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525,600 Minutes: Time, Eternity and Finding Value in Our Lives | Alan Lightman & Meghan Sullivan

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The Veritas Forum

Dr. Alan Lightman, MIT, and Dr. Meghan Sullivan, Notre Dame, discuss how the modern world is impacting the way we view and utilize time and what that means for humanity. Dr. Meghan Sullivan's current book is titled 'Time Biases: A Theory of Rational Planning and Personal Persistence' with a forthcoming book titled 'God and the Good Life' (with Paul Blaschko). Dr. Alan Lightman's new book is called 'Three Flames.' Please like, share, review and subscribe to this podcast. Thank you!

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in thought. Today we hear from Meghan Sullivan.

A philosopher at the University of Notre Dame and Alan Lightman, a physicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In a talk titled '525,600 Minutes, Time, Eternity and Finding Value in Our Very Short Lives.' Not long ago I found myself in a small village, a remote village in Cambodia. The inhabitants of this village from Angkuram live in one room huts.

They cook over open fires, they have no electricity or plumbing and they support themselves by growing rice and watermelons and cucumbers. Each morning, the women of the village ride their bicycles to a market which is about 10 miles away on a very rutted red dirt road. And through a translator, I asked one of the women how long it takes her to ride her bike to this market which she does every day.

And she got a puzzled look on her face and said, I never thought about that. And I was totally startled by her disinterest in time. And envious, we in the developed countries, and I put quotes around developed, have created a frenzied lifestyle in which not a minute is to be wasted.

The precious 24 hours of each day are carved up, dissected and reduced to 10-minute units of efficiency. We become agitated and angry if we have to wait in a doctor's office for more than 10 minutes. We become angry if our printers don't spit out at least five pages per minute.

And we have to be plugged into the grid at all times. We take our smartphones and our laptops with us on vacations. We go through our emails at restaurants.

And when we take walks in the woods, we're looking at our smartphones. And the teenagers I know check their smartphones every three or four minutes, maybe some of you do as well. At night, many people sleep with their smartphones next to their beds or under their pillows.

And when the school day ends, our children are rushed through piano lessons and dance classes and their university curricula are so crayon full that they don't have time to digest with their learning. And I plead guilty myself. If I take the time to look at what I do myself for a 24-hour period, I realize that from the moment I get up in the morning to the moment I go to bed that I'm at work on some project.

The first thing I do is when I get up as I look at my email. And if I have an extra hour in the day, I will work on an article that I'm writing or prepare a class. If I have an extra few minutes, I will check email.

If I have an extra few seconds, I might look at telephone messages. Unconsciously, without thinking about it, I have divided my day into smaller and smaller units of efficient time use. And there are no holes left.

There are no breathing spaces in the day. I rarely goof off. I rarely waste time.

And certainly, I would never, never ride a bicycle for two hours on a red dirt road without knowing exactly how long the trip took or listening to an audio book on the way. There are many aspects of today's time-driven wired existence, but they're all connected. And all can be traced back to technological improvement and increasing prosperity.

Throughout history, the pace of life has been regulated by the speed of communication. And the speed of communication, in turn, is part of the technological advance that has led to the internet, social media, and the vast, all-consuming network that I just call the grid. That same talk technology has been part of the great economic process that has increased productivity in the workplace.

And when that increased productivity is combined with a time-equal money equation, we have a heightened awareness of the commercial and goal-oriented uses of time at the expense of the more reflective, free-floating, and non-goal-oriented uses of time. Technology, however, is only the tool. It is human hands that work the tools.

It's us. And I think that our entire way of thinking has changed over the last 50 years, our way of being in the world, our social and psychological ethos. Many of us cannot spend an hour of unscheduled time.

We cannot sit alone in a room for 10 minutes without external stimulation. We can't take a walk in the woods without a smart phone. And these behavioral syndromes are all part of the hyper-connected, splintered, frantic, high-speed world that we're living in now and that we created ourselves.

And what I want to ask is, is what have we lost by this frantic, hyper-connected life that we're all living? What have we lost? If we no longer have time to let our minds wander and imagine, if we no longer have time to think about what we're learning, what have we lost? Well, certainly, and I'll speak about myself now because I'm I plead guilty. I do have a smart phone, although I don't carry it with me very often. Certainly, I've threatened my creative activities.

Psychologists have long known that creativity thrives on unstructured time, on play, on divergent thinking, on unpurposed, unnon-goal-oriented ramblings through the mansions of life. Gustave Mahler, the composer, routinely took three or four-hour walks after lunch with a notebook where he would jot down musical ideas. Cara Young, the psychologist, did some of his greatest, had some of his greatest and creative thinking when he took time off from his frenzy, practice, and Zurich to go to his country house in Bollingen.

And in the middle of a writing project, Gertrude Stein wondered about the countryside looking at cows. Another thing that I've lost by living this frantic lifestyle that we're all living now is I've endangered the needed replenishment of the mind that comes from doing nothing in particular from taking long walks without a destination, from simply finding a few moments of the day away from the noise of the world. The mind needs to rest.

The mind needs periods of calm. And this need for rest and calm of the mind has been recognized for thousands of years. It was described as early as 1500 BC in the meditation practices of Hinduism and later Buddhism.

But I've lost something more than my creativity and the replenishment of mind. I think I've lost something of my inner self. And by inner self, I mean that part of me that imagines the dreams that explores this constantly questioning who I am and what's important to me.

The inner soil that roots me to me, to my inner self, is solitude and personal reflection. When I listen to my inner self, I hear the breathing of my spirit. And those breaths are very tiny and delicate.

You need quiet to hear those breaths of your inner spirit. You need slowness, you need privacy. And without the breathing and the voice of my inner self, I am a prisoner of the wired world around me.

The number of depressed, distressed young people in the United States, and I think in other parts of the world, I was talking to somebody who's Chinese and she said it's the same in China, the number of distressed, depressed young people has been increasing in recent years. According to the National Institute of Health from 2010 to 2015, the fraction of adolescents who reported being depressed, severely depressed, an increase from 8% to 13%. And there are of course many factors causing this increase of depression.

But some experts say the main driver is the massive and pervasive influence of the grid with little desire to disconnect. So what's the problem with non-stop connection to the grid? I have a friend, Ross Peterson, who is a New England psychiatrist and he sees a lot of young people. And he told me that in his view, the source of the increased depression and anxiety in teenagers is their terror of aloneness.

And that terror is intimately connected to the intense, hyper-connected social media environment of today. Modern teenagers who live in the world of Facebook and Snapchat and Instagram, they find it nearly impossible to be alone. They're always connected.

And Peter's, Dr. Peterson mentioned something to me called a syndrome called foam model, which stands for fear of missing out. F-O-M-O, fear of missing out. And what are we missing out on if we aren't introbate, veniously connected to the grid? We're missing out on that vast, squirming, unceasing, ubiquitous explosion of images and words, stories, messages, connections, real news and fake news, happenings, all of that is on the grid.

And it's an addiction. It's an addiction. We could get another hit just like pressing a button.

And like any drug addiction, there's never enough. We are dependent on the digital flow. We're always waiting for the next hit.

We're always running to catch up. We're always behind foam-O. I went out a couple of years ago with my daughter and her friends.

They were all about 30 years old, a birthday party. And when we sat down at the dinner table, all of the young women took out their smartphones and laid it on the table, like many oxygen tanks and the symphonic patients. So how did we arrive at this point in the

history of the world? Well, as I mentioned earlier, the pace of life has always been regulated by the pace of business.

And the pace of business has been always driven by the speed of communication. In 1881, there was a physician, George Beard, who warned about American anxiousness caused by the new technologies in 1881. And at that time, it was the railroad and the telegraph.

And the telegraph in 1881 could communicate about three bits per second. When the internet was invented around 1985, the communication speed was invented, but the public use of the internet. I actually used the internet in the early 1970s.

But in 1985, the internet could communicate about a thousand bits per second. And now it's over one billion bits per second. And just remember, the pace of life is regulated by the speed of communication.

Much of the pace and stress of the workplace, which eventually carries over it to the rest of life, is caused by the relationship between time and money. The urgency to make every second count comes about when we got increased productivity and we're making more money per minute. I think that the situation is dire.

Just as in global warming, we may already be at the point of no return. The syndrome that I'm describing is not quite as visible as global warming, but I think that it's just as real. Invisibly, we are losing ourselves.

We're losing our ability to know who we are and what is important to us. We are creating a global machine in which each of us is a mindless gear, relentlessly driven by the speed and the noise and the artificial urgency of the world around us. It's an artificial urgency.

So what can we do? I want to end on a positive note and you have to have some optimism. Can we change this? Well, I think that we need to create new habits of mind as individuals and as a society. We need a mental attitude that values privacy, stillness, slowness, a mental attitude that honors the inner self.

I have a few recommendations. I think for K through 12 students, there should be a required 10-minute period of silence sometime during the school day. I think for college students, there should be an introspective intensive course.

I know that we have a communication intensive course. There should be an introspective intensive course created by each academic department that has less reading, less assignments, but more time to digest what the students are learning. In the workplace, I think there should be a quiet room where employees are encouraged and allowed to go for 30 minutes a day.

You can't take your laptops or your smartphones with you in a quiet room. It should not

be part of the lunch hour. It's in addition to the lunch hour.

I think for families, there should be an unplugged hour during the evening where all devices are turned off. It might be over dinner. I think for us as individuals that we should think about how we spend our time each day, and we should build in 30 minutes a day without devices just being quiet.

And I think for society as a whole, there should be mandated screen-free zones in public spaces where digital devices are forbidden. Although changing habits of mind is difficult, it can be done. We did that with tobacco and smoking.

It took 40 years, but we did manage to change our habits of mind. And I think we can do it also with how we spend our time if we have the will. Thank you.

It's so much fun for me to be here. I've loved Alan's work for 25 years now. Einstein's dreams is still a book that I give to my students and my friends.

Brad and I have been colleagues and interlocutors in this really detailed fight about the correct way to represent the passage of time and logic for about 10 years now. So it's a great fun to have him here. In one of my lives, I think a lot about the nature of time itself, but in another one of my lives, I think a little bit about the value of our concepts of time for our life.

And that's really going to be the focus of my remarks here tonight. I think Sam and the Veritas team picked a really interesting question and one that's surprisingly philosophers don't spend a ton of time on right now, even though it's a big part of Greek and Roman philosophy, namely this question of nihilism. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful or meaningless? And what would it take to satisfy ourselves that in fact our lives were meaningful? My remarks, you're going to see in a moment, are actually going to connect up in some pretty interesting and collaborative ways with what Alan has just said, but in other respects, they're going to be a little bit different.

One respect in which it's going to be different is tonight, I'm at least going to present to you a religious spiritual answer to this question of how we understand the problem of nihilism that comes from a Christian perspective. And I hope we'll at the very least give us one focal point to have some folks in history of thought of this question that we can use as a jumping off point for a further big debate about this big, interesting, complicated philosophical question. So I want to start off by talking a little bit about nihilism.

There are lots of ways we can find ourselves in the grips of nihilism, so I'm going to try to like disturb you now for a minute. Why? Why start to worry that our lives are meaningless? One way you can start to worry about it is you might think the very concept of meaning is value. It just doesn't make any sense, and therefore our lives are

meaningless because it just doesn't make sense at all to ask this question about what it is to lead a truly meaningful life.

Another way you might start to find yourself tempted towards nihilism is you might think all of my activities, there is such a thing as meaning, but none of the things that I'm doing in my life live up to that standard. In fact, either all of my activities are ending in pain and disappointment, or at the very least, like I'm not able to do anything that's ultimately really fulfilling. Maybe it's not a personal problem, maybe you think on a societal level, you're just born in an era when it's not possible to have fulfilling projects anymore, and for that reason, you're worried about nihilism.

Those are legitimate questions. Their questions, philosophers, spend a lot of time on. They're not the questions I'm going to talk about tonight.

Instead, I want to talk about the distinctive and weird way that space and time itself can introduce a nihilist threat to our lives. Space can start to get us thinking about nihilism when we consider how big the universe is. If you estimate, and I'm at MIT, so I'm going to quote some things that I think are science, but if there's an actual astrophysicist here, I will defer to you.

The universe is incredibly incredibly big. According to my research, it's 93 billion light years in diameter right now. So when you think about this spatially, the whole universe, 93 billion light years, I don't even have a concept of that except really, really, really big.

And then you think about us and planet Earth and our entire universe, which is completely wrapped up in this minuscule tiny galaxy in that humongous universe, you start to feel like somebody who's never left their tiny hometown. Your entire life is just around this really tiny town, and you have no idea about this big world that's out there. And you might realize that about yourself might make your life feel small and parochial in a way that's really disturbing.

And then multiply that by 93 billion light years, and your life gets that much more like puny and insignificant. That's a way that space can make us feel insignificant. Time can do it in even more interesting ways.

So if you imagine that the universe has had about 14 billion years, give or take 50 billion years, that was the margin of error I found on the internet. Which seems like, again, not a scientist. That seems like a big margin of error.

But between 65 and 14 billion years have already occurred in the universe. We've got maybe five billion years of events left to go. That's a lot of time.

And at the end of that, there's going to be some big rip or some big chill that's going to end spacer time as we know it. On the one hand, thinking about that is cool. Like you think about huge explosion at the beginning of the universe, huge rip or whatever at the

end.

It's exciting as a metaphysician to think about questions like that. But on the other hand, if you really start to do on questions like that, you realize how insignificant your little 100, maybe 120, if we're lucky, year life is in this 20 to 70 billion year story of the universe where we're just like such a very small part of that. And that can get you also starting to feel like maybe this life that seems valuable to me is actually really meaningless in the being scheme of things.

So time also introduces this nihilist threat. These are not new thoughts to 21st century people. These are things that human beings have been thinking about ever since they've been able to think about the passage of time in some way or another.

And in fact, something that's really interesting, I think, as a Christian, is there are entire sections of the Bible that are dedicated to how meaningless our lives seem. So if any of you guys have read the book of Ecclesiastes, it starts off with these really great lines. Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity.

What gain is there for man in all of his toil that he toils under the sun, a generation goes, a generation comes. But the earth endures forever. There's no remembrance of the wise or with the fool since in the days to come everything's going to be forgotten.

The wise man's going to die just like the fool. All of our lives are insignificant. Doesn't matter if you were the smartest kid at MIT and you went on to cure cancer.

The author of Ecclesiastes says, "Somebody in the future is going to cure cancer better. MIT is going to have better students. Nobody's going to ever remember that you existed." And it's going to be as though, I mean, you could have spent your entire life counting blades of grass in your front yard.

And the big scheme of things, it wouldn't matter. There's no way that your life could be more meaningful as a result of your efforts. Now, I give this passage to my students and a lot of them think like, but then the book in the Bible is going to go on to explain how to get out of this puzzle, right? These guys have read this part of the Bible.

It doesn't solve the problem for you. I mean, this is the whole wisdom literature in the Bible. The book of Job also does this.

Like, God seems to allow horrible things to happen to people. And then you're keep expecting the author of this chapter of the Bible to tell you why. And they don't.

You never really get a clear answer to your question. Same with the book of Ecclesiastes. You keep going in the book.

You get like advice about how to distribute grain in your kingdom. He knows what a lot of

us do. You think about the nihilist threat and then you immediately try to just make it a more tractable, like simple, life, rational planning problem.

But it is a big question. It's a legitimate problem. And on a personal scale, it's a problem that a lot of us wrestle with.

You might not, you might only think about it like once a year when you're at a Veritas Forum. But it's a question that becomes a little bit more pressing when you're sitting in a hospital waiting room with a loved one or when you're driving on an icy road and your car starts to skid off a little bit. Or just in general, you know, if you have one of these quite introspective moments that Alan's talking about and you're thinking about this life that's so precious to you and then you think about how freaking big space and time are and how small we are in the scheme of things.

It can be a bit overwhelming. Leo Tolstoy had this like epic midlife crisis, really late midlife crisis when he was 50. If you've read his autobiography, he starts to think about this question.

He just can't get it out of his head. He's one of the most famous authors in the world. He's incredibly rich.

He has a prosperous family. And he just keeps thinking to himself, "No matter what I do, I cannot make a permanent difference in the world." Even within a few generations, people are not going to remember who I am and what I've done. This is what he writes in his autobiography.

He's really losing it at this point. His wife intervenes later. Says, "Sooner or later, my deeds, whatever they may have been, are going to be forgotten.

They'll no longer exist. What is all the fuss about then? How could somebody carry on living and fail to perceive this? That's what's so astonishing. It's possible to go on living only while you're intoxicated with life.

But once you're sober, it's impossible not to see that it's all a stupid trick." So, I mean, these were thoughts that have occurred to great minds in the past and there are definitely thoughts that occur to us as individuals. The question is, how do we get out of it? First thing we do as a philosopher, I think, is try to understand how Tolstoy or the person that wrote Ecclesiastes, how are they arguing? What assumptions are they making about meaning when they try to issue this argument? It seems like Tolstoy, especially, is thinking for one of our activities to be really meaningful, it has to make some difference going forward. It doesn't think it has to make a difference necessarily in the sense that you're world famous for the rest of time and everybody always remembers that you were the one that did that thing.

That's a ridiculously high standard. But at the very least, you have to think the things

that you're filling your life with are not fads. They're not stupid.

They're not the kinds of things that as soon as your life is over, people are going to look back and think they have no interest in those activities anymore. And that seems to be a precondition and meaningfulness. It's like connected in some way to something beyond itself.

So, you might think of an example. I was wasting tons of time on the internet today. I'm sorry, my phone too.

And I was reading like mental floss and they had a really funny thing about historical fads. Things people in previous generations were really obsessed with. And there was a really, one that really stuck in my head is in like the 1700s, 1800s in England, it was a big fad if you were really wealthy to hire a hermit to live on your property.

So, you would hire somebody to pretend to live in like a cave or a tent on your property so that when you had parties, you could show your guests that you had a hermit and they could admire the fact that this person was an ascetic and contemplative who lived on your property. And really they were only doing it around party time. Like the rest of the time they had friends and they would go to the pub.

But like the hermit thing was a really big deal. And it was very fashionable for people to talk about their hermits. And we look back on those people and we laugh at them.

We think like 80 at 18th century people. That was a waste of money. That was fake.

That was a silly thing to invest your resources in. No, we don't want any of our projects right now to look like fads in that way. When we think that the experience of looking at a beautiful piece of art is meaningful, we think it's meaningful because we think even if this particular artistic movement doesn't last forever, people are still going to care about fine art going on into the future.

We're going to be in an important way connected up with the future. So, the question is whether or not we can be assured in our lives the kinds of activities that we pour ourselves into, we are meeting that standard. And that's where the temporal nihilist problem gets really puzzling.

Logically it looks like we're kind of in a Ponzi scheme. So, we assume some event, some activity that we're really invested in is meaningful. Maybe that's raising your children.

Or it's appreciating really beautiful art. Or it's writing amazing philosophy books that are sold for at all fine booksellers for like 40 bucks. We think these activities are meaningful because we think they're importantly connected with the interests of people in the future.

Those people's interests are going to be meaningful only if they're appropriately connected up with the interests of other people in the future that are also meaningful. The meaning book keeps getting passed on and on and on further and further into the future. But then we get, you know, fill in the blank, the big rip, the heat death of the universe, the Google AI taking over culture and human culture as we know it no longer being a thing.

And as soon as down the road these activities that we care so much about cease to exist, then the walls come crashing down. And the thing that happened right before that turns out to have been a fad. And then it turns out the people right before that were betting all their hopes on something that turned out to be meaningless.

And for Tolstoy, at least, he comes crashing back down into his own life. And he fills this desperation that he can't make a permanent difference to the world. Now we can talk about whether there are problems with that logic.

I think as a philosopher there are interesting questions for that logic. But it's at least like an interesting puzzle and one that's enduring for us as human beings. So then we face this question and this is like a real "how do we live our lives?" question.

Presumably we want meaningful lives. What kinds of activities are going to be able to like pass muster? Is there anything we can do in our lives to try to get us out of this Ponzi scheme? One option, and this is an option that the Greek philosophers debated very heavily, and actually MIT philosopher Kieran Sedia has really been trying to revive in some cool, interesting work, is to make a distinction between activities in our lives that have a beginning, a middle, and an end that have this kind of purposeful structure and activities in our lives that are valuable just in and of themselves. So the Greek distinction you might use for drawing this is the difference between teleic activities.

Teleic activities are activities where the goal, the value comes from having some goal at the end that's reached, and atelic activities, atelic activities are activities that just seem to get their value from the activity happening. That doesn't have to reach any particular goal. In fact, it probably doesn't have a goal.

So examples of teleic activities that seem to have value are like the value of getting a degree from MIT or the value of running in the Boston Marathon, the value of finishing a book, where the payoff comes at the end when you've achieved something that presumably has some enduring value. That's what gave value to the process that got there. Atelic activities are activities where you just do them and the value seems to come from doing them.

This might be contemplation. That's what the Greeks thought it was. So just sitting down and thinking to yourself, ruminating to yourself, there's no like final thing that you're aiming at or goal to contemplation.

It's just the very act of doing it is where you get the benefit of it. What Seddia says is that searching for atelic activities nowadays might mean cultivating meditative practices. This would be similar to some of Alan's recommendations, like cultivating time with yourself, where you're just spending time enjoying yourself, and there's no particular end or speed with which you can complete that activity.

Aristotle and Plato had huge fights about how much of our lives should be dominated by atelic versus telic activities. In fact, if you read Aristotle, how many of you guys have read Aristotle's show of hands? All right. You should be proud.

How many of you guys have never read Aristotle? Shame. That's your one goal tonight is to go home and read Aristotle. Aristotle, if you read the Nicomachean Ethics, it's most important book.

It's really hilarious because it's got 10 chapters. The first 9 chapters are telling you how to be good at purposeful activities. It's totally telic.

How to make better friends. How to be better at politics. How to be a better athlete.

How to be a better doctor. How to be a better Lear player. You get tons of advice on searching for activities that are going to give you meaning.

But then even Aristotle gets to the end of this and he thinks, "In the big scheme of things, this isn't going to work because ecclesiastes worries. You might be the best like Lear player ever, but people are going to forget you ever existed and they're going to be interested in different instruments 500 years from now. You're not going to be or at the very least, like, heat death of the universe.

I mean, Aristotle did think things would go on forever, but we can fill in the blanks for him. These telic activities, even if we think we're making a permanent difference to the world, eventually time itself is going to wipe out that difference. There's just no such thing as a permanent difference.

Aristotle gets to the end of the Nicomachean Ethics and he says, "Actually, there might be a better way for us to live." And that is a life that's totally contemplative, that doesn't have any distinct final goal that's like the permanent goal of it, but instead, it's just like deep, continuous contemplation of something. And then Aristotle gets his question, "What am I supposed to be contemplating? What are those K through 12 kids supposed to be thinking about during that 10 minutes of silence?" And Aristotle's like, "That's a tough question. That's a really hard question." Aristotle eventually takes a step back and says he's worried that this is only a life for gods and not a life for human beings like us.

Just the nature of humanity is that we set these goals for ourselves and we try really hard to achieve them. And then we face this worry that none of the activities that we fill our lives with are ever going to make a permanent difference. So one option for getting

out of the temporalist nihilist threat is to just stop dedicating your life to activities that only get their goal for making some kind of permanent difference or impact.

So to go totally atelic or totally contemplative. But that just does not seem to be an option for most of us. Is anybody here thinking about becoming a monk or like a hermit, one of those hermits? I mean for a lot of us, like the life of action is where we like really feel alive.

We feel alive when we're going after goals, when we're conducting research, when we're writing books, when we're trying to achieve things. So then the question is whether or not for super t-like people like us, there's still a reasonable way in which we can make sense of the meaning of our lives, despite the fact that our lives are so hilariously short and insignificant in the big scheme of things. That's the big puzzle.

Now you might say this is where my Notre Dame students always think they're very clever and they know where the talk is going, you say, "Ah, she's a Christian speaker." So she's going to say, "The secret is that heaven is forever." And so as long as we believe in heaven forever, we've got all our problems solved. And I don't know, veritas is probably going to fire me for saying this. Heaven is not all this problem for us, at least not directly.

Why is that? Well the vision of the heavenly afterlife that Christians believe in, the Muslims believe in is not a vision of the afterlife where our activities in this life necessarily have really clear analogues. So it's, we get visions, and I'll talk about the Christian tradition because that's the one I know best, visions of heaven that we get from the Christian tradition are admittedly pretty weird. If you read St. Thomas Aquinas, how many people have ever read Aquinas? Oh, that makes me happy.

If you read St. Thomas Aquinas, Aquinas says, "Here's what you have to look forward to in the afterlife, contemplating God forever." If you thought you were going to be playing chess with Socrates or like jumping out of trampoline with Jesus, those are not options. You'll have a body in heaven. Bodies are important for Christians and for Aquinas, but your main goal is just going to be staring at God with everyone else forever and contemplating him.

If you're not somebody that really enjoys praying right now, get started because that's what you've got to look forward to in Aquinas' heaven. He also thinks everything's going to be perfectly spherical. He says that at one point because spheres are perfect.

I mean it's a little bit strange and we're making fun of Aquinas a little bit. I mean I do, I absolutely believe in a spiritual afterlife, but one of the tenets of Christianity is this is going to be radically different than this life. This life I've committed myself to the most important activities I pursue are doing things with my family, going to philosophy conferences.

I am not 100% sure there's going to be anything like that in afterlife. So I face this question that afterlife is not going to be the thing that solves by itself this question of the Ponzi scheme, like the ultimate guarantor that the things that I poured myself into in this life are going to be represented well in the afterlife. Other visions of heaven are not quite Aquinas' vision.

They might be more active, but you tend to be rebuilding Jerusalem. You tend to be like performing activities that people were doing in the Garden of Eden. There's no Netflix as far as I can tell.

None of the things that we do in fact think are sometimes quasi-meaningful uses of our time seem to have analogs in this eternal afterlife. So the mere fact that you might believe in an afterlife that goes on eternally is not necessarily going to be enough to answer this nihilist worry about the activities that you're pouring yourselves into in this life. So how do Christians try to answer this puzzle? I mean I think it's a really important part of Christian ethics that we don't think that our lives are meaningless and we also don't think that everyone has to become contemplative.

So how do we make sense of our super-purpose driven activity-filled lives in the scheme of this nihilist threat? Well for many Christians in a deep strain of Christian philosophy what's really important is that the activities that we find really meaningful and that we pour ourselves into be connected with something that's permanent and good, but that permanent good thing doesn't have to be just a permanent continuation of our life. It can be connected with a permanent good thing that's God. So what does that mean? It means when you find activities in this life like the activities of creating knowledge or the activities of loving and caring for other people.

The like permanent eternal guarantor of that meaningfulness is the fact that creativity and love are aspects of God who's permanent and eternal. And we're in this life like right now presently participating in things that are permanently internally good. This is a platonic, Christian platonic conception of meaningfulness, but it's one that a lot of people have found really attractive and is at least one like live answer for trying to answer the nihilist threat without just thinking that adding more time into our lives or more time into history is going to be the thing that solves this problem, at least when you find yourself in the grips of this problem.

So this is a view that again I entertain really seriously both personally and I think it's a live philosophical option for answering what is a live philosophical question. Alan did a great job of making some practical recommendations that come out of his theory for thinking about this puzzle of how we create more space for meaning in the context of our lives. So all and maybe with a couple other practical considerations that come from taking this kind of conception of God seriously.

First practical consideration I think is we live in a culture and I look at you MIT engineers.

How many engineers do we have here? I look at you guys. So it's acutely focused on the future and making a difference to the future and the relationship of our projects to nearby future generations.

And that's good in a certain sense. It's important to care about the future and it's important to care about other people, but that's not the only temporal direction we ever have to look in to find meaning. In fact one thing that I find like really liberating and rich about the Christian tradition is that we can also look back on past people and their efforts, sometimes their hilariously silly efforts like hiring hermits to live on your estate.

They seem to be totally obsolete and like all of our technology, all of our efforts are ultimately going to be made obsolete as well. But still we appreciate the fact that they were striving and creativity and love to participate in something that was eternally good. And we're going to be in their same boat.

Future generations are going to look on our efforts in a similarly trivial way, but appreciate the fact that we really cared about what was good. So I find that liberating that you can think about our relationship with the people that have come before us just as much about our relationship and duties to the people who are going to come next. I think another thing that's important to think about is this view of meaning really encourages us to cultivate gratitude for our ridiculously short lives and puny space of the universe that we live them in.

Because we think at the very least our small efforts they don't have to be perfect. We're forgiven for not making a permanent difference to the world. The biggest thing we have to focus on is whether or not in fact we're able to connect up our half-hearted efforts with something that's much bigger than ourselves.

And that is what a lot of us ordinarily think of is the source of meaning. So that's one option. And then finally, and this totally sympathizes with Alan's really interesting remarks at the beginning, we especially high-achieving intellectual folks can tend to make an idle out of time management.

We can think that we can pour more meaning into our lives by just being more efficient, by downloading a better sleep app by like Pomodoroing. Is that even still a thing? Or like set these 15-minute timers to interrupt your writing? There's something good in that drive within us because it's part of the drive to do better at being creative, at discovering truth. That's all good parts of our nature.

But the fact that you're able to manage your time in this, remember, insanely short, in the scheme of things life that we're given is not in and of itself that important. Why is that? Because again, at the end of the day, none of us as individuals are ever going to make any kind of permanent difference to this big insane universe. 20 to 70 billion years are going to go on, and we're just 100 years of that story.

And that's okay. We can accept those limitations, still want to cultivate our creative talents and our love for knowledge, but at the same time, not think that any amount of slicing and dicing this very short time that we're given is going to be the source of value in our lives. Instead, it's going to be our conception about what's ultimately valuable.

And that's the kind of thing that we really are obligated to cultivate. If you like this and you want to hear more, like, share, subscribe, and review this podcast. And from all of us here at the Veritas Forum, thank you.

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