

Meaning in Life and Why It Matters

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A false dichotomy

Philosophical models of human motivation tend to fall into two categories. Egoistic models conceive of human beings as moved and guided exclusively by what they take to be in their own self-interest. Dualistic models hold that people are capable of being moved not only by self-interest, but by something 'higher' as well. Thus, Kant, for example, famously thought that in addition to being subject to inclinations, people are capable of being moved and directed by reason alone.

Closely linked to these two sorts of descriptive models of human motivation are prescriptive or normative models of practical reason. The descriptive thesis of psychological egoism, which holds that people exclusively do seek their own good is closely connected to (and frequently confused with) the normative thesis of rational egoism, which holds that people should do this if they are to be considered rational. Corresponding to the dual conception of human motivation we find a dual conception of practical reason. Sidgwick, for example, held that two perspectives offer people equally valid reasons to act - an egoistic perspective, which issues recommendations of what is most in an agent's self-interest, and an impersonal

perspective, which ranks actions in terms of us what is best “from the point of view of the universe.”

In ordinary discourse as well as philosophy, when we offer justifications for our actions or policies, we seem to have one of these two sorts of models in the backs of our minds. Most often, when asked to explain or justify our choices, we offer reasons that fall under the category of self-interest. When we are trying to persuade *someone else* to do something, we may appeal to self-interest – in this case, to the *other* person’s self-interest - even more. Still, there are occasions when invoking self-interest would simply be unconvincing, and some when such appeals would be unseemly, or at least beside the point. In these cases, we are likely to speak the language of duty: justice, compassion, or simply morality demands that we act in such and such a way, whether it contributes to our own good or not.

These models of motivation and practical reason, however, seem to me to leave out many of the motives and reasons that shape our lives. Moreover, the reasons they leave out are neither peripheral nor eccentric. To the contrary, they are the reasons and motives that engage us in the activities that make our lives worth living; they give us reasons to go on. They, and the activities they engender, give meaning to our lives.

My aim today is to bring out the distinctive character of these sorts of reasons and the special role they have to play in the quality of our lives. Specifically, I shall suggest that our susceptibility to these sorts of reasons is connected to the possibility that we live meaningful lives, understanding meaningfulness as an attribute that is not reducible to or subsumable under either happiness, as it is ordinarily understood, or morality. Today I shall be mainly concerned to explain the feature I call meaningfulness in life and present

it in such a way as to make it seem worth wanting, both for ourselves and for those about whom we care. What I have to say, however, will be of little or no *practical* use.

Though I shall offer a view of what it means for a life to be meaningful, I can offer none but the most abstract sorts of advice about how to go about living such a life. In my second lecture, therefore, after defending my view against one particularly important set of objections, I shall turn to the question of why it matters that we notice that there is such a category as meaningfulness, distinct from the categories of happiness and morality that we are more used to invoking in thinking about what to do and how to live.

Let me begin with some examples of the sort of reasons and motives I have in mind – reasons and motives that are not best understood in terms of their contributions either to our happiness or to our sense of what impersonal reason or morality demands. The most obvious examples are those in which we act out of love for particular individuals. When I visit my brother in the hospital, or help my friend move, or stay up all night sewing my daughter a Halloween costume, I act neither for egoistic reasons nor for moral ones. I do not believe that it is better *for me* that I spend a depressing hour in a drab cramped room, seeing my brother irritable and in pain, that I risk back injury trying to get my friend's sofa safely down two flights of stairs, or that I forego hours of much-wanted sleep to make sure that the wings of the butterfly costume my daughter wants to wear in the next day's parade will stand out at a good angle. But neither do I believe myself duty-bound to perform these acts or fool myself into thinking that by doing them I do what will be best for the world. I act neither out of self-interest nor out of duty or any other sort of impersonal or impartial reason. Rather, I act out of love.

As the egoistic and dualist models of practical reason leave out what we might call these “reasons of love”,¹ so they seem to me also to leave out many of the reasons that move us to pursue nonpersonal interests about which we are especially passionate. Writing philosophy, practicing the cello, keeping one’s garden free of weeds, may demand more of one’s time and attention than would be optimal from the point of view of one’s own well-being. Yet in these cases, even more than in the cases involving loved ones, it is obvious that no impersonal perspective requires us to go on. Just as, in the case of acting for a loved one, it is the good of that other person that provides us with reason to act, what draws us on in these nonpersonal pursuits is a perceived or imagined value that lies outside oneself. I agonize over the article I am trying to write because I want to get it right – that is, because I want the argument to be sound, the view to be correct, the writing to be clear and graceful. It is not for my sake – at least not only for my sake – that I struggle so with my work. I do not know or care whether it is best for me – whether it is best that is, from the point of view of my self-interest – that I try to improve my work beyond a certain point, any more than I care whether it is best for me that I put so much energy into making my daughter happy. We might say that I struggle “for philosophy’s sake” rather than for my own, but that would be misleading and obscure as well as pretentious. Still, it seems to me that it is the value of good philosophy that is driving and guiding my behavior in this instance, as it might be the beauty of the music or of the potential garden that moves the cellist or the gardener to sacrifice ease, and exercise discipline in pursuing her goal.

It does not seem unnatural or forced to speak of the subjects of these examples as *loving* philosophy or music or flowers, and their love for these things may not only

¹ See Harry Frankfurt...

explain but may also justify their choices and behavior more than their love for themselves or for morality or some other impersonal and general good. Because of the similarities in the motivational and deliberative stance of these subjects to that of people who act out of love for individuals, I shall use the phrase “reasons of love” to cover the former as well as the latter type of case. My claim then is that reasons of love – whether of people, ideals or other sorts of objects - have a distinctive and important role in our lives, not to be assimilated to reasons of self-interest or to reasons of morality. Insofar as we fail to recognize and appreciate the legitimacy and value of these reasons, we misunderstand ourselves and our values and distort our concerns.

Not all actions that are motivated and guided by reasons of love are justified, however. Not all reasons of love are good reasons. For one thing, your love for something or someone is no guarantee that you know what is actually good for it, so although you may act in order to advance the interest of the object of your love, your action may not actually be in its interest. You might spoil your child, overwater your plants, cramp your philosophical style.

More interestingly, love can be misplaced or misguided; the energy and attention that you give to an object may be disproportionate to what that object merits.² A wonderful woman might give up her career, her home, her friendships to follow and serve a man the rest of us see clearly does not ‘deserve her’. An impressionable teenager might

² The first way in which reasons of love may be mistaken parallels mistakes to which what we might call ‘reasons of self-interest’ and ‘reasons of morality’ are subject. I may think that something is in my self-interest when it is actually harmful; I may think morality requires or allows me to do what in fact is morally wrong. It is not obvious that the second way in which an apparent reason of love can be wrong has parallels in these other categories. There may be no such thing as caring too much about one’s own good or about morality.

sign over his trust fund to a cult with which he has become enamored, thereby losing both his financial security and the opportunity to benefit worthier and needier groups.

What I wish to defend, then, is the justifiability and importance of a subset of those actions and decisions that are guided by reasons of love. Roughly, I want to defend the importance of actions and patterns of action that positively engage with *worthy* objects of love, and to do so in a way that is independent of whether such actions maximally promote either the agent's welfare or the good of the world. Being prone to be moved and guided by reasons of love, when the objects of love are worthy, is, I believe, at the core of our ability to live meaningful lives.

A Conception of Meaningfulness in Life

Academic philosophers do not talk much about meaningfulness in life. The term is more likely to be used by theologians and therapists, and by people who are in some way dissatisfied with their lives but are unable to pin down why. People sometimes complain that their lives lack meaning; they yearn for meaning; they seek meaning. People sometimes judge others to be leading exceptionally meaningful lives, looking upon them with envy or admiration. Meaning is commonly associated with a kind of depth, and the felt need for meaning is often connected to the worry that one's life is empty or shallow. An interest in meaning is also frequently associated with thoughts one might have on one's deathbed. When the word "meaningful" is used in characterizing a life (or in characterizing what is missing from a life), it calls *something* to mind, but it is not clear what, nor is it clear that it calls or is meant to call the same thing to mind in every context.

In offering a conception of meaningfulness, I do not wish to insist that the term is always used in the same way, or that what I have to offer as an analysis of meaningfulness can be substituted for that term in every context. On the other hand, I do believe that much talk of meaning is aimed at capturing the same abstract idea, and that my proposal of what that idea is fits well with many of the uses to which the word is put.

According to the conception of meaningfulness I wish to propose, meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way. What is perhaps most distinctive about this conception of meaning, or about the category of value I have in mind, is that it involves subjective and objective elements, inextricably linked. “Love” is at least partly subjective, involving attitudes and feelings. In insisting that the requisite object must be “worthy of love,” however, this conception of meaning invokes an objective standard: Not any object will do, nor is it guaranteed that the subject’s own assessment of worthiness is privileged. One might paraphrase this by saying that, according to my conception, meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something good or positive about it.

Essentially, the idea is that a person’s life can be meaningful only if she cares fairly deeply about some things, only if she is gripped, excited, interested, engaged, or as I earlier put it, if she loves something— as opposed to being bored by or alienated from most or all that she does. Even a person who is so engaged, however, will not live a meaningful life if the objects or activities with which she is occupied are worthless. A person who loves smoking pot all day long, or doing endless crossword puzzles, and has the luxury of being able to indulge in this without limit does not thereby make her life meaningful. Finally, this conception of meaning specifies that the relationship between

the subject and the object of her attraction must be an active one. Mere passive recognition and a positive attitude toward an object's or activity's value is not sufficient for a meaningful life. One must be able to be in some sort of relationship with the valuable object of one's attention – to create it, protect it, promote it, honor it, or more generally, to actively affirm it in some way or other.

Aristotle is well-known for his use of the endoxic method in defending moral and conceptual claims. He takes the *endoxa*,³ “the things which are accepted by everyone, or by most people or by the wise” as starting points for his inquiries. If a view can explain and support these common beliefs, or, even better, if it can bring them into harmony with each other, that counts as an argument in its favor.

In that spirit, I suggest that my view might be seen as a combination, or a welding together, of two other, more popular views that one often hears offered, if not as analyses of meaning in life, at least as ingredients – sometimes as the *key* ingredient – in a life well lived. First is the view that it doesn't matter what you do with your life as long as it is something you love. Find your passion. Figure out what turns you on, and go for it.⁴

Second, it is often said that in order to live a truly satisfying life, one must be able to be a part of something ‘larger than oneself.’⁵ Though I think that the reference to the size of the group or the object one aims to benefit or be involved with is misleading, it is not unreasonable to understand such language metaphorically, as a way of gesturing toward the aim of participating in or contributing to something whose value *is*

³ Topics 1.1 100b 21-3 from perspectives on Plato's Symposium conference, Center for Hellenic Studies; see also Nicomachean Ethics, Book VII.1, 1145b4; thanks to Richard Kraut

⁴ (One of those silly books that were on sale at the cashiers' desks at Barnes & Noble last year advanced that view. The book was called “The Meaning of Life.” Richard Taylor offers a more serious and provocative defense of the view in)

⁵ (Not surprisingly, it is common to hear religious leaders speak in these terms, but many others do as well. For example, Peter Singer draws on this conception of the good life in his book, “ .)

independent of oneself. Understood this way, the first view, ('find your passion') may be understood as a way of advocating something similar to the subjective element contained in my proposed analysis of meaningfulness, while the second view, ('be part of something larger than yourself') urges us to satisfy the objective condition.

Each of these more popular views is sometimes couched in the vocabulary of meaning, and in each case there is a basis for that choice in our ordinary uses of the term. When thinking about one's own life, for example, a person's worry or complaint that his life lacks meaning is apt to be an expression of dissatisfaction with the subjective quality of his life. Some subjective good is felt to be missing. One's life feels empty. One longs for finding something to do which remedies this gap and makes one feel fulfilled.

On the other hand, when we consider the lives of others, our tendency to characterize some as especially meaningful and others as less so is apt to track differences in our assessments of the objective value of what these lives are about. When we look for paradigms of meaningful lives, who comes to mind? Gandhi, perhaps, or Mother Theresa, or Einstein, or Cézanne. By contrast, Sisyphus is a standard exemplar of a meaningless existence. Our choice of these examples seems to be based on the value (or lack of value) we take these people's activities to have, rather than on the subjective quality of their inner lives.

Insofar as the conception of meaningfulness I propose joins these views together, it may be seen as a partial affirmation of both these more popular views. From my perspective, both these views have something right about them, though each also leaves something crucial out.

The Fulfillment View

Let us turn our attention, then, to the first of the popular views I mentioned, the one that stresses the subjective element, urging each person to find his passion and pursue it. It is easy to see why someone would support this advice, and find plausible the claim that being able to pursue a passion adds something distinctive and deeply good to life. For the advice, at least as I understand it, rests on the plausible empirical supposition that doing what one loves doing, being involved with things one really cares about, gives one a kind of joy in life that one would otherwise be without. The reason one should find one's passion and go for it, then, is because doing so will give one's life a particular kind of good feeling.

Let us refer to the feelings in question as feelings of fulfillment. Such feelings are the opposite of the very bad feelings of boredom and alienation. Although feelings of fulfillment are unquestionably good feelings, there are many other good feelings, perhaps more comfortably classified as pleasures, that having nothing to do with fulfillment. Riding a roller coaster, meeting a movie star, eating a hot fudge sundae, finding a great dress on sale, can all give one pleasure, even intense pleasure. They are unlikely to contribute to a sense of fulfillment, however, and indeed, it is easy to imagine that a person who has an abundance of opportunities for such pleasures might still find something lacking in her life.

Further, someone whose life is fulfilling has no guarantee of being happy in the conventional sense of that term. Many of the things that grip or engage us make us vulnerable to pain, disappointment, and stress.

It will later be useful to bring to mind the fact that the feelings of fulfillment are but one kind of positive feeling that potentially compete with other kinds: spending one's

time, energy, money, and so on, on the projects that fulfill you necessarily reduces the resources you have for engaging in activities that are ‘merely’ fun. Moreover, to the extent that one’s sources of fulfillment are also sources of anxiety and suffering, the pleasure one gets from pursuing these things may be thought, at least from a hedonistic perspective, to be qualified or balanced by the negative feelings that accompany it. For now, however, the fact that most of us would willingly put up with a great deal of stress, anxiety, and vulnerability to pain in order to pursue our passions can be seen as providing support for the idea that fulfillment is indeed a great and distinctive good in life. Insofar as the view that urges us ‘to find our passion and go for it’ expresses that idea, there is a lot to be said for it. From here on, I shall refer to this as “The Fulfillment View.”

Because feelings of fulfillment are different from and sometimes compete with other types of good feeling, types which are more paradigmatically associated with terms like ‘happiness’ and ‘pleasure’, it is plausible to interpret the Fulfillment View as a proposal for what gives meaning to life. To someone who finds himself puzzled by why, despite having a good job, a loving family, and a healthy body, he feels that something is missing from his life, it provides an answer. To someone trying to decide what career to pursue, or more generally, how to structure his life, it advises against focusing too narrowly at the superficial goals of ease, prestige and material wealth. Nonetheless, the Fulfillment View, as I have interpreted it, is a form of hedonism, in that its prescription for the best possible life (in which is included the possession of meaning) rests

exclusively on the question of how a life can attain the best qualitative character.

Positive experience is, on this view, the only thing that matters.⁶

For this very reason, it seems to me, the view is inadequate as it stands. If, as the Fulfillment View suggests, the only thing that matters is the subject quality of one's life, then it shouldn't matter, in our assessments of possible lives, which activities give rise to that quality. If the point of finding one's passion and pursuing it is simply to be fulfilled – that is, to get and keep the *feeling* of fulfillment, then it shouldn't matter which activities or objects one has a passion for. Considering a variety of lives, all equally fulfilling, but differing radically in the sorts of things that give rise to that fulfillment, however, may make us wonder whether we can really accept that view.

Imagine, in particular, a person whose life is dominated by activities that most of us would be tempted to call worthless, but which nonetheless give fulfillment to the person whose life it is. I earlier mentioned the case of the person who simply loves smoking pot all day, and another (or maybe the same person) who is fulfilled doing crossword puzzles, or worse (as personal experience will attest), Sudokus. We might also consider more bizarre cases: a man who lives to make hand-written copies of the text of *War and Peace*; or a woman whose world revolves around her love for her pet goldfish. Do we think that, from the point of view of self-interest, these lives are as good as can be – provided, perhaps, that their affections and values are stable, and that the goldfish doesn't die?

Initially, perhaps, not everyone will answer these questions in the same way; some will not know what to think. In part, I believe this is because we are uncomfortable

⁶ The Fulfillment View might be considered a plausible extension of J.S. Mill's view that an enlightened hedonist must take into account the differences in quality as well as quantity of pleasure in conceiving of the best possible life.

making negative judgments about other people's lives, even about imaginary other people who are conceived realistically enough to be stand-ins for real people. We are especially uncomfortable making negative judgments that diverge from the judgments the characters would make about their own lives. To avoid this problem, let me approach these questions by way of reflection on a more stylized philosophical example – namely, the case of Sisyphus Fulfilled.

Sisyphus, in the ancient myth, is condemned to an existence that is generally recognized as awful: He must roll a heavy stone up a hill, only to have it roll down again, so that he must roll it back up again in an endless cycle. He is condemned eternally to a task that is boring, difficult and futile. Sisyphus's fate is generally recognized as awful *because*, as Albert Camus famously pointed out, his existence is absurd. Sisyphus's life⁷, therefore, has been commonly treated as a paradigm of meaningless existence.

The philosopher Richard Taylor, however, in a discussion of life's absurdity, suggests a thought experiment according to which the gods take pity on Sisyphus, and so insert a substance in his veins which transform him from someone for whom rolling that stone is nothing but an arduous and unwelcome chore to someone who loves stone-rolling more than anything else in the world (or in the afterworld, as the case may be). There is nothing the transformed Sisyphus would rather do than roll that stone. Stone-rolling, in other words, fulfills him. Sisyphus has found his passion (or perhaps his passion has found him), and he is pursuing it to his life's content. The question is, what

⁷ More precisely, it is Sisyphus's afterlife that is considered awful because absurd and meaningless. He was condemned to this fate by the gods in punishment for ...

should *we* think of him? Has his life been transformed from horribly unfortunate to exceptionally good? Taylor thinks so, but some of us might disagree.

As I have already noted, the reason Sisyphus has traditionally been taken as a paradigm of a meaningless existence is that he is condemned to the perpetual performance of a task that is boring, difficult and futile. In Taylor's variation, Sisyphus's task is no longer boring – no longer boring to Sisyphus, that is. But it is still futile. There is no value to his efforts; nothing ever comes of them. Even if due to divine intervention, Sisyphus comes to enjoy, even to feel fulfilled by his activity, the pointlessness of what he is doing doesn't change.

In light of this, many will feel that Sisyphus's situation remains far from enviable. Something desirable seems missing from his life despite his experience of fulfillment. Since what is missing is not a subjective matter – from the inside, we may assume that Sisyphus's life is as good as can be – we must look for an objective feature that characterizes what is lacking. The second popular view I brought up earlier names, or at least gestures toward, a feature that might fit the bill.

The Larger-than-oneself View and the Bipartite View

That second view tells us that the best sort of life is one that is involved in, or contributes to something 'larger than oneself,' though contemplation of the case of Sisyphus should be enough to show that this must be understood metaphorically. We might understand the view as one that recommends involvement in something *more important* than ourselves – something, in other words, that is larger than ourselves not in size but in value. If the recommendation is to be taken as a criterion for a meaningful life, however, I would be inclined to argue against this interpretation, too. For one thing,

if we assume that the value of one person's life is as great as the value of another's, this criterion would seem to rule out the possibility that a life devoted to the care of a single other individual – a disabled partner, for example, or a frail, aging parent, could live a meaningful life, for the value of the one cared for is presumably just equal to rather than larger than the value of the person who cares. When we try to assess projects and activities that are not principally aimed at the benefit of one or more human beings, the difficulties with such a view appear even worse. Presumably, a dog is not more important than oneself – but what about two dogs, or six? And what about projects and activities that are not directed toward promoting anyone's welfare at all? Is philosophy or poetry or basketball something 'larger than oneself' in value? It is difficult to know what such questions even mean.

A more promising interpretation of the view that links meaningfulness to involvement with something larger than oneself takes the metaphor of size less seriously. Its point, on this interpretation, is not to recommend that one get involved with something larger than oneself, but rather with something *other* than oneself – that is, with something whose value is independent of and has its source *outside of* oneself. Presumably, Sisyphean stone-rolling has no such value – nor, it seems, does pot-smoking or Sudoku-solving. But devotion to a single, needy individual does satisfy this condition as much as devotion to a crowd. Philosophy and basketball appear to meet this criterion, too, since the value of these activities, whatever it is, does not depend on one's own contingent interest in them.

If we interpret the advice that one get involved with something 'larger than oneself' in this way, it might be thought to represent a second and independent criterion

for a fully successful and flourishing life. Combining this advice with the Fulfillment View, one might think, yields a better, bipartite conception of meaningfulness than either view taken on its own. The Fulfillment View directs our attention to a subjective component a meaningful life must contain. But, as the case of Sisyphus Fulfilled led us to see, even a life that fully satisfies the subjective condition may be one we are hesitant to describe as meaningful, if objectively the life is unconnected to anything or anyone whose value lies outside of the person whose life it is. By conjoining the Fulfillment View with the injunction to get involved with something ‘larger than oneself,’ we get a proposal that appears to remedy the problem: On this bipartite view, in order for a life to be meaningful both an objective and a subjective condition must be met.

If meaningfulness is understood to refer to a particular category or dimension of value, however, it would be puzzling if it turned out to depend on the satisfaction of two unrelated conditions. The proposal I favor, which identifies meaning with a property in which subjective and objective components are suitably linked, conceives of meaningfulness in a more unified way. On my conception of meaningfulness, one can see how the subjective and objective elements fit together to constitute a coherent feature a life might possess. Besides, if we really consider the two conditions of meaningfulness proposed by the Bipartite View as criteria to be taken separately, it is not clear that they contribute to the goodness of a person’s life at all.

Consider again the suggestion that a life in which a person contributes to something larger than himself (suitably interpreted) is more meaningful than a life that serves only the needs and desires of the person whose life it is. I introduced this idea in answer to the question of what (desirable feature) might be missing from a life like that of

Sisyphus Fulfilled (or the pot-smoker, or Sudoku-player), that prevents it from representing a life we would want for ourselves or for those we love. We can add stipulations to these examples that guarantee that the protagonists' lives and activities do contribute to some independent value. Imagine, for example that unbeknownst to Sisyphus, his stone-rolling scares away vultures who would otherwise attack a nearby community and spread terror and disease. Or imagine that the pot-smoker's secondary marijuana smoke is alleviating the pain of the AIDS victim next door. If Sisyphus and the pot-smoker do not know or care about the benefits their lives are producing, however, it is hard to see how the fact that their lives yield those benefits – that they contribute, in other words, to something larger or other than themselves – should make us any more inclined to describe their lives as meaningful (or to find their lives desirable) than we were before we learned of these consequences.

In any case, it seems to me that when the recommendation to get involved with something larger than oneself is offered, it is typically offered in the hope, if not the expectation that if one does get so involved, it will make one feel good. The thought is that if one tries it, one will like it, and one will like it in part because of one's recognition that one is doing something independently valuable.⁸ The suggestion, then, that one gets meaning in life through involvement with something larger than oneself, may be most charitably interpreted as a suggestion that is not meant to be taken in isolation. If one gets involved in something larger than oneself – or, as I have interpreted it, in something whose value is (in part) independent of oneself – then, if one is lucky, one will find that involvement fulfilling, and if that happens, then one's life will both seem and be

⁸ This does not always work. It is a standard part of the requirements of a child who is training for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, as it is for many middle and high school programs, that she put in a number of hours of community service. Not surprisingly, the degree to which thisvaries widely.

meaningful. If one's involvement brings no such reward, however, it is unclear that it contributes to meaning in one's life at all.

Just as the objective condition sometimes associated with meaning seems more plausible when it is understood to function in conjunction with some assumptions about the subjective attitudes that accompany its satisfaction, the subjective condition seems more plausible when understood in conjunction with objective constraints. When someone recommends that you find your passion and go for it, it seems, there is a hope, if not an expectation, lurking in the background, too. The hope is that the passion you find will be an intelligible one, within a certain range. You will not be passionate – at least not for too long – about stone-rolling, or Sudokus, or caring for your goldfish, or making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*.

In my earlier discussion of Sisyphus Fulfilled, I expressed sympathy with those who, unlike Richard Taylor, found something desirable missing from Sisyphus's life, despite his being subjectively quite content. There is room for an even stronger disagreement with Taylor, however, that I want to consider now. Specifically, one might wonder whether the transformation that Sisyphus undergoes from being unhappy, bored and frustrated to being blissfully fulfilled makes Sisyphus better off at all. One might think that it actually makes him worse.

From a hedonistic perspective, of course, Sisyphus's transformation *must* make his life better, for the only changes in Sisyphus are subjective, replacing negative feelings and attitudes for positive ones. From a nonhedonistic perspective, however, these changes come at a cost. When I try to understand the new Sisyphus's state of mind – when I try to imagine how someone might find stone-rolling fulfilling – I can conceive of

only two possibilities: On the one hand, I can think of the substance in Sisyphus's veins as inducing delusions: They make Sisyphus see something in stone-rolling that isn't really there. On the other hand, the drug in his veins may have reduced his intelligence and his imaginative capacity, thus eliminating the possibility of his noticing the dullness and futility of his labors or of being able to compare it to other more challenging or worthwhile things that, had the gods not condemned him, he might be doing instead. In either case, Sisyphus is in at least one respect worse off than he was before his transformation – he is either afflicted by mental illness or delusion or diminished in his intellectual powers.

Opinion may divide over whether, all things considered, the transformation makes Sisyphus worse or better off. Those in strongest sympathy with Mill's claim that it is better to be a human unsatisfied than a pig satisfied may think that however bad the fate of the classical Sisyphus, the fate of the transformed Sisyphus is worse. Others may conclude that since Sisyphus is condemned to roll stones in any case, it is better for him to be happy with, or more precisely, fulfilled by his lot than otherwise. Even those who hold the view that it is better to be Sisyphus happy than Sisyphus unhappy, however, may agree that it is better still not to be Sisyphus at all.

To me, the first scenario, in which the transformed Sisyphus is deluded, seems a more plausible way to understand what it would be for Sisyphus to be or to feel *fulfilled* by stone-rolling, for "fulfillment" seems to me to have a cognitive component to it that requires seeing the source or object of fulfillment as being in some independent way, good or worthwhile. Even deep and intense pleasures, like lying on the beach on a beautiful day, or eating a perfectly ripe peach, would not naturally be described as

fulfilling. To find something fulfilling is rather to find it such as to be characterizable in terms that would portray it as having value beside the pleasure it gives its subject.⁹

Imagining Sisyphus in terms of either scenario, however, can explain why we might hesitate to describe the life of Sisyphus Fulfilled as meaningful – and similarly, I would argue, why we would withhold that label from the life of the fulfilled pot-smoker, goldfish-lover, or Tolstoy-copier. Imagining these characters on the model of either scenario would, in any case, help to explain why we might regard their lives as far from ideal. Earlier I suggested that we might judge these lives to be ‘missing something,’ a phrase that suggests a feature separable from fulfillment that these lives lack, rendering them less than optimally meaningful (if meaningful at all). In light of our discussion, we can now see that even the apparent condition of meaningfulness they do satisfy – viz., the condition of being fulfilled – is in a certain way defective and less desirable than fulfillment that stems from a more fitting or appropriate source.

The Fitting Fulfillment View Defended

I earlier argued that the popular view that takes meaning to involve contributing to something larger than oneself is most charitably understood as a criterion that includes a background assumption about the subjective feelings and attitudes that one’s contributions will engender. Analogously, I suggest, the popular view that meaning is a matter of finding and pursuing one’s passion is best understood against the background assumption that one’s passion will fall within a certain objective range.

The endoxic method thus supports a conception of meaningfulness that involves subjective and objective components, suitably linked. It supports the idea that meaning

⁹ See Darwall, Welfare and Rational Care. Perhaps say more about the need to avoid overintellectualizing. Lower animals cannot be fulfilled.

in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it. The question remains, however, why such a feature should be thought or felt to be desirable. What, if anything, is so good, so *distinctively* good, about loving objects worthy of love, and being able actively to engage with them in a positive way? An advantage of my conception of meaning, in addition to its being supported by the endoxic method, is that it identifies a feature of a life for which an intelligible and plausible answer to this question can be given.

We have already noted that being able to be actively engaged with things that one loves affords one a particularly rewarding type of subjective experience – it is, if you will, a high quality pleasure. Like the Fulfillment View, the Fitting Fulfillment View (for lack of a better name) identifies a feature that gives this recognizable benefit to the person whose life possesses it. According to the latter view, however, what is distinctively valuable is not the state or ongoing experience of fulfillment considered in itself. Rather, what is valuable is that one's life be actively (and lovingly) engaged in projects that give rise to this feeling, when the projects in question can be seen to have a certain objective kind of worth. Why should this be something that matters to us? If having this in one's life answers a human need, what human need is it?

At least part of the answer, I believe, has to do with a need, or at least an interest or concern, to be able to see one's life as valuable in a way that can be recognized from a point of view other than one's own. We can better understand this need, and perhaps quell the doubts of those who are skeptical of its existence, if we see its connection to other features of human psychology with which we are familiar from other contexts.

One such feature that has long been of interest to philosophers has been especially emphasized by Thomas Nagel – namely, the human tendency, to see (or try to see) oneself from an external point of view. Humans have a tendency to aspire to see things, including themselves, without bias; they take up a detached perspective on their lives; they aspire to a kind of objectivity. Nagel has characterized this as an aspiration to take a ‘view from nowhere;’ others have talked about this feature in terms of a God’s eye point of view.

In addition, humans have a need to think well of themselves – a need for self-esteem. Being prone to imagine oneself from an external point of view, to see oneself as if from without, the wish that from that point of view one will be able to see oneself and one’s life as good, as valuable, as a proper source of pride seems to follow straightforwardly.

Still, the strength of that wish, and the peculiarly poignant feelings that can accompany it seem to me to involve something further, that, I suggest, is related to our social natures, and to our need (or wish) not to be alone.

Contemplation of one’s mortality, or of one’s cosmic insignificance can call up the sort of feelings I have in mind. The thought that one lives in an indifferent universe makes some people shudder, and leads them to despair. Reminding oneself of the fact, if it is a fact, that one has lived or is living in a way that is actively and, we may stipulate, somewhat successfully, engaged in projects of independent value may put these feelings to rest. For by living in a way that is partly occupied by and directed toward the preservation or promotion or creation of something independently valuable, one does

something that can be understood, admired or appreciated from others' points of view, including the imaginary point of view of an impartial observer.¹⁰

The fact that the feature focused on by the Fitting Fulfillment View can bear on our reactions to thoughts about the human condition, that it can even offer some solace to those who are distressed when they think about our insignificance, gives further support to the idea that this feature is reasonably identified with 'meaningfulness,' since it makes the association between meaningfulness and the age-old philosophical topic of the Meaning of Life more than a coincidence.

A longing for fulfillment, and an admiration for lives engaged in projects that are fitting for fulfillment, are not restricted to times when we are especially cognizant of the human condition, however. Even when we are not thinking about our relation to the cosmos, we may intelligibly want to do something whose value extends beyond its value *for us*. Indeed, even if we never explicitly formulate a desire for our lives to be connected to something of independent value, the unarticulated *sense* that we are so connected may affect the quality of our experience. The *feeling* of being occupied with something of independent value, the engagement in an activity that takes one out of oneself can be thrilling. At least part of the reason why again seems to be related to our social natures, and our desire not to be alone. If we are engaged in projects of independent value – fighting injustice, preserving a historic building, writing a poem – then presumably others will be capable of appreciating what we are doing, too. Others may actually appreciate what we are doing, or at least appreciate the same values as the

¹⁰ Of course, there is no guarantee that such a thought *will* put the feelings in question to rest. Many people are upset by the thought that they are mere specks in a vast universe. They are upset, that is, by their smallness, their inability to make a big and lasting splash. My remarks – aimed at reminding them of the quality, not the quantity of their contribution to the universe – does not speak directly to this concern. Such people will just have to get over it – their desire is unsatisfiable.

ones that motivate us. This makes us at least notionally part of a community, sharing values, to some degree, and a point of view. Even when no one knows what we are doing, or when no one appreciates it, however, the thought that it is *worth* doing can be important to us. The scorned artist or lonely inventor, the scientist whose research no one seems to approve, may be sustained by the thought that her work is good, and that the day may come when others understand and value it.¹¹

Although I have suggested that the desirability of living in a positive relation with something of value from an independent source is related to our sociability, these last examples show that the relation may be indirect, perhaps even metaphorical. People who, for any number of reasons, cannot or do not wish to live around or be in intimate contact with other people, may still live meaningful and fulfilling lives. (Some artists, for example, may make art for an only dimly conceived posterity.) Conversely, for some people, the support, approval and admiration of others is not enough to make them feel fulfilled by what they are doing, or to judge their own lives as meaningful.

It may be suspected that the interests I am discussing are exclusively bourgeois, or that they are confined to an even narrower class of academics and other intellectuals. If one has to struggle to get enough to eat for oneself and one's family, to get shelter from the cold, to fight a painful disease, a concern with whether one is engaged in projects of independent worth may seem to be a frivolous luxury. The fact that an interest in a meaningful life may not surface until one's more basic needs are met is no reason to dismiss its importance, however. Nor does it seem to me that the fact that a person does

¹¹ These remarks, I think, add to the plausibility of interpreting popular references to being involved in something 'larger than oneself' in terms of the idea that one should be engaged with a value that has its source outside of oneself. The thought is that such a value exists metaphorically in a public space – it is accessible to others, and so makes one at the least a potential member of a community, larger than oneself.

not consciously articulate an interest in ensuring that some of the projects or things with which his life is bound up can be judged to have independent worth is enough to warrant the view that whether they have such worth is irrelevant to him. Bernard Williams once wrote, with respect to the question of life's being desirable, that "it gets by far its best answer in never being asked at all."¹² Similarly, I think, for a person whose life is meaningful, the need to think about it might never come up. If a person is actively engaged in valuable projects, he may be getting feedback from these projects that enhances his life even if he is unaware of it.

Our interest in being able to see our lives as worthwhile from some point of view external to ourselves, and our interest in being able to see ourselves as part of an at least notional community that can understand us and that to some degree shares our point of view, then, seem to me to be pervasive. By engaging in projects of independent value, by protecting, preserving, creating, realizing value whose source lies outside of oneself, one can satisfy these interests. Indeed, it is hard to see how one could satisfy these interests in any other way.

Reflecting on the pervasiveness of these interests, and of the way a life of 'fitting fulfillment' answers to them will, I hope, support both my proposal that meaningfulness is a matter of active and loving engagement in projects of worth and my claim that this feature, distinct from both happiness and morality, deserves to be included in a conception of a fully successful human life.

For much of my lecture today, I have stressed the subjective aspect of a meaningful life – that is, the aspect that assures a meaningful life of being fulfilling, and

¹² Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) p. 87.

to that extent feeling good. This emphasis brought out what my view of meaningfulness has in common with the simpler Fulfillment View (the view that says one should find one's passion, and go for it) and allowed me to make an easy argument for a way in which a meaningful life was good for the person who lives it. When we consider what deep human interests or needs a meaningful life *distinctively* answers to, however, it is interesting to notice that the objective aspect of such a life needs to be stressed. Our interest in living a meaningful life is not an interest in our life *feeling* a certain way – it is an interest that it *be* a certain way, specifically, that it be one that can be appropriately appreciated, admired, or valued by others at least in principle¹³; that it be a life that contributes to or realizes or connects in some positive way with independent value. We do not satisfy those interests simply by thinking or feeling that they are satisfied any more than we satisfy our interest in not being alone simply by thinking or feeling that we are not alone. To have a life that not just seems meaningful but is meaningful, the objective aspect is as important as the subjective.

Many questions about this conception of meaningfulness and its importance remain. Though my discussion so far has been scattered with examples of activities that do as well as those that do not tend to enhance meaning, according to my conception, I have not offered any sort of general or systematic criteria for sorting these out. Nor have I yet addressed, or even so much as acknowledged, the resistance many in the audience are no doubt feeling toward my references to objective value, or to the corresponding view that some activities or projects are more fitting than others to be the object of one's

¹³ This is not unrelated to the interest in our actions being 'justifiable to others' that Thomas Scanlon stresses in his account of the motivation and reason to be moral. The interest I have in mind, to which meaning rather than morality answers, however, is broader, if not metaphorical, embracing not only the possible points of view of one's fellow human beings, but the imaginable point of view of an even more external, nonhuman observer.

life's central passions. I shall begin my lecture tomorrow by responding these questions before turning to the second set of issues promised by the two lectures' title. By the end of tomorrow's lecture, then, I shall have tried to convince you not only of what meaning is, but of why it matters.

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Tanner Lecture II

Yesterday I argued that philosophical models of human psychology that divide all motives and reasons into the self-interested and the moral, or the personal and the impersonal, were simplistic and distorting, failing to capture the character of our relationships to many of the things that are most important to us. Insofar as such models encourage us to think about our lives in terms only of happiness and morality, I suggested, they lead us to neglect another important dimension along which lives can be better or worse – namely, the dimension of meaningfulness.

But what is meaningfulness? I argued yesterday for a conception that combined aspects of two popular views. Like the Fulfillment View, that tells us to find our passions and pursue them, my view acknowledges a subjective component in the achievement of a meaningful life. Like the view that associates meaning with involvement in something ‘larger than oneself,’ however, my view also recognizes an objective component. According to what I called The Fitting Fulfillment View, a life is meaningful insofar as its subjective attractions are to things or goals that are objectively worthwhile – that is, one’s life is meaningful insofar as one finds oneself loving things worthy of love and being able to do something positive about it. A life is meaningful, as I also put it, insofar as it is actively and lovingly engaged in projects of worth.

This abstract characterization of meaningfulness leaves many challenges unanswered. Perhaps the most serious ones have to do with the ‘objective’ side of the proposal – that is, with the category I have variously referred to in terms of fittingness (for fulfillment), worthiness (of love), and independent, as well as objective, value. Which projects, one wants to know, *are* fitting for fulfillment? Which objects *are* worthy

of love? How is one to know whether an activity is fitting or worthy or independently valuable? For that matter, why accept the legitimacy of these judgments at all?

After spelling out and defending my views on these matters, I shall turn finally to the last topic promised in my lectures' title, with some thoughts about why it matters that we think of life's possibilities in terms not only of happiness and morality but in terms of meaning as well.

Questions about objective value

To address the first set of questions, let me begin at an intuitive level. Those who were at yesterday's lecture will remember that the idea that there must be some objective condition on the kinds of projects and passions that could be the basis of a meaningful life arose in connection with the thought that some projects – like rolling a stone uselessly up a hill, making hand-written copies of *War and Peace*, solving Sudoku puzzles, or caring for one's pet goldfish, were in some way inadequate. By noting what is lacking from such projects, we can form hypotheses about what features make an activity more fitting as a grounding for meaning. Thus, as many of the problematic cases exemplify useless activity, it seems plausible to propose that activities that are useful are to that extent better candidates for meaning. And, as many of the difficult cases involve activities that are routinized or mechanical, we may conjecture that a project's suitability as a meaning-provider rises as it becomes more challenging, or offers a greater opportunity for a person to develop her powers and realize her potential.

It is noteworthy how broad and diverse the range of projects and activities that meet these standards is. In particular, though it will include the projects and activities that will be recognized as *morally* valuable by conventional standards, it extends far

beyond that. Creating art, adding to our knowledge of the world, preserving a place of natural beauty all seem intuitively to deserve classification as valuable activities, even if they do not bring about any improvement in human or animal welfare in any obvious way. So do efforts to achieve excellence or to develop one's powers – for example, as a runner, a cellist, a cabinetmaker, a pastry-chef.

It is in part because the range of activities that seem able to ground claims of meaningfulness is so large and varied that the words I have used to characterize this condition are so general and vague. Perhaps the best of the expressions I have used in this connection is that which says that the project or activity must possess a value whose source comes from outside of oneself. That expression has the advantage of being minimally exclusive. It makes the point that a project whose only value comes from its being pleasing or useful to the person whose project it is is not the kind of project that can make a person's life meaningful. But it makes no other restrictions either to the kind or to the source of value the project or activity may have. Intuitively, however, this condition may be *too* minimal if taken literally. One problem with it is that when we think about activities that may make a person's life meaningful, some sort of proportionality condition seems to operate in the background. Insofar as we think that devotion to one's pet goldfish or to the literal re-writing of *War and Peace* cannot make meaningful, it need not be because we think there is absolutely *no* independent value to the fish's comfort or to the additional copy of the literary masterpiece. Rather, we may think that these endeavors are just not valuable *enough* to merit the time and energy that our imagined characters give to them, particularly in light of the wealth of other possible activities that we assume they might be engaging with instead.

Furthermore, there seems good reason to ask why, if an activity's value to *oneself* is insufficient to give meaning to one's life, an activity's value to some *other* creature, should make it any more suitable. Are we to understand the condition that an activity be of value 'independent of oneself' to be met by anything that is of value to? If, in addition to Sisyphus, a third party was pleased or fulfilled by watching Sisyphus roll stones up a hill, would that make a difference in the assessment of his life as meaningful? If so, it is puzzling why this should be so significant. If not, the condition of 'independent value' stands in need of further specification.

The difficulty of formulating an adequate account of the contours of the objective condition of meaningfulness may make us begin to wonder whether to accept any such condition at all. Two sorts of reasons tend to fuel such doubts. They are worth distinguishing and responding to separately.

First, there are worries of a moral, or quasi-moral nature, having to do with the dangers of parochialism and elitism. They are perhaps most naturally expressed by the rhetorical question, "*Who's to say?*" "*Who's to say* which projects are fitting (or worthy or valuable) and which are not?" The worry is that any person or group that sets itself up as an authority on values is liable to be narrow-minded or biased.

To be sure, elitism and parochialism *are* dangers that we need to be wary of, especially when making judgments about the relative value of what other people do with their lives. But we can guard against these dangers if we keep our fallibility in mind, if we regard our judgments as tentative, and if we remind ourselves, if necessary, that the point of thinking about the category of meaningfulness in life is not to produce a method

for generating a ranking of different possible (or actual) lives along a meaningfulness scale.

To the question, “Who’s to say which projects are independently valuable and which are not?” my answer is “no one in particular.” No person or group has any special expertise that makes its judgment particularly reliable. Rather, questions like “Which projects are valuable?” and “Which activities are worthwhile?” are open to anyone and everyone to ask and try to answer, and I assume that that we will answer them better if we pool our information, our experience, and our thoughts. Our initial judgments about what is valuable and what is a waste of time are formed in childhood, as a result of a variety of lessons, experiences, and other cultural influences. Being challenged to justify our judgments, being exposed to different ones, and broadening our range of experience will lead us to revise, and, if all goes well, improve our judgments. Presumably, this is a never-ending process, not only because, as fallible creatures, our judgments of value will always be somewhat tentative, but because at some level the sorts of things that have value are apt to change over time.¹⁴ The absence of a final authority on the question of which things have value, however, does not call into doubt the legitimacy or coherence of the question itself or of the enterprise of trying to find a more or less reasonable, if also partial, tentative, and impermanent answer.

A second set of reasons for doubting the objective condition of meaningfulness is more intellectual. Whereas worries about elitism call our attention to the dangers of thinking one knows *which* things, activities, or projects have value, this second set of concerns raise questions about the idea that there is an objective standard of value at all.

¹⁴ See Joseph Raz, ...

In addressing these concerns, it is important to keep in mind what kinds of objectivity are at issue, for the term is notoriously slippery. In the context at hand, the reference to objectivity can be associated with two very different ways in which, in order for a project to be capable of contributing to the meaning of a person's life, its value must be at least partly independent of the subject whose life it is.

One way is suggested by the second popular view that I discussed and partly endorsed yesterday, the view that one's life gets meaning from engagement with something 'larger than oneself.' A central thought here seems to be that a life *lacks* meaning if it is totally egocentric, devoted solely toward the subject's own survival and welfare, and realizing no value that is independent of the subject's own good. Meaning comes from successful engagement with values that are not just values *for* the person herself – for only then, it seems, will one be able to say that one has lived in a way that can be claimed to be worthwhile from an external point of view.

This sense in which some of the values with which one is engaged must be subject-independent is not metaphysically mysterious or conceptually problematic. It is easy enough, at least in principle, to distinguish activities that are valuable only to oneself from those that are not. It is good *for me* that I get to eat fine chocolates, or watch "Friday Night Lights," or take a walk in the woods – but no one else in the world is benefited by these things, nor is any independent value realized or produced. By contrast, what good there is in my helping someone else, or even in my writing a good book, is not exclusively goodness for me. What values there are in these activities are at least partly independent of my own existence and point of view.

There is, however, another kind of subject-independence that is relevant to the value of the activities and projects that give meaning to life which is more philosophically problematic. Specifically, in order for one's activities or projects to contribute to the meaningfulness of one's life, not only must the locus or recipient of value lie partly outside of oneself, the standard of judgment for determining value must be partly independent, too. According to the Fitting Fulfillment View, thinking or feeling that one's life is meaningful doesn't make it so, at least not all by itself. One can be mistaken about whether a project or activity has the kind of value necessary to make it a potential provider of meaning.

Examples I gave yesterday showed that we could conceive of a person finding an activity fulfilling that we would find inadequate for meaning from a third-person perspective. Insofar as Sisyphus thinks his life is meaningful, he is mistaken, finding something in stone-rolling that isn't really there. Realistic examples may be more controversial, but are easy enough to come up with: On drugs, one may find counting bathroom tiles fascinating, or watch reruns of *Father Knows Best* with rapture. A member of a religious cult may think that obedience to her leader's commands and dedication to his empowerment are worthwhile goals. An attorney fresh out of law school may see his ardent defense of an unscrupulous corporate client as a noble expression of justice in action; a personal assistant to a Hollywood star may be seduced by the glitter and fame that surround her into thinking that catering to her employer's every whim is a matter of national significance. Such people may *feel* fulfilled by activities that foster what they take to be worthwhile ends. They may *think* a life devoted

to the advancement of their goals and heroes is a meaningful one. But, according to the Fitting Fulfillment View, they would be mistaken.

As these examples make plausible the idea that a person may find meaning in an activity that isn't really there, others suggest the converse possibility: We can imagine Bob Dylan's mother thinking her son was wasting his time messing around with that guitar; or Fred Astaire's father wishing his son would quit dancing and get a real job. Tolstoy went through a period when he could not see the value of his own literary accomplishments, magnificent as they were – the realization that he had done much that *had* made his life meaningful was unavailable to him. These examples suggest that a person may judge an activity to be worthless that others can see to be valuable. With respect to negative as well as positive judgments of value, then, it appears that one can be wrong.

If we are to accept the plausibility of these sorts of judgments, we must accept the legitimacy of a kind of value judgment that is subject-independent. According to the conception of meaningfulness I am proposing, that sort of judgment is essential to understanding what a meaningful life is.

Accepting these judgments amounts to a denial of radical subjectivism with respect to value. But it seems a far cry from accepting the sort of metaphysically ambitious conception of objective value associated with Plato or G.E. Moore. To acknowledge that a person may be mistaken about what has value, and that finding something valuable doesn't necessarily make it so, is hardly to commit oneself to a view that value is a nonnatural property, or that it is built into 'the fabric of the universe.' Nor does believing that one can be mistaken about value, or even that everyone can be

mistaken about value, imply that values might even in principle be independent of human (or other conscious beings') needs and capacities.

There are many accounts of value that fall in between the radically subjective and the radically objective. In claiming that meaningfulness has an objective component, I mean only to insist that something other than a radically subjective account of value must be assumed. Nonetheless, I must confess that I have no positive account of nonsubjective value with which I am satisfied. Radically objective accounts of value are implausible and obscure, but the most obvious conceptions of value that fall between those and the radically subjective are problematic as well.

Thus, for example, some people are attracted to intersubjective accounts, according to which whether something is valuable depends on whether it is valued by a community of valuers. If an individual's valuing something isn't sufficient to give the thing real value, however, it is hard to see why a group's endorsement should carry any more weight. If one person can be mistaken about value, why can't five people, or five thousand? The history of art, or for that matter of morals, seems ample testimony to the claim that whole societies can be wrong.

More promising, I think, are accounts that link value to the hypothetical responses of an idealized individual or group. Whether something is valuable on such a view is associated with the claim that it *would* be valued by someone sufficiently rational, perceptive, and knowledgeable, to be, as John Stuart Mill would say, "a competent judge." Yet this view, too, seems inadequate as it stands, for if it is interpreted as claiming that what *makes* something valuable is its being able to evoke such a reaction in such an individual, the view needs further explanation and defense: Why should an

object's capacity to be valued by an imaginary being make the object valuable if its being actually valued by me or my friends or my fellow countrymen does not? If, on the other hand, the reference to these hypothetical responses is understood as a way to track value rather than as an account of what constitutes it, then the view seems to leave untouched the question about which we are most concerned – viz., the question of what is being tracked.

On my view, then, finding an adequate account of the objectivity of values (of the ways or respects in which value judgments are not radically subjective) is an unsolved problem in philosophy- or perhaps better, an unsolved cluster of problems. Though I believe we have good reason to reject a radically subjective account of value, it is far from clear what a reasonably complete and defensible nonsubjective account will look like. The absence of such an account gives us all the more reason to be tentative in our judgments about what sorts of project deserve inclusion in the class of activities that can contribute to the meaningfulness of a life. We must admit the reasonableness of controversy not only about the value of particular activities, such as cheerleading, ultimate Frisbee, and analytic philosophy, but also about whole categories of activity, such as self-realization or communion with nature. My own inclination is to be generous in my tentative judgments about what is valuable. I expect that almost anything that a significant number of people have *taken* to be valuable over a large span of time *is* valuable.

Still, these expectations may not be supportable. A quick glance at the Guinness Book of Records or at a list of internet chat rooms will remind one that people – indeed, large numbers of people - do the darnedest things. They race lawn mowers, compete in

speed-eating contests, sit on flag poles, watch reality TV. Do these activities merit the investment of time and money that people put into them? Do they contribute to the meaningfulness of these people's lives? There is something to be said on both sides of these questions.

As some will have been critical of my endorsement of the idea of nonsubjective value and the associated thought that some projects are more fitting than others for contributing to a meaningful life, others will be frustrated by my reluctance confidently to apply the notion, to make substantive judgments that actually identify meaningful projects, and contrast them to meaningless ones. What is the point of insisting that there is such a thing as a meaningful life if you cannot give any kind of guidance for how to live one, they might ask? Why, in other words, does acknowledgement of the abstract category of meaningfulness matter if it will not help us identify meaning or its absence in specific concrete lives?

An answer we might consider is that, even without being able to say anything more systematic or definite about meaningfulness, the mere reference to it as an explicit element of an optimally desirable life may make us more likely to attain it than we would otherwise be. Even if we don't have a philosophical *theory* about which projects and activities possess the kind of nonsubjective value that make them potential contributors to meaning in life, we are not totally clueless about these matters in practice. The mere mention of meaningfulness might remind a person at least to notice whether his life is (or seems to be) satisfying in this respect, and this may be enough to make a difference in the shape he gives to it.

I would not place too much weight on this suggestion, however. Many people manage to live meaningful lives without giving the *idea* of meaning a moment's explicit thought, and those whose lives are not sufficiently meaningful are not likely to be able to remedy this simply by having it called to their attention.¹⁵

If our lives or the lives of our students and children are to become more meaningful as a result of our thinking about it, it will more likely be by an indirect route. The immediate benefits of thinking abstractly about meaningfulness are apt to be more purely intellectual. Specifically, attention to the category of meaningfulness may help us better understand ourselves and our values, and may enable us better to assess the role that some central interests and activities play in our lives.

In fact, much of what I think is valuable about thinking about meaningfulness has to do with thinking about what meaning is *not* – recalling the remarks I made at the beginning of yesterday's lecture, it is not (equivalent to) happiness, and it is not (equivalent to) morality. Recognizing that meaning is something desirable in life means recognizing that there is more to life than these categories suggest. This means that it need not be irrational to choose to spend one's time doing something that neither maximizes one's own good nor is best for the world.

As I mentioned yesterday, much of what we do is not obviously justified by either morality or self-interest. I visit my friend in the hospital; I study philosophy; I bake an elaborate dessert. If the framework in which we conceptualize our reasons recognizes only self-interested and moral value, then we will have to fit our understanding of these

¹⁵ Many people, through no fault of their own, simply lack the opportunity for meaning: their physical, economic, political circumstances deprive them of the freedom or the leisure to explore and pursue activities they would love. Others may have temperaments that make it difficult to love anything in the right sort of way. One cannot find something engaging at will.

choices into these categories if we are not to regard them as irrational or mistaken. Given the inconvenience and the difficulties involved in these enterprises, however, it is far from clear that they are in my self-interest. Yet to regard them as morally valuable, much less as morally better than any alternatives, is to puff them up in a way that seems both pompous and hard to sustain. Insofar as we feel the need to explain and justify ourselves in terms of these two categories, we will be tempted to distort the character and importance of our interests or replace them with projects more obviously beneficial to ourselves or more morally admirable.

It might be suggested that the problem here is with thinking our actions and choices need to be so fully justified at all. Why can't we sometimes do things just because we want to, without any further justifying reason? We can, but with respect to the kinds of activities I have in mind, to regard them as mere arbitrary preferences is also misleading, in a way that sells them short. In fact, I don't perform these acts *just* because I want to. I do want to, but for reasons. I visit my friend because he can use the company, or at least the assurance that his friends care about him; I study philosophy because it is interesting and mind-expanding, or, because, in my case, it is part of doing my job well; and I bake because I take pride in my skill as a baker, because I love good food and want to share my enthusiasm for it with others.

Though at least some of these acts have recognizably moral merit and are morally preferable to others that might be as good or better for me, and all contribute in some way to my happiness – at the least, I get the felt satisfaction of being able to do what I have chosen to do – neither the moral nor the egoistic perspectives capture my perspective in acting, and if we think of them only in these terms we will miss the role such acts play in

our lives. I do these things not for my sake or the world's; I act neither out of duty nor self-interest. Rather, I am drawn by the particular values of my friend, of philosophy, of a great chocolate cake.¹⁶ These are 'objects' whose value have a source outside myself – they would be good, or interesting, or worthwhile whether *I* liked or cared about or even noticed them or not. But they are values I respond to, for which I have an affinity – a subjective attraction, if you will.

Understanding this is important in part because, as I have already said, it enables us to approve of these sorts of interests and activities without distorting the character of their value. It is also important for a proper understanding of self-interest and morality, and of the roles these two types of value and the perspectives they define play and should play in our lives.

One implication the recognition of meaningfulness as a value has for our concept of self-interest is obvious and familiar. Specifically, if meaningfulness is acknowledged as an ingredient of a good life, and so as an aspect of an enlightened conception of self-interest, and if, as I have argued, meaningfulness cannot be understood in purely subjective terms, then a hedonistic conception of self-interest, that identifies the best life with a life of maximally good qualitative experience, will not do.

Accepting meaningfulness as an aspect of the good life should also lead us to acknowledge a certain indeterminacy in the concept of self-interest. At least, one will acknowledge this if one thinks, as I do, that meaning is one ingredient of a good life, among others (like subjective happiness). Many things that would contribute to the meaning of a life are difficult, stressful, demanding; they may leave one open to danger or vulnerable to pain. Consider, for example, adopting a child with severe disabilities, or

¹⁶ Include recipe?

moving to a war-torn country to help its victims find safety or food. Is the more meaningful life better *for oneself* than the one that is easier, safer, more pleasant? There may be no answer to this question. Nor is it obvious that meaning is something it makes sense to want to *maximize* in one's life, even if it does not compete with other self-interested goods.

If the introduction of meaning into one's conception of self-interest makes the latter concept more indeterminate and difficult to apply, it also makes self-interest less significant from a practical perspective. Acknowledging the possibility and desirability of meaning involves accepting the idea that there are values that are independent of oneself which provide reasons for the activities from which meaning comes. Though it may not be clear whether the woman whose life has been made more meaningful by the adoption of a child is all things considered better off because of it, the woman herself may not care about this. The fact that her relationship with the child adds meaning to her life assures that she will have other reasons for being glad to have adopted her, having to do with the child rather than with herself.

The recognition of meaningfulness as a distinct category of value has implications not only for the concept of self-interest, but for our understanding of morality as well. In fact, as with the concept of self-interest, there are implications both for the content of morality and for the role it can be expected to play in our thoughts and our lives. When thinking about morality, philosophers (if not others) tend to assume that the claims of morality are limited only by the normative and the motivational pull of self-interest. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, a framework that invokes the dichotomy of self-

interest and morality tends to be assumed. As we have seen, however, this framework is mistaken, and relying on it leads to distortions.

Curiously, it seems that in practice we do recognize a difference between meaning-enhancing activities and merely self-interested ones when we make moral judgments. We give a wider moral berth to people's engagement with the projects or realms from which they get meaning than we do to people's pursuit of happiness, pure and simple. We are less critical of a woman (if critical at all) who misses office hours to go to a philosophy lecture across town than we would be if she were to miss them in order to soak in a hot bath; we are less apt to accuse an amateur musician of decadent expenditure for buying an expensive cello than we are if he were to spend the same amount on a flat-screen TV. Lying to protect a friend or loved one tends to be regarded as morally quite different than lying to protect oneself. In our theoretical discussion of such judgments, however, the fact that the acts in question do or do not have a role in the meaningfulness of the person's life is frequently obscured. Rather, the value to the agent, or to the world, of the individual's action gets exaggerated, or appeal is made to the questionable idea of a person's duties to herself.

Recognizing explicitly that those activities that sustain the meaningfulness of our lives have a different kind of moral weight than purely self-interested activity is rare in moral theory, but it is not especially problematic. From a moral point of view, we have at least as much reason to want to encourage and increase people's opportunity to live meaningful lives as we do to want them to live happy ones. If the content of our moral principles has not often been framed explicitly to recognize the special place of meaning, there is no obvious reason why it *cannot* be.

The role of meaning in a person's life, and the character of a person's attachment to the things that give her meaning, however, have implications not only for the content of morality but for its place in our lives, and these implications are more difficult to accommodate. Bernard Williams, one of the few contemporary philosophers to have noticed the distinctive relevance of meaning for morality, has brought this problem vividly to light.

As is well known, Williams criticized both utilitarian and Kantian moralists for failing to appreciate the possibility and nature of a conflict between morality and meaning. In *A Critique of Utilitarianism*, he asks us to consider a man who "is identified with his actions as flowing from projects and attitudes which in some cases he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about." "It is absurd to demand of such a man," he continues, "when the sums come in from the utility network, ... that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires."¹⁷ In a later essay, he goes on to argue that "the Kantian, who can do rather better than (the utilitarian), still cannot do well enough. For impartial morality, if the conflict really does arise, must be required to win; and that cannot necessarily be a reasonable demand on the agent. There can come a point," Williams writes, "at which it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of the impartial good ordering of the world of moral agents, something which is a condition of his having any interest in being around in the world at all."¹⁸

¹⁷ J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism For & Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) p. 156.

¹⁸ Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p.14.

Though most philosophers have wanted to acknowledge *some* truth in Williams's criticisms, few have accepted his conclusions. In response to Williams, they have been quick to agree that of course morality should take account of the agent's possible sacrifices, weighing them in the balance against the goals and interests of others that morality is concerned to address and protect. Still, most say, there are limits to what a person is morally permitted to do, and if the world conspires to put someone in a position where holding on even to a project 'he takes seriously at the deepest level' would require him to cross those limits, morality must hold its ground. After all, they will point out, one man's ground-projects are still *one* man's, whose interests, however fundamental, must be balanced against the interests and rights of others with which their pursuit would interfere.

This response, though not altogether wrong, seems to me to miss the point of Williams's remarks in a way that suggests a failure on the part of the moralists to appreciate the difference between self-interest and meaning. One difference, which Williams stresses himself, concerns the special connection between meaning and having a reason to live. What gives meaning to our lives gives us reasons to live, even when we do not care much, for our own sakes, whether we live or die. What gives meaning to our lives gives us reasons to live even when the prospects for our own *wellbeing* are bleak. Indeed, what gives meaning to our lives may give us reasons beyond that. As Camus pointed out, if something is worth living for, it is also worth dying for. The objects, people, activities, that give meaning to our lives may serve as anchors for our having any interest in the world at all.

Further, in what constitutes a departure from Williams, we have seen that insofar as our interests and relationships give meaning to our lives, it is because the objects of those interests and relationships have an independent value, which draw us out of ourselves and link us to a larger community or world in a positive way. When we act or want to act in the context of these attachments, out of love or passion for their objects, we do so not purely or primarily for our own sakes, but at least partly for the sake of the person or project or value that is the object of our love.

If we keep these features in mind, the moralists' injunction that the agent should sacrifice what gives meaning to his life for the sake of morality is liable to take on a hollow ring. For first, the suggestion that hard as it might be, one must sacrifice one's own interests for the sake of the moral order neglects the fact that it may not be under the description of 'a sacrifice of one's *own* interests' that the action one is being asked to take presents itself. One's reasons for wanting to take the contrary action may rather be a reflection of one's seeing that action or its goal as independently worthwhile. Second, it is hard to see how reasons for staying within the moral order could override one's reasons for doing something without which one would lose one's interest in the world altogether.

Ordinarily, people have a number of reasons for wanting to be moral: they have sympathy for others, they want to live on open and equal terms with them; they want to be able to justify their actions to those whom they affect, and morality tends to align with self-interest. If being moral would require them to do something that would deprive them of all interest in the world, however, it would undermine all these reasons. It is hard to see why nonetheless these reasons should be trumps.

This is not to say that the *content* of morality should be revised so as to *permit* people to do anything they need to in order to maintain an interest, if not in their own lives, at least in the world. Williams's concerns may be best understood as making a point, not about the content of morality but about the place it can reasonably be expected to occupy in a person's life.

Moralists (including the great majority of moral philosophers) tend to assume that morality should occupy an overarching place in one's practical and evaluative outlook, that it should function unconditionally as a filter through which all a decent person's choices must pass. According to Williams, however, this assumption is unwarranted. To return to the passages I quoted earlier, he thinks that, if it comes down to a conflict between morality and meaning, it is 'absurd' or, at any rate, 'unreasonable' to demand that morality must win.

Williams himself offers no analysis of meaning and so the conclusion he leaves us with has seemed to many to be either morally subversive or terribly depressing. If I am right, however, about what meaning and our interest in meaning are, we can see his conclusions in a different light.

Meaning, I have argued, comes from active engagement in projects of worth, which links us to the world in a positive way. It allows us to see our lives as having a point and a value even when we take an external perspective on ourselves. It is not clear, however, that the external standpoint we take from which we ask whether our lives are meaningful is (or must be) the same external standpoint as the one from which moral judgments may be thought to issue. Morality, at least as I understand it, is chiefly concerned with integrating into our practical outlook the fact that we are each one person

(or perhaps one subject) in a community of others equal in status to ourselves. It requires us to act and to restrain our actions in ways that express respect and concern for others in exchange for our right to claim the same respect and concern from them. But there is another perspective, possibly even more external, in which the demands and interests of morality are not absolute. From a perspective that considers our place in the universe (as opposed to our place in the human or sentient community) a person's obedience or disobedience to moral constraints may itself seem to be one consideration among others.

A religious view that allows the possibility that God's will might come apart from the demands of human morality is perhaps the most obvious example of such a perspective. But, as Nietzsche has shown us, belief in a deity is not necessary in order for it to seem plausible that some values are independent of and in potential conflict with moral values. Furthermore, moral values, or morally valuable projects may themselves conflict. The goodness of one such value or project and the reasons to pursue it may compete with ends and principles that morality as a whole demands. From a perspective that steps back, not just from one's own interests, but from an absolute commitment to morality itself, if a value or project with which one's life is bound up conflicts with a demand of impartial morality, there is, as Williams believes, no guarantee that the moral demand will win. This perspective, however, is not egocentric, nor are the values and reasons it recognizes expressions of selfishness. This has at least two implications for the way we look at the relation of meaning to morality and at the possibility of conflict between them.

First, it might make us more ambivalent in our judgment of people who face such conflicts than we would otherwise be. That people should live, and should care about

living meaningful lives is, quite generally, a good thing, even if it means that on occasion such people might reasonably be moved to violate moral constraints. When people face a conflict between meaning and morality, we have reason to be sympathetic (a different reason than we have with regard to conflicts that arise between self-interest and morality), and sometimes even to be grateful if they decide not to do what morality requires.

Second, since meaning has an objective (that is, a nonsubjective) component, we do not have to take every individual's claim to face a conflict between meaning and morality at face value. An individual cannot get meaning from worthless projects, much less from projects of only negative value. Thus a child-molester cannot get meaning from molesting children, whatever he may think or feel about the matter. The vague proportionality condition on meaning that I mentioned earlier today may further limit the kinds of conflict that can plausibly be understood to be ones in which obedience to moral requirements would jeopardize a person's ability to sustain meaning in his life. Appeals to the objective value of a project or relationship which appears at first to be in tension with morality may also help foster a perspective in which the initial appearance of conflict disappears.

It cannot be expected that all conflicts between morality and meaning will be resolvable in this way, however. The possibility that what gives a person's life meaning will come apart from what morality permits will always be open. This implies that morality is no better suited to serve as an absolute standard for practical reason than self-interest. Still, meaning and an interest in meaning are likely more often than not to complement and reinforce moral concerns. For meaning involves an appreciation of

what is good independently of one's own interests and attitudes, and an interest in meaning involves an interest in realizing and affirming something that is good in this way. Moral concerns are perhaps the most obvious and most typically engaging of such goods. Though few people are likely to get meaning in their lives from the abstract project of 'being moral' – a passion for morality as such would be a peculiar and puzzling thing – many if not most people get meaning from more specific projects and relationships that morality should applaud: from being good and doing good in their roles as parent, teacher, lover, friend, and from furthering or trying to further social and political goals. If we pay more attention and give more weight to people's interest in getting and sustaining meaning in their lives, morality and the importance of obeying its requirements will necessarily occupy a smaller place in our practical and evaluational outlooks. But it is arguable that the goals of morality will be as likely or more likely to be achieved, and in a way that is more rewarding to the people who are achieving these goals, for they will be doing so not out of obedience to duty but out of love.

The need for the idea of objective value

These last remarks rely not just on the idea of meaningfulness as a category of value in life, but on the particular conception of it that I have urged in these lectures – a conception according to which meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness; that is, a conception according to which meaning comes from active engagement in projects of worth. This conception manifestly relies on some idea of objective value, and on the corresponding acceptance of the ideas that some projects are better than others, and that the person whose projects they are may be wrong about their value. These ideas are notoriously controversial and, in secular academic as well as

popular culture, we tend to avoid them. The popular Fulfillment View of meaning which I spoke about in yesterday's lecture may be understood as implicitly rejecting the idea of objective value. It conceptualizes meaning in wholly subjective terms. The equally popular view that identifies meaning with involvement with something larger than oneself is not subjective. But by shying away from any reference to objective value, it deprives itself of the resources that would allow it to answer the challenge, What has size got to do with it?, or to explain why caring for an infant (presumably smaller than oneself!) can be meaningful and being a groupie for a rock band might not.

Perhaps we avoid talk of objective value out of a desire to stay clear of controversy, perhaps out of fear of being chauvinistic and elitist. Controversy, however, should not be avoided, particularly perhaps in academic and public discourse, and, as I have argued, a belief in the objectivity of values need not be narrow-minded or coercive. One can find the question 'What has objective value?' intelligible and important while remaining properly humble about one's limited ability to discover the answer and properly cautious about the use to which one's partial and tentative answer may be put. In any event, I have tried to show that without that idea, the concept of meaningfulness, understood to refer to a type of value which is distinct both from morality and from self-interest will not be fully intelligible. Our interest in meaningfulness will be even less intelligible, and may eventually disappear.

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