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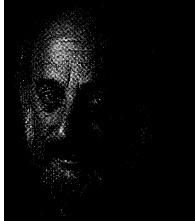
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Professor Jay L. Garfield is Doris Silbert Professor in the
Humanities and Professor of Philosophy at Smith College. He
also teaches philosophy at the University of Massachusetts,
Melbourne University, and India’s Central University of Tibetan
Studies. Professor Garfield is the author, coauthor, or coeditor
of 16 books. Among these are *The Oxford Handbook of World
Philosophy* and *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*.

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Intellectual History

The Meaning of Life

The Meaning of Life: Perspectives from the World’s Great Intellectual Traditions

Guidebook

Professor Jay L. Garfield

Smith College



Job's Predicament—Life Is So Unfair

Lecture 8

There's already a sense in which the book of Job is representing people not as free agents in the world but as kind of among the ... random catastrophes or benefits that can happen. This is not your ... standard representation of human agency. This isn't Aristotle; this isn't the Gītā.

In our examination of ancient views about the meaning of life, we've thus far visited India and classical Greece. As we've seen, the Gītā emphasized the importance of individual choice, existential situations, and an understanding of our relationship to the transcendent. It also argued for the need to detach ourselves from our immediate surroundings and conditions in order to free ourselves for thoughtful action. In contrast, Aristotle emphasized our connections to friends and associates and a set of virtues aimed not at a relationship to the transcendent but at enrichment of life in the temporal world. It's useful to think of these two texts as providing complementary perspectives.

Before we begin our study of the book of Job, let's pause to consider our approach to the texts we've been examining. Both the Bhagavad-Gītā and *The Nicomachean Ethics* are, in a sense, sacred texts in important spiritual traditions, but we didn't adopt a religious attitude toward them. For our purposes, it's a mistake to treat such texts as so sacred that we give up the right to interpret them and connect them to our own lives. We will take the same philosophical approach to the book of Job.

Job is a book of mysterious origins and authorship, probably well known in its standard form by about the 6th century B.C. The preface tells us that Job is both extremely virtuous and extremely rich. He's so virtuous and rich, in fact, that Satan is prompted to question whether God has made it too easy for Job to be pious because he has been so blessed. Satan, acting as God's "devil's advocate," urges God to put Job to the test. God, believing that Job will remain pious, agrees to allow Satan to wreak his havoc as long as he doesn't hurt Job himself. As we know, Job is then subjected to various catastrophes that destroy his home and livestock and kill his children.

Of course, Job laments his losses, but he continues to praise God. Satan ups the ante, asking God to bring physical suffering to Job, and God agrees. Satan causes painful boils to appear on Job's body. Job's wife asks her husband, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die." In effect, she's saying that his years of piety have been meaningless. Job responds, "Let the day perish on which I was born. Why did I not die at birth?" but he still doesn't relinquish his faith.

If our lives are so short and full of toil without reward, how can they be meaningful?

Next, Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, come to visit. They are certain that he must have done something to deserve his fate, and if he will only repent of his sins, God's punishment will cease. Job tells them that he needs consolation from his friends, not rebuke—an Aristotelian point of view. Further, his friends are unable to tell him what he's done wrong; they simply presume that he's done something. Job says that misfortune isn't necessarily our own fault.

Then Job launches into a series of questions: Is life meaningless? It seems that we work hard on earth in hopes of a reward, but we don't always get that reward. Job acknowledges, too, that life is brief: "Remember that my life is but breath" If our lives are so short and full of toil without reward, how can they be meaningful? Finally, Job sees that life is unjust, and he asks God why he has become the target for suffering. Job challenges God: "For now I will lie down in the dust; And thou will seek me, but I will not be." Bildad, hearing this, accuses Job of blasphemy: charging God with injustice. Again, Bildad tells Job that he must have done something to deserve his suffering, but Job says that justice is exactly the wrong metaphor for thinking about God because the parties involved are so unequal. Moreover, the world is full of injustice, and if God is in charge, then he's responsible for it.

The third friend, Zophar, tells Job that he doesn't necessarily understand anything about God, but he should accept that he has committed some sin and repent. We might think that this defense of blind piety is the moral of the story, but it's not. Job tells his friends that they are arguing as if they are somehow channeling God and that none of their claims makes sense. The

real problem for Job—and for us—is to try to make sense of life in the face of these facts: that we are going to die after a life of suffering and that we're stuck in a world that doesn't seem to be organized by a just God. Given those circumstances, what is the meaning of life? ■

Suggested Reading

Job.

Mitchell, *The Book of Job*.

Scheindlin, *The Book of Job*.

Study Questions

1. Why does God take up the bet? What does this say about the nature of the deity as it is portrayed in this book?
2. Why are Job's friends so sure that he must have done something to deserve his misfortune?

Job's Challenge—Who Are We?

Lecture 9

What Job has done—the book of Job, that is—is to take the suffering of an individual and quickly universalize it.

We ended the last lecture with Job's three friends arguing that Job must have done something to deserve his suffering, even though he doesn't know what it is, and urging him to repent. But Job knows that the idea of divine justice makes no sense because justice implies a sense of equality, and we are not equal to God. Further, any reasonable person looking at what God has done would have to conclude that this is already a case of terrible injustice. Job has shown us that there's nothing particular about himself; we are all Job. All of us lead lives that are short and full of suffering.

At this point, Job's friends begin to argue that we might make sense of our brief, anguished lives in the context of an incomprehensible God and an incomprehensible universe. Eliphaz accuses Job of spinning out theories claiming to understand what's going on, claiming even to understand that everything is incomprehensible; this is what Job is being punished for. Note the thematic shift here: Earlier, the discussion took for granted that Job's suffering made some kind of sense; now it takes for granted that everything is incomprehensible. Bildad tells Job that he is compounding whatever his original sin might have been by refusing to accept the obvious explanation for his suffering. Job's blasphemy is that he thinks he understands everything and knows that God is unjust.

Zophar attempts to console Job, telling him that his suffering will be temporary and that in the end, good will triumph. Job knows that life isn't like this fairytale; we all inhabit the ash heap of reality, in which evil sometimes prospers and justice sometimes fails. If we're going to find meaning in our lives, we have to find it in a world that is, in fact, imperfect and unjust.

Bildad argues that we are worthless, insignificant specks in the universe—"maggots and worms"—while God is great and majestic; thus, he has given

us exactly the universe we deserve. Job points out that this view is the real blasphemy. If we take for granted that God is just and good and can punish us when we deserve it, then saying that we are maggots who deserve terrible lives is saying that God, justly and benevolently, created a world of maggots

just to torture them. That makes both our relationship to God and our lives totally meaningless.

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took for granted that Job's suffering made some kind of sense; now it takes for granted that everything is incomprehensible.

At this point, a younger man, Elihu, enters. He urges Job to pay attention because God is trying to tell him something, but Job wonders how he's supposed to interpret this message. If all his suffering itself is meaningless, then it must be that God is meaningless.

Elihu, however, has made the first profound point against Job. It may well be that things in the world are meaningless and we're smart enough to see that they're meaningless, or it may be that there is a larger pattern or message in what seems meaningless, and our perspective is too narrow for us to see it. Job may be blaming God or the universe for his own inability to understand.

Now God challenges all of the assembled men and, in doing so, challenges us, as well. We're not just Job, but we're the friends, too, because each of us has a certain amount of faith that everything will come out all right and that if we think hard enough, the universe is comprehensible. God now says that he is, in fact, totally incomprehensible and we shouldn't even try to understand. He confirms the idea that justice is nonsense when we talk about the relationship between human beings and divinity and tells us that he doesn't owe us any hidden purpose or justification for his actions because the universe isn't organized around us. Job and his friends have taken for granted that the universe is organized to be comprehensible to us, to be a place where we can lead meaningful lives. But that is the most terrible hubris of all. In the end, we can't necessarily make sense of our lives or of God.

The book of Job gives us a disturbing vision of the meaning of life, a vision of a vast universe, perhaps personified in a deity, in which we are very small

players. We might think that the universe is organized to reward and punish us, but the book of Job tells us that we're not all that important; our lives are indeed ephemeral. There might be a divinity to the world, but whatever it is, it's not about justice and it's not about us. Life is not meaningless, but we may live our lives without ever knowing its meaning. ■

Suggested Reading

Job.

Mitchell, *The Book of Job*.

Scheindlin, *The Book of Job*.

Study Questions

1. Why is the fact that there is no justice in God's actions not a problem?
2. Why does Job's lament appear to be blasphemous? Why isn't it?
3. What are the similarities and the differences between the vision of the relation of humans to the divine in the Gītā and in Job?

