One of the most important distinctions in philosophy is between means and ends. Means are valued as tools for the improvement of life, whereas we find ends inherently valuable, making any improvements to which they might lead irrelevant. For example, working is often viewed as a means of making money, leading to the end of buying things we like. Sometimes what we buy improves our lives down the road, but those who enjoy shopping as an end know that eventual outcomes are beside the point. They do not shop for the sake of a better tomorrow but for the sheer enjoyment of the present. Another important difference is that means and ends stand in opposite relations to satisfaction. While means lead to satisfaction, ends supposedly yield the satisfaction we seek when we engage in means. Eating right and exercising, for instance, are often viewed as means of achieving good health, which is supposed to bring satisfaction in and of itself.

In theory, at least, there is nothing wrong with the idea that means lead to the satisfaction found in ends. The trouble is that most ends turn out to be less than fully satisfying. More often than not, achieving the ends at which our actions aim yields only fleeting satisfaction, prompting us to search for satisfaction elsewhere. Like the pleasant sensation of fullness that comes after eating, the satisfaction of getting what we want is merely palliative, masking but not truly satiating the underlying hunger. The pleasure of a new pair of shoes lasts at most a few days before yielding to the desire to own something else. In the professional realm, an increase or promotion provides a short period of heightened self-esteem that soon gives way to the desire to climb higher. We even grow tired of husbands, wives, and partners, imagining the prince or princess we never met but should have. We say we love a challenge and note that adversity strengthens, but what drives us is the
longing for true satisfaction. As a wise philosopher once said, “the nectar is in the journey”\(^1\). But the nectar must satisfy, or it is not really nectar. The journey must include destinations, pauses complete in themselves consisting of unalloyed satisfaction. The vicious cycle of means leading to ends that fail to satisfy our desires fueled the pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer, who saw no permanent escape from such vain striving.

Unfortunately, Schopenhauer’s pessimism about means leading to disappointing ends is even more appropriate now than it was in his time. Much of the westernized world embraces an ideology of endless progress in all areas of life, with each achievement sending us in search of a greater one. No accomplishment is too good to be surpassed, making satisfaction arguably more elusive now than in previous eras. The expectation of endless progress exponentially increases the pressure and stress of living. Still out of reach, true satisfaction is desired that much more, making the failure to achieve it all the more painful.

Now more than ever, we need a way of breaking the cycle of means and ends. But that requires finding an activity that is valuable not as a means, nor even as an end, but as an end-in-itself transcending the cycle of means and ends altogether. Such an activity would be unconditionally valuable, engaged in purely for its own sake, without reference to anything in the past or to come. An activity of that kind, if it can be found, promises to bring satisfaction that, if not everlasting, is at least complete, unlike the partial satisfactions found within the means and ends framework. An unconditionally valuable activity would yield moments of unassailable inner peace and contentment.

It may seem odd to consider the instrumental value of what is inherently valuable, but taking these different views of ultimate value does not disturb its inner nature as a reality transcending means and ends. It does, however, shed light on the experience of those longing for relief from stress and worry, whether caused by the rat race in the prime of life or by chronic illness during life’s final stages. For them, peace of mind is a goal to be achieved, and inherently valuable activities are a means of achieving it. Nor does the fact that engaging in such activities instantly reveals their true nature as ends-in-themselves transcending means and ends diminish the perspective from which ultimate value is a means to an end. More importantly, that perspective provides a framework for discovering how ultimate value can enhance our lives. Describing it this way mobilizes ultimate value for the relief of human suffering and pain, although such descriptions are somewhat misleading. We can then say, for example, that unconditional value brings inner peace to those who are weary of striving. That is not literally true, because ultimate value in