special and a part of something larger and more encompassing. Traditionally, this need to feel ‘heroic’ was met by religion” (57). Like all of us, Annie wishes to be something more than just a body that lives for a time and dies. The event that is life, her life, must be more than just a short stay on the third planet orbiting a sun.

It is a part of the human condition to question why we cannot control our death while so much else in our lives is within our control. Annie, once realizing that her life is in her own hands, will also find that death escapes her control. According to Kierkegaard, the anxiety and dread we feel when trying to choose what to do with this life is a predicament he calls “the dizziness of freedom” (Barry 57). This is a key aspect to our transcendence.

Upon realizing that her life, however short or long it may be, is largely under her control, the adult Annie may choose to deny death and try to defeat it. This is a possible choice that can be made out of the anxiety of freedom. Her grandmother, despite dying so long ago, lives on in memories and achievements. By denying the end of life as an end of self, Annie may feel that she can achieve immortality through a legacy of some sort. She could bury herself in her work, triple her baking efforts for church bake sales, and join all of the well-known charity organizations in her town in an effort to leave her mark on the world, and avoid thinking about that pesky little thing called death. Her death, after all, is of no more consequence than anyone else’s, but the life that remains in the memories of others will be quite impressive (59).

This is the path away from the transcendence we desire. According to Kierkegaard, this avoidance of a personal realization of death deludes us into thinking that we have defeated death when we have merely avoided thinking about it. Instead of thinking of death as something that happens to everyone, we have to realize that it is a personal experience.

As such, Annie may elect to look inward and realize that death will happen to her, as a subjective experience. In living authentically through the acceptance of her personal finitude, she would choose to live her life in a way that encourages growth.
through enriching experiences. She may well take on active roles in her work, church, and charity organizations, but her motivations and what she gets out of doing such things would be totally different. These activities of an authentic life would be a representation of her passions. By focusing her actions on growth, she will shed the selfish desire to leave a mark and instead form relationships that allow her to reach even further than her life could on its own. By connecting with others, her life becomes the lives of everyone she cares about and who cares about her. This web of lives is a transcendence of finite existence, sharing the experience of life made infinite by the diversity of relationships held, as well as those that could potentially be held. This web, for Kierkegaard, would eventually lead to a very personal relationship with God as an infinite being himself (Barry 60).

3. – Robert Nozick

Nozick also felt that meaning in life is found through transcendence. He claimed that the obstacles preventing us from achieving this were the limits we impose on our lives. A greater sense of meaning would be achieved from a more broad conception of life.

A narrow life could be lived in two ways. The first was a totally disintegrated life. Here, life is led from moment to moment with no continuity in action. Everything is experienced at a whim, with no goals or intention in mind. There is no unity in the activities engaged, and as a result, no unity to the person (Nozick 81). Here the self-imposed narrow limits are more easily seen. This type of individual will lead a life that occurs in finite, disparate chunks that can never be more meaningful than they are in the moments that they are observed.

A narrow life can also be led through well-integrated goals and plans that have a definite purpose in mind. Despite this unity of action, having the goals and purpose apply only to the self puts in place narrowing limits. This is akin to Annie’s goal to leave a legacy. While her life was very well structured and ambitious, she did not concern herself with anything that moved beyond her legacy (Nozick 81).

Nozick likened the creation of meaning in our lives to the way we create meaning for objects. The meaning we assign to things arises from the connections we create between different ideas. A narrow definition of an object’s existence says nothing about what it means to be that object; meaning is found within the intermingling of the ideas. “The phrase ‘the meaning you give to your life’ refers to the ways you choose to transcend your limits, the particular package and pattern of external connections you successfully choose to exhibit” (81). By living life in a way that connects with others, meaning will arise. Those limits that are transcended become part of the meaning, in that they are no longer a constraining factor. This allows you to act on the world in total freedom, in accordance with how you perceive yourself. Passions can be expressed freely, allowing you to connect with others who share in those passions. This connection with others allows you to transcend your finitude by becoming a part of something more than yourself, much like Annie and the charity work she engaged in because she believed in the cause as part of her authentic life (82). The broader your web of connections, the more meaningful your life is.
4. – Kierkegaard Would Agree With Nozick on His Concept of God

As can be seen above, finding meaning in life is similar for Kierkegaard as with Nozick. A narrow life, as explained by Nozick, is similar to the selfish, inauthentic life that results from an objective view of death, as presented by Kierkegaard. Living authentically by making death and life a more personally enriching experience would give way to the annihilation of limiting thoughts and beliefs. It is from this agreement that I feel Kierkegaard would agree that Nozick’s conception of a relationship with God is limiting and therefore an obstacle to the meaningful relationships that result of authentic living.

For Kierkegaard, the subjective outlook on the meaningful web of relationships is what also made the relationship with a divine being (God) a factor of transcendence. In living a connected life with others and discovering the far-reaching effect of your actions on the world, you become infinite. Every choice you make must be one that you authentically believe is the best for all, because acting on these choices is what creates the world we know.

Nozick saw a relationship with God as being part of His Plan. He only looked at a very objective relationship with God when he dismissed a connection with the divine as transcending. To be part of God’s Plan, under Nozick’s conception, is to say that you personally possess a part in the grand scheme of things that is separate from others and specially tailored just for you (Nozick 74).

Kierkegaard would agree with Nozick in that transcendence and meaning cannot be found in a relationship that is confining and selfish by definition. Nozick himself said, “The problem of meaning is created by limits, by being just this, by being merely this” (82). Also, by revealing his narrow idea of God, Nozick has revealed to us a personal limiting factor that is preventing his own transcendence.

This is something the inauthentically living Annie could have experienced while trying to leave her mark at her local church. She may have felt that God wanted her alone to raise the most money from bake sales, and by doing so, she was fulfilling her purpose. She created a limit for herself by making her relationship with God nothing more than raising money for the church.

5. – Conclusion

We have the freedom to make our lives whatever we wish. While I know that I will die, and you know that you will die, the advice of Kierkegaard and Nozick should help us put that fact in better perspective. We live for ourselves and for the rest of the world. We should not allow the uncertain limitations of our time on Earth prevent us from living the most authentic that life we can.
Works Cited
