The Story of the Prodigal Son

11: And he said, "There was a man who had two sons;
12: and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me my inheritance.' And he divided his living between them.
13: Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his inheritance in loose living.
14: And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want.
15: So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine.
16: And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.
17: But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger!
18: I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;
19: I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'"
20: And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.
21: And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'
22: But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet;
23: and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry;
24: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.
25: "Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.
26: And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant.
27: And he said to him, `Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.'

28: But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,

29: but he answered his father, `Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.

30: But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!'

31: And he said to him, `Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

32: It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

Study questions:

1. Who is the Father, and who is the son?
2. What was the inheritance?
3. What does it mean that the son left home and squandered his inheritance?
4. The 8th century CE Muslim saint, Rabia of Basra, said that the only real sin is existence (and 1300 years earlier the Greek philosopher Anaxamander said something very similar). What does that mean, and how does it fit with the story of the prodigal son?
5. There is also a Buddhist version of the prodigal’s story. Buddhism is a practical philosophy, and its goal is Nirvana (the ending of suffering). Explain this in terms of the prodigal story.
6. What is the significance of the part about the older son’s complaint (verses 25-32)?
7. What is the significance of verse 20?
8. What has all this got to do with philosophy, i.e., why use stories from the religions in a philosophy class, and why use this story in particular in our philosophy course? (Note here that a very important philosopher for our course, the 18th century Scottish empiricist and agnostic, David Hume, said “All religion . . . is nothing but a species of philosophy.”)