SENIOR THESIS

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I would like to extend a special thanks to Steven Dennis, my advisor for this thesis. He has given thorough attention to this writing, fostered its growth of ideas from beginning to end, and instilled in me a great love for Acting.

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Introduction

I’d like to address a certain feeling we tend to get when thinking about the universe, and I would ask, dear reader, that you take a moment to focus on something tangible nearby. It could be a table top, armrest, koala bear, or the person sleeping next to you on the bus. Any of these will do. Now put your finger on it. After reading this, take a moment to close your eyes and imagine everything: all that’s important to you: everything. Put the whole universe in your mind: all your life, all of creation, everything. Next, take it one step further and imagine that it doesn’t need to exist.

What an odd feeling! I personally am struck with this bizarre sensation of nothingness. The object I am touching seems so real and yet so fake when I imagine all the universe as one, giant, pointless entity. Those things which are close to us (the sleepy guy, the koala bear) anchor us to the earth with powerful magnetism. Perhaps the most accurate word to describe such a momentary leap into the abyss is creepy.

The 1999 film, *The Matrix*, uses that feeling to create a world of false reality in which a privileged few have managed to escape. Through the course of the film, the viewer encounters both individuals who seek true reality, and those who prefer a fake reality in exchange for ignorance and, consequently, happiness. In the beginning, the main character, Neo, is faced with a decision to accept this new reality, or to live out an ignorant life. It begs the question though: can someone like Neo be happy without seeing any meaning in his life? Can he go on with his life?
One may claim that ignorance is bliss, but sooner or later we all wonder “why?” A lamp can stand only with a proper base; can we live without the base of meaning?

Perhaps we are not ready to tackle this question just yet, but it is of vital importance to note a particular trend that has occurred during the present era. I refer to that trend which has led individuals to regard philosophy, religion, and indeed, all matters of thought to be purely subjective.\(^1\) The subscriber to this kind of thought maintains that no one can be so presumptuous as to claim that his or her ideas are any more correct than anyone else’s. Now before further investigation, we must also acknowledge that, from a socio-historical standpoint, this type of thought clearly moved society in the right direction. Coming from a history of monarchy and totalitarianism, the move to reject such authority of ideas in western society has brought us good beyond measure including the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, and dozens of other movements for human rights.

This having been said, we must also recognize the ramifications of this paradigm. If all of our views are subjective (they are true only within our minds) and ideas, by that definition, are purely relative, from where does truth come? I might hold the idea, for example, that we maintain peace and not war, while others might have the view that the necessity of war comes from justice, which has equal importance to them. Just as a mathematical theory in a scientific branch such as physics must be either right or wrong, so must my argument be regarding peace and justice. If no

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\(^1\) By definition, this is relativism. I hesitate to use the word because it tends to have a negative connotation. Also, I don’t want to identify the trend with a philosophical school of thought because that implies mere theory as opposed to significant praxis. The next statement about presuming certain authority has much more relevance to what I’m trying to address than a philosophical term.
truth on this subject exists outside my head, then the necessity of it all has about as much credibility as a peach and mango smoothie to those in *The Matrix*. Does it taste just as good when we know it isn’t real?

This particular distinction calls for a special word. Just as using the word *acting* would be a heinous crime without first defining it, speaking of reality without specification allows for terrible confusion among metaphysicians, theologians, and actually everyone. The reality to which I will refer exists outside the mind, and when boiled down, it would exist whether we know it or not. For that reason, I will refer to it as extra-psychological reality. It’s “real” reality! Redundancy aside, this distinction makes all the difference when we consider what reality means to us. Specifying reality as extra-psychological means that whether I think so or not, it’s there.

Having made this distinction, I must also clarify its associative word: *truth*. If I describe something as being True (note the capitalization), this means that it is an element of extra-psychological reality. Under this definition, Truth itself is simply another word for extra-psychological reality. When attempting to prove innocence or guilt, for example, the jury wants to know what actually happened, not simply what the witnesses *think* happened. For this reason, the Truth is that which exists outside the mind.

The problem comes in trying to determine what makes up extra-psychological reality. The philosopher Descartes, famous for the statement, *Cogito Ergo Sum*,

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2 Some refer to this as mind-independent reality. I’m an angry young man who likes to be different.

3 “I think, therefore I am.”
was making a very important point on this subject. It's scary to think we could be living in a Matrix, but at first glance, this world could be one. If everything we perceive through the senses is ultimately interpreted by our brains, how do we know anything exists extra-psychologically? Sure, I can see that tree over there, but vision itself is merely an interpretation of stimuli received from the eyes. Am I being deceived? Thankfully, Descartes saves our sanity by pointing out something extremely important: the very fact that we think about anything at all means we ourselves exist somewhere. In other words, we don't just make up our own existence inside our heads; we actually exist. Gee golly jeepers, we're extra-psychological!

If we ourselves exist in extra-psychological reality, other things must reside there as well. Otherwise, what would there be for our brains to think up? How could my brain make up a tree if something like a tree doesn't exist outside of it? From where would that thought come? And even if one belongs to that branch of belief which asserts that we, as humans, have certain knowledge regardless of sensory experience,4 from where would they say this knowledge comes?

If I'm sending your mind on a roller coaster ride, then that's great. Nothing exercises the mind better than a philosophical anvil to the skull; though, at this point, one might ask what philosophical anvils, Descartes, nothingness, and extra-psychological reality have to do with our daily lives. Why were you asked to connect with something tangible while considering the idea of nothingness?

Without it, we would have no basis for anything.

4 By definition, this is rationalism.
If we accept that certain intangible things must exist extra-psychologically, then the tangible world around us must breathe with the very essence of it. If our lives are a part of Truth in extra-psychological reality (a condition as inherently necessary to each of us as it is to those characters in the Matrix) we must see evidence of it everywhere. Particularly, I think, in human behavior.

The actor, as I will soon demonstrate, is charged with the ability to perform real human behavior. Thus, the actor and artist must have the ability to recognize its importance. No behavior (I repeat, no behavior) comes without a motivation, as small as it may be. We are creatures of purpose. We rise with the sun because we must go to work; we go to work because we must make money. We must make money to support ourselves or our families, and we must support ourselves and our families because, well, do we know why? Maybe we don’t know exactly, but something drives us to complete the cycle and upon viewing a true and present actor, we receive the tiniest of reflections on what that something might be.

I recall once an evening in which a friend opened up to me something very personal. This rarely happens because I don’t exactly appear to be the talk-to type. My awkward levels rise to “Peter Brady” and I attempt to compensate by appearing overly empathetic. It’s weird.

Still, she loosed the floodgates of catharsis and her problems gushed out onto the moonlit ground. I sat there, over-empathetically soaked in her pain, loss, and self-pity. The floors of her house were covered in eggshells, eggshells that reeked of an intense family issue. They cut like glass to tread on them, and with every step the
family with whom she had grown up crumbled like wet sand. And while it sunk into the sea, she bandaged her feet and went to school, smiling and laughing and tucking it all behind her. The days passed like mist when she knew she'd go home to sobbing, confusion, and destruction.

At this point, my awkwardness rose beyond “Peter Brady” and moved swiftly towards “speech-in-your-underwear-dream.” Accompanying this rush of nerves though, in sharp contrast, was that feeling which inspires hugs: that feeling you get after watching movies like *Casablanca* or *It’s a Wonderful Life*. No, I didn’t feel what she felt. How could I? How could I presume to know? But I saw it and I’ll be damned if it wasn’t sublime.

Yes, we hugged. How could one not? And all the while, a little ball of light had sprung from my perception of the sublime and drifted above my head. It glowed so surely and steadily that I wondered to myself how I could have forgotten that such a light existed. Perhaps it had always been there, a symbol of the presence of real Truth. I hurried back to my room as that light still hovered. *Don’t go away, little light!*

Passing swiftly my snoozing roommate, I met with a dark desk full of my life at the present. *Hold on for just a moment longer!* I brushed aside my assignments, my papers, my everyday life, and I grabbed a pen. *Almost got it!*

On a tiny piece of paper, I wrote, “There is something *real* in this world.” I had to write it down, because it’s the easiest thing to forget.
Part I: The End Result of Avoiding a Rooster

*The mind is framed even like the breath
And harmony of music. There is a dark
Invisible workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, and makes them move
In one society.*

(Wordsworth, the Prelude bk I, 351-355)

People do some awfully bizarre things. If you’ve ever people-watched (and if you haven’t, you don’t know what you’re missing), you may often find yourself wondering why someone’s buying sixteen loaves of bread, why the kid in the shopping cart won’t stop crying, and what on earth that lethargic, teenaged cashier has been doing with his fingernails for the past eight minutes. We are creatures of causality and we wonder why things happen.

As a matter of fact, people wonder why things happen so frequently that mystery writers make a ton of money simply by asking questions like, *why did such a thing happen?* Mysteries of motivation also happen to make very good introductions to things like books, plays, movies, and pretentious theses. For that reason, I sent a message to a friend of mine requesting that he lend me a bit of his knowledge on the subject of murder cases. I wanted to know of a few cases involving bizarre motivation.

Happy to oblige, he wrote me a few quick summaries of the cases surrounding some terribly wacky killers including, “The Earthquake Killer,” “The Sacramento Vampire,” and “The Grandfather Killer,” all of which I noted would make awful super villain names. Their stories scared me, surprised me, intrigued me, struck
me, and grossed me out in no particular order, but as far as my purpose went in this thesis, they didn’t really fit. With each of their explanations, my friend included a brief explanation of the intent behind these murders. (Bizarre? You bet.) In reply, I wrote back that I was looking for something a little more mysterious: perhaps a case in which no apparent motivation had been found at all. His response made a heck of a lot more sense out of the whole situation.

“That’s tough,” he wrote back, “there’s always an underlining motivation as to why someone kills another human being, even if it’s hard to understand.” He never did find a case that fit my description, and while his response may be quite the deflation for mystery lovers, it makes an awfully good point in a painfully philosophical thesis.

My friend kindly demonstrated the impossibility, or at least the extreme implausibility, of a lack of motivation. Anything that occurs in a grocery store, outlet mall, city council meeting, or anywhere, has a personal reason for occurring. Don’t attempt to prove that wrong or you’ll contradict yourself. Seeking to prove a lack of motivation is, in itself, a motivation. Take that, skeptics!

It would be quite taxing of me on the reader here if I relayed the number of times I told my parents, “I don’t know,” when they asked why I did something stupid. “Why did you pour that milk on the floor?” “I don’t know.” “Why did you light that curtain on fire?” “I don’t know.” “Why did you run your sister’s Barbies over with the ‘Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle’ Bodacious Buggy?” (I said I didn’t know, but couldn’t keep a straight face.) In all of these situations, and in the case of all other
excuses that kids come up with today, they most certainly have a reason for their action; they’re just too embarrassed to admit it. The most childish of children and the most whacky of whackos has a reason for doing what he or she does, even if it’s hard to understand, as my friend explained.

This same principle holds true for narrative art. No character, even one portrayed by a less than talented actor, is without motivation. We find, actually, that characters interest us by justifying outrageous actions with intense motivations. In Paul Thomas Anderson’s Punch Drunk Love, released in 2002, Adam Sandler’s character, Barry Egan performs some rather extraordinary actions including breaking a window at a family gathering and buying hundreds of packs of pudding. Because we know that motivations accompany actions, his story grabs the viewer immediately and forces him or her to wonder, “why?”

Lucifer’s motivation, for many, is actually the most astonishing aspect of his revolt in Milton’s Paradise Lost:

“Here we may reign secure, and in my choice,

To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:

Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n.” (261-263)

Notice that he makes reference to his choice. Though our motivations are affected by thousands upon thousands of influences, ultimately we choose our actions. I find that fact immeasurably interesting and would like to point out that the quality granted to the Devil’s motivation herein is humanizing.

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5 Politicians do this as well but we never call them children. What a pity.
Once we accept that human action contains powerful elements of motivation, we can not help but seek to discover what motivates us. This, I barely need mention, has been debated for hundreds and hundreds of years. Philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists alike love to discuss why people do certain things, and most of them seem to think they have a pretty good grasp on it. Obviously not everyone can be right, but each theory brings interesting observations to the table of human motivation.

Perhaps one of the earliest recorded theories of human motivation can be found in Plato’s *Republic*. In Part IV, Plato (through the mouth of Socrates) describes the soul as having three parts, reason, spirit, and appetite. He does not deny that each has its own importance, yet he identifies them as being highly different from one another (Cooper 91).

Specifically, Plato describes a correct balance of the tripartite soul as being “virtuous,” a concept which adds a separate level to human motivation. Not only does he discuss what motivates us, but suggests how we ought to respond to these motivations. Here we find a sense of a proper or correct way to live. Not until lightning strikes the stone tablets⁶ does this sense of virtue become tied to the will of a transcendent being. The Judeo-Christian following which emerges from this is now motivated by the sense of an imperative to follow the law laid down by Yahweh.

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⁶ (Exodus 20: 2-17) I am well aware that lightning didn’t strike the tablets but a reference to *The Ten Commandments* feels appropriate in this essay. I’d be very interested to know, though, what percent of the American population would actually expect such an exciting display of film effects in the Bible narrative after seeing it happen to Charlton Heston!
and reestablished later by Jesus Christ. In order to be fulfilled, according to this tradition, one must live for God.

St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, notes that our hearts are made for God (bk I, chp I). Here we see a perfect example of how motivation is made singular for humanity, and thus absolute. Where traditional Christian belief might separate a good motivation from an evil motivation, the writings of Augustine suggest that evil is simply a privation of good. He suggests that no matter what we do, we seek some amount of good, reflecting that restlessness which God has instilled within us (bk II, chp vi). In other words, he has presented a theory of motivation which does not so much mandate certain behavior as it does define an unconditional motivating factor of humanity.7

Just so, the psychologist who seeks to study human motivation focuses not on how people should be motivated, but how they are motivated. Only about a hundred years ago, Sigmund Freud introduced the idea that our deepest motivations come from the unconscious. Even things that appear to be simple mistakes have unconscious motivations to Freud.8 While many of his suppositions may seem extreme (attributing the cause of all our actions to desires of sex or aggression) still more of his assertions have become so well known that they appear throughout popular culture today. A mistake in one’s speech that sometimes

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7 This is not to say that Augustine’s beliefs don’t suggest certain behavior, but the fact that he creates an absolute in human motivation differs strongly from simply saying we ought to be motivated by God’s laws.

8 Freud tended to analyze his own somewhat “psychotic” actions in order to prove this. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, he explains a bizarre and sudden impulse he followed to destroy a marble Venus statue as an unconscious desire to make a “sacrifice” of thanksgiving for a sick relative who had just gotten better (McLelland 42). What a great service he’s doing for psychology by not “repressing” his impulses! I wish I could show him *Punch Drunk Love*. 
doesn’t seem so accidental, for example, has been dubbed a Freudian Slip: a word that unwillingly escapes the deep unconscious of our bed. Whoops! I meant head.

The most widely examined theory of human motivation, though, is that of Abraham Maslow. In chapter four of his book *Motivation and Personality*, Maslow works his way through a hierarchy of needs in which the attainment of one prompts the seeking of the next (35).

Once and only once one’s physiological needs have been sufficiently fulfilled can one move on to the “higher” needs in life like sunbathing and watching reality TV shows. He acknowledges that being accustomed to the attainment of certain needs allows you to take them for granted and assume that you might be able to do without them (52); however, he holds strong to the idea that in severe deprivation of a lower need, one is inescapably motivated to achieve it. “For the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry,” he says, “no other interests exist but food.” (37).

![Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](image)

**Fig. 1:** Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. They progress from top to bottom.
We would do well to remember though, as David G. Winter points out in *The Power Motive*,¹⁰ that pure motivation itself does not strictly mandate certain behavior (21). Factors such as circumstance, general disposition or tendency, and likelihood of achieving goals work strongly with motivation to determine how one acts. I may feel the inclination to get a good cheese steak, but if the conditions are such that I’m not in Philadelphia, my chances of performing subsequent behaviors to fulfill it don’t look promising.¹⁰

Even now, as I write, I become aware of my own choice of words (in addition to sounding like Freud in my self analysis). The act of fulfilling my own desire for a cheese steak implies, by my motivation, that I believe things would be better if I had one. Notice now that I’ve made a connection back to the philosophy of Plato and Augustine. In motivation, no matter what the circumstances or the conditions of our unconscious force upon the situation, the behavior performed by the motivated individual is done so with the assumption that the resulting situation is better than the first. I’ll give another example.

For a few years, my family had chickens, and more specifically for this story’s sake, a few roosters. Being very little at the time, I don’t remember a great deal, but enough. Occasionally, my dad would let the chickens out to roam around, and more specifically for this story’s sake, the rooster. He’d strut about with a foul, fowl scowl and make you think that being a foot and a half tall was terribly intimidating.

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¹⁰ David G. Winter believes the desire for power to be a highly significant (though not absolute) motivating factor in people’s lives (1).

¹⁰ Don’t be fooled by places claiming to have “real Philly cheese steaks.” If the guy who sells it to you doesn’t make you feel bad about yourself for not knowing how to order, it’s not going to be a good cheese steak.
When you’re little, you don’t ask why animals like this are out to get you, you just assume they are. That rooster chased me so many times that I would consider it appropriate for the reader to ask if I’ve gotten a backbone since then or remained an invertebrate. It’s the former. I hope.

Regardless, my desire to stay inside, as Maslow would readily agree, came from my motivation for safety. I didn’t know how much damage would be inflicted on my body if I had remained outside,\(^1\) but some faculty of my intellect or spirit informed me that being safe was better than being in danger—that comfort was better than pain. From where did that idea come? I wished to stay inside under the crazy assumption that safety supercedes playing outside in importance. Between safety and danger I sought the better of the two options. Thus, my purpose was to stay alive.

We see through this story that our motivations are linked to some sense of purpose. I stated at the beginning of this section that human beings always have motivation for performing certain actions. Motivations imply some sort of end, like safety in the case of the rooster. Therefore, it would be safe to say that purpose is the end goal of motivations. Consequently, if all humans can have similar motivations, then all humans can have a similar purpose. Just as psychologists speak of motivation as an absolute, for all of humanity, I will sometimes refer to purpose as an absolute in later sections. When doing so, I will capitalize it so it looks like this: Purpose!

\(^1\) In retrospect, probably none.
I stated before that reality in this world, ironically, is easily forgotten. It may not seem like such a big deal to you, dear reader, sipping your coffee or lying on your couch. Suppose, though, that as our lives go on with the everyday bills, grocery lists, and computer problems, we begin to forget about the reality of Purpose. Suppose we walk so far down the path of our lives that we begin to ask ourselves why we started walking in the first place. Suppose we dare to make the assumption that Purpose isn’t real.

Suddenly, the nothingness springs into existence and runs its icy finger down our back, giving us a chill that shakes the happiness from our bodies. All our lives and all our motivations join the nothingness that accompanies a thought of the absence of necessity in the universe. We feel that it’s wrong; that there’s no way we should possibly feel so empty. Don’t worry, we shouldn’t. And I’ll tell you why.

Part II: The Significance of Getting Up in the Morning

“I’ve been to Paris,  
And it ain’t that pretty at all.  
I’ve been to Rome,  
Guess what?  
I’d like to go back to Paris someday and go to the Louvre Museum,  
Get a good running start and hurl myself at the wall...  
‘Cause I’d rather feel bad than feel nothin’ at all.”

Warren Zevon, “Ain’t That Pretty at All”

According to A Confession, there was a time in Leo Tolstoy’s life when he did not carry a rifle with him on hunting trips (30). Since we have already discussed humanity’s intrigue at motivation, it comes as no surprise that this arises some
suspicion in us. It’s not really a hunting trip if you don’t plan on killing anything, is it Leo? Well, as we might suspect, our dear Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy was motivated to leave the rifle at home because he specifically wished not to kill anything—one thing in particular.

All this non-hunting was occurring at a time in his life when Tolstoy examined the all-important question of whether or not Purpose was real. Specifically asking himself, “What comes next?” (28), he observed his own motivations and their direction in life. Having done much for the education of peasants in Russia, he considered the end of such an endeavor, only to find it somewhat meaningless. As he continued to delve into his reasons for doing things, Tolstoy asked himself questions about prosperity, his children, and his land. All these questions came to the same end: meaningless. Finally, he dared to apply this question to his writing and discovered what he thought was a terrible truth. “So you will be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Molière,” he asked himself, “more famous than all the writers in the world, and so what?” (29)

So what? Tolstoy had put a hand to his brow and gazed down the road of his actions only to find that they led off the edge of the Earth; they had no purpose. So what if he never became a great writer? So what if the peasants were uneducated? So what if even his own children were uneducated? “My life,” Tolstoy said, “came to a standstill.” (30). Since his own life (and humanity as a whole he thought) had no Purpose, Tolstoy decided he could not carry a rifle. He might shoot himself.
Examples of this point of view surface all throughout literature and film. Poor young Werther, Goethe’s tragic hero from *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, views life as a prison from which one might easily release himself just as one might release himself from shackles and bonds (62). In David Russell’s *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), two main characters played by Jason Schwartzman and Mark Wahlberg attempt to accept nothingness by bashing each other in the head with a rubber ball. It apparently works for them. I don’t recommend it.

Specifically, the theory of nihilism is most often associated with the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche believed that right and wrong are mere illusions forced into our minds. By equating the concept of right and wrong with Purpose, Nietzsche refuted the idea of an extra-psychological Purpose altogether. He was well aware that a society built on this concept could not function and so mandated that only the lesser classes need morality and that the higher, more educated individual need not concern himself with it.  

Indeed, what might the world be like if everyone believed this? What implications would this have for the way the world works? For Tolstoy, Werther, and Albert Markovski (*I Heart Huckabees*), life without Purpose, essentially, is really a give or take. Those who have the strength and the courage can do away with it, and in their minds, be better off. Yet all of them (with the exception of Werther at the very end) decide to go on living despite this lack of meaning in their lives, a very important fact.

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12 For more on this, read Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*.
13 I never said this thesis didn’t include spoilers!
If life has no Purpose, why would anyone get up in the morning? Why would history have brought us here? How could we continue to build society if we had no Purpose for doing so? Indeed, we would either kill ourselves, or simply do nothing.

But people don’t do “nothing,” they do lots of things. They build bridges! They make tin foil! They watch Oprah! Take yourself up to the thirtieth floor of a big city high-rise and just take a look at everything below you. Everyone’s doing something! Even Tolstoy, seemingly aware of the nothingness of life, went on living: drinking his vodka, hunting without a rifle, and probably wearing one of those great fuzzy hats. He even states in A Confession, “I was afraid of life and strove against it, yet I still hoped for something from it.” (30).

There’s staggering evidence in this world to prove that people, as a whole, think their lives are pretty important things to keep. Ultimately, the actions we choose to take in our lives (like evading killer roosters) are meant to make our lives better. Now modern evolutionary theory explains this phenomenon of behavior rationally and scientifically. Charles Darwin conceptualized the theory of natural selection stating that genetic traits are acquired over time simply because those traits allow a species to survive and thus procreate.\(^{14}\) If humans and animals did not have a natural instinct to live, they wouldn’t survive and wouldn’t be around to consider it. This explains thoroughly our animal drive for survival and though it may seem contradictory to the idea that this drive indicates Purpose, I do not believe it is. The following argument explains why.

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\(^{14}\) From *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin.
In C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*, some important arguments are made regarding instinct. Lewis argues that while our instincts may govern a decent amount of our actions, they often conflict. “Telling us to obey Instinct is like telling us to obey ‘people,’” he says. “People do different things: so do instincts” (35). He specifically addresses the issue of preservation. We, as humans, may have a natural instinct to stay alive but we also have an instinct (according to many) to preserve the species even if it means sacrificing ourselves. How do we decide when to obey one instinct and when to obey another? Can that faculty within us which makes that decision be an instinct in itself?

My experience in television leads me to make the following analogy. Most studios have at least three cameras, and each camera person sees only what his or her camera shows. The director, however, sits in the control room and has three television monitors from which he can see what each camera is filming. He does this in order to make a decision of which camera to choose for a specific shot. Is it possible that one of the camera operators could be the director? Absolutely not! Not only would this be insulting to high-nosed directors, but it would be impossible. How could someone who sees only one screen decide which screen to show at any given time? If he *does* see more than one screen, he’s no longer a camera operator but a director. The same follows for instinct; that which chooses among the available instincts is not an instinct, but something else entirely. And just as a director must consider his knowledge of film in order to make a decision, so must

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15 I say it as if I don’t have a choice. It’s not instinct, I swear!
16 This is true logically, if we accept, under these circumstances, that a person is a director if and only if he or she sees three screens.
this instinct-factoring part of our minds consider its purpose when making a
decision.

Still the nihilist and the detractor of this argument might acknowledge the
instinct factoring part of our minds, and yet still refuse to believe that life has real
Purpose. He might think this way under the assumption that nothing anyone does
works toward any kind of purpose outside of itself. “Vanity of vanities! All things
are vanity!” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) Vanity here, in this quote from the book of
Ecclesiastes, refers to something that exists for its own sake. To say that “all things
are vanity” is to say that if the world has no reason to exist, everything in the world
has no reason to exist either. This sheds some light on the idea some hold that
human actions are pointless. The nihilist might argue that our lives center on mere
vanities that have nothing to do with Purpose because the world exists simply for
its own sake. This very thought plagued Tolstoy to a nearly suicidal position. He
had concluded that nothing “under the sun” showed any real Purpose for man’s
existence—no reason for man’s motivation. Oddly enough, he was right.

Now why would I say such a thing? Did I not just spend several pages making
the argument that people’s daily acts of living draw the conclusion that there is
Purpose? Did I not stress that we should not feel empty and that our lives have
meaning? I did, but in response, I’d like to point out the precise phrasing of the
statement in question: “nothing ‘under the sun’ shows any real Purpose for man’s
existence.” The truth in this statement lies in what we mean by “under the sun.”
We mean, “within the physical world.”

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17 This phrase also comes from the same passage in Ecclesiastes.
Tolstoy, as we find upon reading further, did not kill himself. In fact, we find in *A Confession* that he found a purpose! For him, this purpose was religion, the existence of God. For those of us seeking just the extra-psychological reality\(^\text{18}\) of Purpose, the reasoning that led him to this saving element of Purpose is the last piece for our puzzle. Tolstoy realized that he could not find Purpose in the physical world simply because Purpose does not exist *within* the physical world. It exists just beyond it!

**Part III: The Meat and the Metaphysical**

> “If the doors to perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”

- William Blake

(from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

The natural perceptions of our minds don’t take kindly to putting huge concepts into little explanations. When I begin to speak about something as sublime and mind-boggling as that realm beyond the physical, our brain, in order to understand, fills in the gaps where certain aspects are left undefined. For this reason, we must be absolutely clear in our ideas of the metaphysical (that place in which our Purpose resides).

Since all that we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell usually occurs in the physical world, it may seem nearly impossible to imagine anything differently.  

\(^{18}\) The next chapter will present arguments for why Purpose must be extra-psychological.
Consequently, when we think of a place beyond the physical, an afterlife for instance, we tend to conjure up the same type of images we have of this world only with more white, more clouds, and maybe more of something we really enjoy, like mountains of cheese steaks. After reflecting upon this, especially if we accept that Purpose belongs there as well, we may be tempted to assume that it’s much more important than a place like the physical world. We may even go so far as to say that the place in which we live our lives (the physical world) doesn’t matter or even that it holds us back from experiencing that other, much purer, area outside the physical.

Early Greek philosophy, particularly that of Plato, claims that the soul (non-physical) actually wishes to rid itself of the body (physical). Looking back at Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, we see that what might be an endeavor of the “soul” (self actualization) is much more refined than the endeavors of the body (physical, safety needs). In fact, many find these lower needs to be so unimportant that they fulfill them only out of necessity. The case follows then, as with many other things done out of necessity, that one feels trapped by these lower needs, just as Plato felt his soul trapped by his body.

This creates an interesting perspective; however, we must be careful that we don’t undermine the importance of living. If Purpose is the fulfillment of living in this physical world, then seeking to be rid of physical things nixes Purpose altogether. How then can we explain this relationship between the physical and the

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19 Plato 62 (from *The Trial and Death of Socrates*)
metaphysical? Quite simply actually; you’re experiencing something similar right now.

When we read, whether it be fiction, e-mail, or extensively analogous theses, we experience two distinct realms of the reading. There are the physical attributes and the metaphysical attributes. The physical attributes include elements like ink, paper and even the words themselves with sentences, grammar, spelling, syntax, and all of those other things we see when we look at the paper. A piece of writing though, no matter how small, has so much more to it than that. It has meaning, style, tone, story, theme, and in fact an entire world of elements beyond mere words. Imagine reading Hamlet without considering its metaphysical elements. Sure the words would sound nice and pretty but Ophelia would never kill herself, “to be, or not to be” would be just a jumble of words, and Shakespeare himself would have been nothing more than a monkey scribbling on paper. Without metaphysical elements, Hamlet’s just fuel for your campfire.

As important as the realm of the metaphysical may be though, can we still deny the importance of the physical? The concept of vengeance would still be around if Hamlet hadn’t been written, but aren’t we fortunate to have this text of the play which, upon reading it, helps us to understand the concept more fully?

Life happens to work the same way. We live on the page of a great novel. The grammar and syntax of the natural world make up the pages of our lives. We experience everything through our five senses, and yet just as the story and meaning of Hamlet makes up the true purpose of the book, the metaphysical realm
of this world holds its meaning and Purpose. Thus, as I have stated before, the physical world still has immense importance because it is the “meat” of the metaphysical, the unparalleled (and for some sacred) medium through which we experience extra-psychological reality.

Now, if we accept that our reason for living must exist in a metaphysical realm (and we must, if, like Tolstoy, we plan on justifying living!), then we must also accept its extra-psychological nature. Again, something real in an extra-psychological sense means that it’s not just something created in our heads; it actually exists. If our reason for living has simply been conjured up in our brains by society or instinct, then it’s not really a meaningful reason at all but an illusion meant to keep us from the noose. To assure you that this is not the case, I’d like to discuss another argument presented by C.S. Lewis.

The entire premise of Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man* is a response to two men he names Gaius and Titius who asserted in a children’s textbook that often, when we describe the qualities of a thing, we merely describe our feelings about that thing (2-4). Lewis’s outrage at this prompted him to write an entire book about it. His concern happens to be the same as mine. People often have a tendency, the origins of which I discussed in the Introduction, to look upon nearly every statement as mere opinion. While this may not be of great concern with claims such as “hockey’s the greatest sport ever,” “baboons are ugly,” or “marinara sauce ruins my cheese steak,” it has immense importance when making claims about things like justice, virtue, and Purpose. The belief that statements about these more important things
are mere opinion or social convention greatly affects the way one views life in
general and how one will act from day to day. Under Gaius and Titius, calling an
action “just,” for example, merely means that you think it’s just, not that it actually
is. Imagine the consequences of making decisions with that in mind!

Lewis points out though, that the mere act of arguing for “the way something is”
implies that it exists outside the mind (27-28). If I were to argue with Gaius and
Titius about “how people describe things,” we would be attempting to convince each
other that “how people describe things” is not just something we make up in our
heads, but a real part of a human being’s mental process. Just so, when two people
argue about right or wrong, they refer to a right and wrong outside their own
minds. Why would I attempt to argue with someone if I knew my argument wasn’t
real but merely an idea in my head?

The relativist might say, “You don’t know your argument’s not real. You’ve been
led to assume that there is an extra-psychological truth to right and wrong, Purpose
and non-Purpose. You’re simply mistaken.” If I am mistaken, then again, why
would I go on living? If I knew Purpose existed solely in my head, I would have no
need to continue. Neither, may I point out, would the individual who posed the
question, thus making that person rather hypocritical.

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So now we’ve determined that we have a drive for living and that it can not be
merely instinct, based on Lewis’ argument for competing instincts. If we accept
this, then there must be another faculty within us that controls instincts based on
its knowledge of Purpose. We also know that Purpose must exist outside the realm of the physical because simple purposes in this world are vain. Preserving the environment, for example, would be a vain purpose if one failed to acknowledge that the environment has reason for existence beyond its own self. Thus, I conclude that our faculty for understanding Purpose links us to the metaphysical.

Let’s answer a few questions. Does the previous explanation make sense? Perhaps it does. Does it satisfy a puzzling intellectual question within your mind? It might. You may believe it to be true. Now, the new question I’d like to pose: do you feel its truth? Certainly revelation comes in many ways. After working out a difficult math problem, I might arrive at an answer that makes sense and know that it’s true intellectually, but do we not sometimes feel the truth of something intuitively? Surely, when I consider whether or not I love my father, mother, sister, brother, or friend, I don’t believe I need to write a boring intellectual thesis in order to arrive at the conclusion that I do love them. Rather I feel it, and it’s no less true to me than the answer to a math problem. In fact, most would probably agree that the truth felt in something as profound as love is exponentially more important than any math problem.

Do we have a stronger sense of Purpose when we think it or do we have a stronger sense of Purpose when we feel it? If we do feel it, when does it happen? Can we force that feeling? Can we beckon it? Does it obey or does it simply leap into existence like the light hovering above us when we hear the heartbreak of another?
Can we smell it in a soft green summer, a white winter? Can we hear it in the penetrating glory of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, or the quiet laughter of a smiling infant? Does it arrive when we converse, when we make love? Does it sit with us when we dine with our loving families? Can it walk with us when we amble for miles along the beach? Can it weep with us when we’re sad? Does it glow brighter when we smile? Where do we see it? Where do we know it? How do we call it to us?

Let us find out. Let us examine how we might beckon the hovering light.

Part IV: Tear-jerker vs. Rotten-Vegetable

I cried when Simba’s father died in the Lion King; I still do. I cry like a baby and I like to think that everyone else does, not only because I want to defend my manliness, but because I think it’s simply a moving moment. Anyone who has seen at least a few movies and or plays will agree that when done right, these works of art can plug into our emotional insides and jolt us into empathy.\(^{20}\)

Since film and theater have become such an integral part of western culture, I don’t mind making the assumption that most understand this feeling. According to the United States Census Bureau in 2002,\(^{21}\) the U.S. supports over three thousand five hundred theater companies, bringing in around five point three billion dollars annually. On the film end, the Box Office recorded in 2007 a total gross of over nine

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\(^{20}\) In the next chapter, I will attempt to explain why this happens. For now, let’s simply agree that film and theater can stimulate emotion.

\(^{21}\) The 2002 census is the last to be published. Information on the 2007 census will not be made available until 2009. This information comes from www.census.gov.
and a half billion dollars with an average ticket price of six dollars and eighty eight cents a piece. The numbers clearly indicate that a lot of people go to the movies and the theater. I would say that implies a profound impact on culture.

In presenting these numbers, I have thrown together two similar, and yet very different artistic mediums: theater and film. The expectations we have before seeing a film sometimes differ from those we have before seeing a play. People often claim to go to a particular film or play for specific reasons. I might claim to be seeing Spider Man 3 merely for the special effects, Death of a Salesman to hear how the music will be done, or Conan the Barbarian just to hear Arnold Schwarzenegger’s voice (that’s the only reason I would watch that movie).

For my purpose here, the element inherent in both of these mediums to which I will refer is the element of Acting. The Oxford American Dictionary defines the verb “to act” in this sense as “to portray by actions, to perform a part in a play.” In order to give proper credit to the artist, and to be sure that my meaning is clear, let “to Act,” as a verb, be “to respond in a truthful manner to imaginary circumstances.”

With this in mind, one can see that Acting on stage differs from Acting in a film for a few reasons. Firstly, though spontaneity in an actor’s performance occurs on film, it does not occur at the very same moment you see it, as is the case with theater. The look on Humphrey Bogart’s face as he nods to the band in Casablanca may have been spontaneous in 1942, but it will always be the same no matter how many times I watch it (which is a lot).

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22 This comes from boxofficemojo.com.
Secondly, the stage requires a different presence for an actor than the set. In Ingmar Bergman’s 1975 film adaptation of *The Magic Flute*, a few spoken lines of the actors are whispered, creating an eerie contrast to the bombastic arias and recitative. When performed on stage though, those lines have to reach the guy in the third balcony with the nose-bleed. Also, theater and film actors alike often must create imaginary surroundings. Rarely, in a film or play are the actors actually where their location suggests in the story. For a film actor, this means dealing with a film crew, for a stage actor, it means dealing with an audience and a “fourth wall.”

Nevertheless, Acting theory for the stage and for film, in my opinion, is the same and universal. The concept of “Acting theory,” though, it may surprise the reader, has developed significantly only within the last century. Even though theater has existed for thousands of years, the working definition I have provided for Acting has only been around since the early twentieth century. This concept of Acting was described and brought about by the great Russian actor and director, Constantin Stanislavski, the teachings of whom are of vital importance to extra-psychological reality.

Stanislavski recognized a significant psychological difficulty faced by the actor. He articulates this difficulty well in chapter sixteen of *Building a Character* with Tortsov, a teacher meant to represent himself.

“...when we step on to the stage, we lose our natural endowment and instead of acting creatively, we proceed to

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23 This is the English translation. *Trollflöjten* was the Swedish release title.
24 Stanislavski was highly influenced by psychology, particularly the studies of his contemporary, Ivan Pavlov. (Moore 11)
perform contortions of pretentious proportions. What drives us to do this? The condition of having to create something in public view.” (279)

This assertion is certainly well grounded. How often do we, when expected to act in a certain way, end up acting highly artificially? If you would like an example, think hard about blinking and blink normally. Personally, I end up blinking too much, then not enough in an attempt to overcompensate. All in all, I end up with some “contortions of pretentious proportions.”

The keyword to this introduction of Stanislavski is natural. Stanislavski was very concerned about natural acting because, to him, it separated the tear-jerking actor from the rotten-vegetable actor. Even as far back as Ancient Greece, theater-goers identified the fact that some actors were good and others were bad. We identify this as well, and few would argue that the Acting in a guts-and-gore horror film is as good as that of an Oscar winning performance. People don’t go to those types of movies for the Acting!25

That Acting must be natural is the idea that forms the basis for what is generally referred to as “the Stanislavski system.” For Stanislavski, Acting naturally meant behaving just the way one does in daily life, with “truthful responses” to things. In order to do this, one must fully accept the plausibility of the imaginary circumstances. From where does the actor obtain his understanding of the circumstances? From life! (Moore 73). If an actor must love on stage, then he must know what it means to love in life. For an actor to weep on stage, she must know

25 For an example, go watch The Happening. Try not to vomit.
why she might weep in life. For an actor to fully be the character he or she represents, the actor must understand that character's predicament and why that character might do the things he or she does. “When you play a nasty man,” Stanislavski said, “search for what is good in him.” (Moore 74).

When compared to the Acting which preceded it for hundreds of years, this modern way of Acting is radical. Traditionally, actors were taught how to swoon and dash, but the contemporary actor is taught not to think about what they're doing at all, but merely to react in a truthful manner having already accepted the circumstances. Since a good actor learns from everyday life experiences, we can conclude that Acting reflects life back to the audience.

William Ball addresses this phenomenon in his book *A Sense of Direction* by saying, “The theatre artist gathers people into a dark room and says to them, ‘Look what we’ve discovered. Isn’t this admirable...?’ An artist is someone who draws attention to what is praiseworthy in the Universe.” (46) Indeed, if those involved with a play or film intend to show the audience something praiseworthy, an artificial performance will only hinder that goal. If an actor cannot accept the circumstances of the play, then the audience will not accept them either because his performance will show this lack of acceptance.

We can see then that in order for a performance to be enjoyable, it must be truthful to both its actors and its audience. Remember that motivation comes from our understanding of Purpose. Just as Tolstoy searched for Purpose in life, we too as an audience search for purpose in an actor's motivation, conveyed through
performance. The motivation of characters in a film or play must be familiar to us. In order for it to be familiar to all and thus shared by all, it can not exist simply within one person’s mind. Therefore, the root motivation of an actor’s performance, as in life, must be extra-psychological.

Part V: Yes, We Can Beckon It

The very idea that we, as people, enjoy watching plays and movies tells us something very important. As I stated previously, good actors (those we enjoy watching) draw from their own lives in order to understand their characters and motivations. If we accept that good acting requires that source, then we can proceed to examine a connection to extra-psychological reality.

But first, let’s take the position of the skeptic. Let us pretend that extra-psychological reality doesn’t exist and all of our notions about truth reside simply within our own minds. If this is true, then the actor draws from a “reality” which is unfamiliar to everyone else. Imagine two people standing in adjacent rooms of a house in which one room has been painted yellow and the other has been painted white. “I’m glad this house has white rooms!” yells one to the other. “White rooms?” the other responds, “silly, these rooms are yellow!”

The same would happen to an actor trying to portray the reality within his own mind to someone else in the audience. What if the character needed to be in love? If “love” is simply a subjective idea in the mind, the audience might have a reaction similar to that of the person in the yellow room. “What is this person doing
serenading that girl on the balcony? That’s not how I see love! Let’s go watch a ‘guts and gore’ flick…” No one would enjoy any love scene if there wasn’t some bit of extra-psychological reality to love.

Indeed, we can see now that in order to enjoy any performance, we must share some understanding of the world with the actors themselves. Simba’s predicament makes me and many other people (I hope) cry because we understand some extra-psychological truth in the remorse of losing a loved one. Even though the story may be fantastical, the characters may be animals, and the audience may be children (I’m not ashamed), the element of extra-psychological truth is there, and it’s moving.

This same principle makes comedians funny. The show *Seinfeld*, which enjoyed a good eight years of prime-time television, relied heavily on elements of life that people share: candy bars stuck in vending machines, waiting to be seated at a restaurant, nagging parents, and so on. In order for these things to be funny, we must share some common thoughts about them. Just so, when an actor shows us, as William Ball suggests, what is admirable in the world, it must be something outside of his or her mind, something with which we all share an experience.

What does all of this extra-psychological talk mean for us? We have now seen that a film or a performance shows the audience some extra-psychological truth. Why do we enjoy that so much? In order to tackle this question, we must return to our thoughts on Purpose.
As Tolstoy discovered in his *Confessions*, Purpose must exist outside the realm of the physical for it to be true Purpose at all (52-53). Therefore, our intuitive notions of Purpose (made evident through our desire to live and do things) which are our motivations, link us to this extra-psychological and metaphysical realm wherein Purpose resides. Consequently, when an actor draws from her own motivations to understand those of her character, she draws directly from this great Purpose. For this reason, the audience can understand and enjoy the performance because they too have the same intuitive sense of Purpose. By watching the play or film, the audience is reconnected to the Purpose of life!

I think to put another word on this Purpose might deny its non-physical attribute. I don’t mean to say that we can never get a sense of what it is, or that no one can be more correct in their understanding of it, but I simply can’t explain it in mere words. It isn’t some end product for the world, as if we are part of some great scheme or master plan. Rather, this extra-psychological Purpose, of which we all have some sense, might be that which makes us human. Whether it’s the divine will of a transcendent being or some truth woven into the fabric of the universe, this Purpose defines our humanity.

It’s moments in which we have a great sense of that “hovering light” of Purpose that we feel inspired to do things, like write *there’s something real in this world* on a little piece of paper. Our lives, no matter how great, do not provide us with these moments too frequently. Driving to work, making dinner, and running from the rooster are the kinds of things that make up the bulk of our lives. We do them
because somewhere inside us, we have a sense that it must be done; it must be done because life is worthwhile.

How easily we can forget Purpose when we become so accustomed to living life without thinking about it! As we work and talk and eat and sleep, that light of Purpose drifts slowly away from our awareness. Fortunately for us, we are capable of calling it back. Fortunately for us, when the film rolls or the curtain goes up, when the actor cries or the music sweeps, that Purpose which has inspired it hovers swiftly back to us and lifts us back to the profound understanding of our own existence. Do I dare suggest that we not only enjoy it, but we need it? I believe we do.

“When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe than ours,
A friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,- that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’”

Keats, from “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

When John Keats wrote this with reference to an object of art, he had discovered that very need we have for experiencing beauty. The beautiful hovering light that we beckon when we sit in a theater is one of Truth, and it reassures us that our lives are not lived in vain. Through our daily living, we have placed our hearts
under that sky of Purpose which covers our world. The hovering light from that sky will remind us of it all. Drift freely, little light; we know you’re always there.

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