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July 13, 2009: Whatever Works—and Loves

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Title: Whatever Works—and Loves

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7/13/2009—I just got back from seeing Woody Allen's latest film, *Whatever Works*. The basic structure is like *Annie Hall*, complete with a very similar soliloquy at the end. Actually, Allen must have mellowed, because whereas in *Annie Hall* people cling irrationally to relationships to help them get through life (We need the eggs), in *Whatever Works*, the secret is any "temporary grace" we can get or give. At the beginning of *Whatever Works*, the main character tells us that life is meaningless. So, he tries to kill himself. By the end, he still says that life is meaningless, but now he says that because life is meaningless, we should try to love each other. This is pretty cheap grace, in two senses. First, loving each other genuinely is very difficult, as Allen's characters show. Since all traditional morality is rejected in the movie and nothing is substituted that requires the least sacrifice of pleasure and whim, temporary grace turns out to be simple self-indulgence. In my experience, actual love is hard. The second sense of cheapness is the structure of the insight itself. The Canadian Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan describes in his book *Insight* types of arguments that refute themselves. *Whatever Works* is one of those arguments. If life is meaningless, we have no reason to be kind to each other. If we should be kind to each other instead, then, of course, it is meaningful to be kind to each other. Thus, life cannot be said to be meaningless. But if Woody Allen had simply said that the secret of life is love, he would have had to turn in his Jewish existentialist card.