What is the Meaning of Life?
Program 22
Where does our Sense of Right and Wrong Come From?
by Ernest O'Neill

Why are you alive? You've probably wondered that yourself, at some times more than others. We're all the same, I think. We have bad times. It is surprising how many of us find those bad times are more frequent in these days. More of us are asking the question, "Why are we alive? What am I doing here? I don't really understand any of it. It all seems so chaotic and so filled with anarchy."

What we're talking about on this program each day is whether there is any meaning to life, whether there is any point or purpose in life. We started by looking at the world itself. We have seen a surprising amount of order and design in our world. Of course, you know it so well. Every morning you get up, you realize there is an order that makes the sun rise every morning. It's really not the sun rising. It's the earth turning 'round, but there's obviously some force that keeps the earth turning regularly on its own axis, day after day, year after year, century after century.

We know deep down in our own minds that, of course, there is meaning in this world. It's obvious. The world wouldn't continue to exist if it weren't for the regular seasons that enable us to grow crops to get our daily food. We could not continue to survive if there were not great meaning in the world. If we were not able to direct our feet to precede one another, we would not be able to walk or propel ourselves from one place to another.

We know enough now from our ability to study the infinitesimally small movements of the body to realize that it is an absolute miracle, an absolute mystery of motor movements connected

with electrical charges connected with a complex nervous system and an immense muscle system that we cannot even yet reproduce with all of our robot inventions.

Many of us have realized that there is, undoubtedly, meaning in the world around us. There is great meaninglessness, but most of that seems to come from us human beings. The world in which we live seems to be filled with purpose and filled with meaning. All of us who have studied the activities of animals or birds or fish know that there is great planning and design and system evident in the whole world of nature.

What we were saying yesterday was that there is another amazing phenomenon that we find inside ourselves that is very hard to explain just on the basis of the production of time plus chance or a big bang explosion that is unsupervised by some intelligent mind.

That is this fact: even though the world is filled with four billion little human beings that love to fight each other, that love to be selfish, that find it easier to be unkind to one another rather than to be kind, that find it easier to kill one another than not to kill one another, that find it easier to want their own way and insist on their own rights than to give up their rights and give up their own way -- in spite of the fact that we are a mass of struggling, selfish, unpleasant individuals -- yet, we still have something within us that keeps on telling us, "You shouldn't be like that."

You shouldn't fight. You shouldn't be selfish. You shouldn't lose your temper. You shouldn't be unkind. That seems to be deep within us. Some of us like to think, "Oh well, no. It's not deep within us. It's just been our education that has brought that about", but the fact is that many people in the crudest most primitive tribes in the world who have had no education still believe that it's wrong to be cowardly, it's wrong to be selfish.

They still believe it's wrong to do the things that we ourselves think are wrong. In other words, this sense of "I ought" that we have inside us seems to be a more universal feeling, a more universal obligation than comes just from our education. What one has to face is that there is a paradox here. Dostoevsky, you remember, said, "The only reason a man will act against his own best advantage is to have his own way."

You know how true that is. You have only to look at your eating habits to realize that it is true, "The only reason a man will act against his own best advantage is to have his own way." There is something perverse in us that makes us want to have our own way even if it kills us. Yet, it's amazing that there is something in us also that says, "That's wrong."

There is something in us that says, even though we want our own way, even though we want to trample over other people, even though we want to do the dirty on people, even though we want to tell lies to get out of difficulties and to get out of troubles, even though we want to be hypocritical in our praise and our polite compliments to other people to cover up our own hatred and contempt for them, even though we want to do that, there is something in us that says, "That's wrong. That's wrong."

"You ought to love them. You ought to be kind to them. You ought to be patient. You ought to be understanding. You ought to be patient. You ought to give up your rights for their sake." It's amazing that we human beings who find it so easy to oppose each other still think that it is wrong to behave in that way. Why is that? Why do we have this sense of moral "I oughtness" when it is very inconvenient for us?

Some of us say it's just what is convenient. You get a lot of little monkeys all throwing coconuts at each other, and eventually, one

begins to realize that this causes a lot of lumps on his head. There must be an easier way to live. So, he sets up a social contract with some other little monkeys that he will not throw coconuts at them if they will not throw coconuts at him.

Many of us conclude that this feeling of "I oughtness" is just what is convenient. It enables us to preserve our own existence as a race. You can see yourself that that begs the question, why should we want to preserve our existence as a race? Why should we want to survive? What is it that programs into us this feeling that we should try to survive? What is it that programs into us this desire at times not to throw coconuts at another person even though they have no chance of throwing coconuts at us? Because that is also true.

Many of us are prepared at times, like war, to die for each other. Indeed, not only in war but even now in some disasters that occur in the world of air travel, we find human beings that are prepared to sacrifice in order to preserve the life of someone else. We find within us this feeling that we ought to live higher than we feel it is natural to live.

We ought to live better than we find it comes naturally for us to live. Why is that so? Where does that feeling of "I ought" come from? It seems that it is a call to live better than we human beings really want to on our own. It seems that it is a drive or a desire to live higher than we human beings live in our ordinary, everyday lives.

Is there, in fact, some signal that comes from outer space? Is there some power beyond this world that has these ideals and these desires and has somehow implanted them in us so that this feeling of "I ought" -- that I ought to be better than I am -- has been put in us by some intelligent mind or some higher

personality that was originally responsible for creating us? Let's talk more about this tomorrow.