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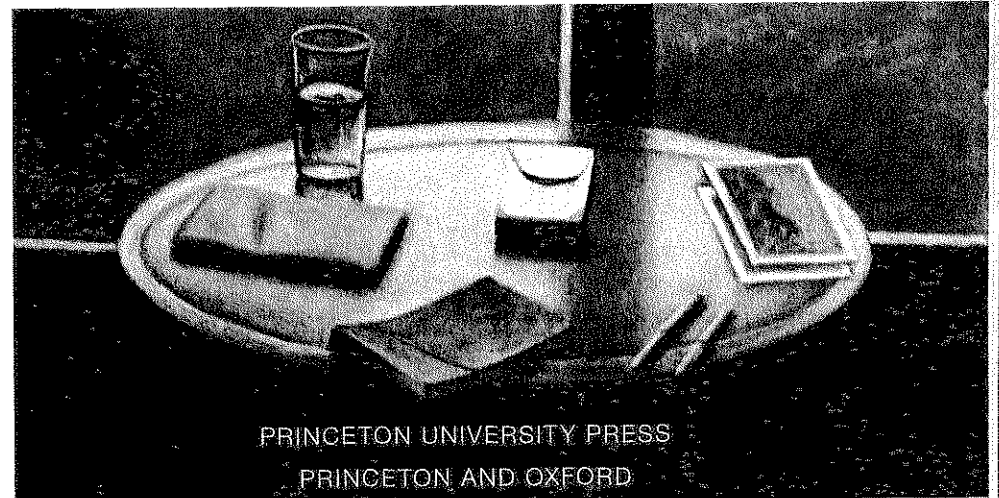
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Meaning in Life

A False Dichotomy

PHILOSOPHICAL MODELS of human psychology—or, more specifically, of human motivation—tend to fall into one of two categories. Perhaps the oldest and most popular model conceives of human beings as egoists, moved and guided exclusively by what they take to be in their own self-interest. However, there have long been defenders of a dualistic model of motivation as well, according to which people are capable of being moved not only by self-interest, but also by something “higher.” 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 descriptive models of human motivation are prescriptive or normative models of practical reason. The descriptive thesis of psychological egoism, which holds that people exclusively seek their own good, is closely connected to (and frequently confused with) the normative thesis of rational egoism, which holds that people are only rational insofar as they seek to maximize their welfare. Corresponding to the dual conception of human motivation we find a dual conception of practical reason as well. This is perhaps most explicit in the writings of Henry Sidgwick, who

held that two perspectives offer people equally valid reasons to act: the egoistic perspective, which issues recommendations of what is most in an agent's self-interest; and the impersonal perspective, which urges one to do what is best "from the point of view of the universe."

In ordinary discourse as well as philosophy we seem to have one of these two models in the backs of our minds when we offer justifications for our actions or our policies. Most often, when asked to explain or justify our choices, we offer reasons that seem to 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 some occasions when invoking self-interest would simply be unconvincing, and others 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 left out are neither peripheral nor eccentric. Indeed, we might say that the reasons and motives omitted by these models are some of the most important and central ones in our lives. They are the reasons and motives that engage us in the activities that make our lives worth living; they give us a reason to go on; they make our worlds go round. They, and the activities they engender, give meaning to our lives.

My aim in this lecture is to bring out the distinctive character of these sorts of reasons and the special role they 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 lives can have that is not reducible to or subsumable under either happiness, as it is ordinarily understood, or morality. I shall be mainly concerned to explain the feature I call meaningfulness in life and to present it in such a way as to make it seem worth wanting, both for ourselves and for those about whom we care. As will be seen, however, what I have to say 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 only the most abstract advice about how to go about getting or 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. As I shall argue, awareness that meaning is a third sort of value a life can possess should affect our understanding of the first two sorts: that is, adopting models of human motivation and reason that are attentive to meaningfulness should affect the way we think about happiness and morality—and about self-interest as well. Moreover, if the view I present in these lectures is right, we cannot so much as conceive of meaning without attributing a certain sort of objectivity to value judgments. It follows that if we want to continue to talk about, attend to, and encourage the acquisition of meaning in people's lives, we need to be willing to admit this sort of objectivity into our discussion of values.

Let me begin with some examples of the sorts of reasons and motives I have in mind—reasons and motives that are not best understood in terms of their contributions to either our happiness or our sense of what impersonal reason or morality

demands. The most obvious examples of what I have in mind occur when we act out of love for individuals about whom we deeply and especially care. 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 will stand out at a good angle from the butterfly costume my daughter wants to wear in the next day's parade. 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 beloved human beings, it is obvious that no impersonal perspective requires us to act. Just as, in

¹The phrase is used by Harry Frankfurt in much the same way as I use it and for purposes that largely overlap with mine in Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Like me, Frankfurt sees our susceptibility to reasons of love as essential to the possibility that we live meaningful lives. He forcefully rejects the conditions on which reasons for love can ground claims of meaning that I defend in what follows, however.

the case of acting for a loved one, it is the good of that other person that provides us with a reason for our action, what draws us on in the nonpersonal pursuits I have in mind is a perceived or imagined value that lies outside of 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—that is, whether it is best 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 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 explain but may also justify (or, more strictly, may contribute to the justification of) their choices and behavior more than their love for themselves or for morality or for 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 both types of cases. My claim then is that reasons of love—whether of human individuals, other living creatures, or activities, ideals or objects

of other sorts—have a distinctive and important role in our lives. They are not to be assimilated to reasons of self-interest or reasons of morality. Insofar as we fail to recognize and appreciate the legitimacy and value of these reasons, we misunderstand our values and ourselves 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 them. You may mean to help the object of your love, but your action may not benefit it. You might spoil your child, overwater your plants, cramp your philosophical style.

More interestingly, love can be misplaced or misguided; the energy or attention that you give to an object of love may be disproportionate to what that object merits.³ A wonderful woman might give up her career, her home, her friendships to follow and serve a man the rest of us see does not “deserve her.” An impressionable teenager might 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 claim that acting in a way that positively engages with a *worthy* object of love can be perfectly justified even if it does not

³The 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.

maximally promote either the agent’s welfare or the good of the world, impartially assessed.

Actions and decisions based on the good of the beloved are part and parcel of love and its expression quite generally. When, in addition, the object of love is specified to be worthy of love, the justification of action on behalf of that object may be straightforward. Why shouldn’t it be as justifiable for a person to act on behalf of a friend, for example, as it is for her to act on her own behalf? And why shouldn’t it be as justifiable to act on behalf of one’s friend as it is to do something of greater benefit to the world at large? Unless rational egoism or a particularly extreme form of consequentialism is presupposed, there is no reason to doubt the rational permissibility of acting on such reasons of love. Still, I want to say something stronger, something more favorable and more supportive of reasons of this sort. More precisely, I want to say something more favorable about a life that is prone to being moved and guided by such reasons. Proneness to being moved and guided by such reasons, I believe, is at the core of our ability to live meaningful lives. But it is far from clear what saying this amounts to.

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 or 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. Often the need for meaning is connected to the sense 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, or in contemplation of one's eventual death. 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 all contexts.

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. Whether or not my idea of meaningfulness captures what others mean when they use the term, it is an idea of philosophical interest, for it is an idea of a significant way in which a life can be good, a category or dimension of value, if you will, which we have a serious reason to want for ourselves and for those we care about, and which is neither subsumable under nor reducible to either happiness or morality.

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. The words "love" and "objects," however, are in some ways misleadingly specific, "engaging [with objects] in a positive way" regrettably vague, and the description of some objects but not others as being "*worthy* of love" may be thought to be contentious. Rather than try to clarify the view by taking up one word or phrase at a time, let me try to describe the view in other terms, bringing out what I take to be salient.

What is perhaps most distinctive about my conception of meaning, or about the category of value I have in mind, is that it involves subjective and objective elements, suitably and 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. It is implicit in insisting that an object be worthy of love (in order to contribute meaning to the lover's life) that 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.

Essentially, the idea is that a person's life can be meaningful only if she cares fairly deeply about some thing or 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 so 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 restraint 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. The condition that says that meaning involves engaging with the (worthy) object of love in a positive way is meant to make clear that 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. That is, he takes the *endoxa*,³ “the things which are accepted by everyone, or by most people or by the wise” as a starting point in 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, then at least as ingredients—sometimes the *key* ingredients—in a life well lived.

The first view tells us that it doesn't matter what you do with your life as long as it is something you love. Do not get stuck, or settle into doing something just because it is expected of you, or because it is conventionally recognized as good, or because nothing better occurs to you. Find your passion. Figure out what turns you on, and go for it.⁴

The second view says that in order to live a truly satisfying life one needs to get involved in something “larger than oneself.”⁵ The reference to the size of the group or the object

³ Aristotle, *Topics* I.1 100b 21–3. For an excellent discussion of the endoxic method, see Richard Kraut, “How to Justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle's Method,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics"* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) 76–95.

⁴ One of those silly books that were on sale at the cashiers' desks at Barnes & Noble a few years ago advanced that view. The book, by Bradley Trevor Greive (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2002) was called *The Meaning of Life*. Richard Taylor offers a more serious and provocative defense of the view in Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), Chapter 18.

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, *How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-interest* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 1993).

one wants to benefit or be involved with is perhaps misleading and unfortunate, but 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 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 that life. Some subjective good is felt to be missing. One's life feels empty. One longs to find something to do that will fill this gap and make one feel, as it were, 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 reflect 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. Sisyphus, condemned to an endless cycle of rolling a huge stone up a hill, only to have it roll down again, 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 welds these two popular views together, it may be seen as a

partial affirmation of both. From my perspective, both these views have something right about them, but each also leaves out something crucial.

Why believe any of these views? The question is ambiguous. Understood as the question, "Why believe that any one of these views offers a correct analysis of meaningfulness in life?" the inquiry seems to focus on whether any of the views under consideration captures a property or feature or set of conditions that answers to most of the instances in which the term "meaningful" is used in ordinary discourse, in contexts in which the topic in question is meaningfulness in life (as opposed, say, to meaningfulness in language). In answering this question, we would want to look at how the term *is* used in ordinary discourse: In what sorts of situations do questions of meaning arise? What sorts of concerns is the presence of meaning in a person's life supposed to put to rest? What types of lives would be generally accepted as paradigms of meaning? What types would be accepted as paradigms of meaninglessness? I have already expressed some doubt about whether there is a single cleanly definable concept that is being invoked in all the contexts in which talk of meaningful (and meaningless) lives may naturally take place. More important than the question of how to use the term "meaning," in any event, is the question of what a good life should contain. Above all, when therapists, ministers, and motivational speakers tell you either to "find your passion" or to "contribute to something larger than yourself," they are offering advice about how to live. More important than asking which, if any, of these views offers a plausible conception of "meaningfulness," is asking which, if any of them, identifies key and distinctive ingredients of a fully flourishing, successful, good life.

Still, it is difficult to keep the conceptual and the normative questions apart. Those who urge us to find our passions or to

contribute to something larger than ourselves typically mean to be responding to a more particular set of concerns than is expressed by the general question, "How should one live?" We cannot properly interpret their advice, much less assess it, without having some idea of what those concerns are, and it would be difficult to call up the intuitions, to capture the images and feelings on which it is relevant to reflect, without occasionally using the word "meaningful" in our description. My own proposal, that we recognize a category of value that is not reducible to happiness or morality, and that is realized by loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way, is offered as a refinement or as an alternative to these more popular forms of advice, and it is easiest to express this in terms that identify the category of value in question with meaningfulness. No harm, I hope, will be done by this. As long as we are alert to the possibility of filtering out questions about how to understand and apply the term "meaningful" from questions about what to aspire to in life, we can be careful to ensure that no questions will be begged.

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 or her 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 type of good feeling. Moreover, the

distinctiveness of the type of good feeling in question makes it possible to see how the kind of life that engenders such feelings would be associated with meaningfulness, and how therefore one might be led to identify a meaningful life as a life lived pursuing one's passions.

Let us refer to the feelings one has when one is doing what one loves, or when one is engaging in activities by which one is gripped or excited, 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 have 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 it would not be difficult to imagine a person who has an abundance of opportunities for such pleasures still finding something (subjectively) 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. Consider, for example, writing a book, training for a triathlon, campaigning for a political candidate, caring for an ailing friend.

It may later be useful to bring to mind the fact that feelings of fulfillment are but one kind of positive feeling and 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. Still, 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 that view as the "Fulfillment View."

Because feelings of fulfillment are different from and sometimes compete with other types of good feeling, types that 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 on 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 subjective quality of one's life, then

⁶The 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. See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861), Chapter 2.

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 *feelings* of fulfillment, then it shouldn't matter what 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 that person. I earlier gave the example of a 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 handwritten 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 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 acknowledged to be awful. He is condemned eternally to a task that is boring, difficult, and futile. Because of this, Sisyphus's life, or more precisely, his afterlife, has been commonly treated as a paradigm of a meaningless existence.⁷

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 inject a substance in his veins that transforms him from someone for whom stone-rolling is nothing but a painful, arduous, and unwelcome chore to someone who loves stone-rolling more than anything else in the (after-)world.⁸ 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 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 remains futile. There is no value to his efforts; nothing ever comes of them. Even if due to divine intervention, Sisyphus comes to enjoy and even to feel fulfilled by his activity, the pointlessness of what he is doing doesn't change.

⁷ See especially Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).

⁸ See Taylor, *Good and Evil* (n. 4, above).

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.” Contemplation of the case of Sisyphus should, however, be enough to show that this “larger” must be understood metaphorically. We may, after all, imagine the rock Sisyphus is endlessly pushing uphill to be *very* large. We might rather 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, it 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, or a child with special needs—could be a meaningful life, for the value of the one cared for is presumably just equal to and not larger than the value of the person who does the caring. 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 more serious. 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 exactly what the question is asking.

A more promising interpretation of the view that links meaningfulness to involvement with something larger than oneself takes the metaphor of size less seriously. According to this interpretation, the point is to recommend that one get involved not with something larger than oneself, but rather with something *other* than oneself—that is, with something the value of which is independent of and has its source *outside of* oneself. Presumably, Sisyphus's 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 that 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 would be hesitant to describe as meaningful, if objectively that life were unconnected to anything or anyone whose value lay outside of the person whose life it was. 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: A meaningful life is a life that a.) the subject finds fulfilling, and b.) contributes to or connects positively with something the value of which has its source outside the subject.

If, however, meaningfulness is understood to refer to a coherent dimension of value, more specific than the general category of self-interest, or the even more general category of “all that is desirable in a life,” 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 condition in which subjective and objective components are suitably linked, conceives of meaningfulness in a more unified way. My conception of meaningfulness sees subjective and objective elements fitting together to constitute a coherent feature a life might or might not 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.⁹

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 Ful-

⁹I thank Cheshire Calhoun for pressing me to think about why the relation between the subjective and objective conditions of my conception of meaningfulness is important.

filled (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 could add stipulations to these examples that guaranteed that the protagonists’ lives and activities did contribute to some independent value. If they had no interest in the external or objective or independent value with which their lives were involved, however, it is not clear that that involvement would make their lives any better or more desirable to them. 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 care about the benefits their lives are producing, it is hard to see why 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.

Even when we consider people whose involvement with something “larger” is less accidental, the contribution this makes to the quality of their own lives is limited at best if they are not emotionally engaged with the people or things or activities that make what they are doing valuable. People who do valuable work but who cannot identify or take pride in what they are doing—the alienated housewife, the conscripted soldier, the assembly line worker, for example—may know that what they are doing is valuable, yet reasonably feel that their lives lack something that might be referred to as meaning.

In any case, it seems to me that when the recommendation to get involved with something larger than oneself is offered, it is 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 engaged with a person or an object or an activity that is independently valuable.¹⁰ 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. It is not to be regarded as a criterion of meaningfulness separable from any assumptions about the attitudes the subject will have toward the project or activity in question. If one gets involved in something larger than oneself—or, as I have interpreted it, in something the value of which 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 be and seem 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—namely, that one's life be involved in something larger than oneself—is much more plausible when it is understood to function in conjunction with a positive subjective attitude to one's involvement, so it seems to me that the subjective condition—that one live in a way that one finds fulfilling—is more plausible when understood in conjunction with objective constraints. I suggested a moment ago that when someone recommends that you get involved in something larger than oneself, the hope, if not the expectation,

¹⁰This does not always work. It is a standard part of the requirements for a child who is training for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, as it is for many middle and high school programs, that the child spend a specified number of hours engaged in community service. Not surprisingly, the degree to which this results in a gratifying experience, an enhanced social consciousness, or a lasting commitment varies widely.

that is lurking in the background is that you will find that involvement subjectively rewarding. Similarly, when someone recommends that you find your passion and go for it, there seems also to be a hope, if not an expectation, lurking in the background; namely, that the passion you find, the pursuit of which will be fulfilling, will be an intelligible one, within certain bounds. You will not be passionate—at least not for very 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 his situation worse.

From a hedonistic perspective, of course, Sisyphus's transformation *must* make his life better, for the only changes in Sisyphus are subjective. Negative feelings and attitudes are replaced by 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 only conceive of two possibilities: On the one hand, I can think of the substance in Sisyphus's veins as inducing delusions that make Sisyphus see something in stone-rolling that isn't really there. On the other hand, the drug in his veins may have lowered his intelligence and reduced his imaginative capacity, thus eliminating his ability to perceive the dullness

and futility of his labors or to compare them to other more challenging or worthwhile things that, had the gods not condemned him, he might have been 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 delusions 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 include a cognitive component 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 (objectively) good.¹⁷

¹⁷Though he does not use the language of "fulfillment" and "meaningfulness," Stephen Darwall discusses the profound contribution to welfare that comes from "the experience of connecting with something of worth in a way that enables the direct appreciation of the value of one's activity" in *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) 95. His discussion of such experiences,

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—that is, the condition of being fulfilled—is in a certain way defective and less desirable than fulfillment stemming from a more fitting or appropriate source.

The Fitting Fulfillment View Defended

I earlier argued that the suggestion that a life is meaningful insofar as it contributes to something larger than itself is most charitably understood if we take it not as an isolated objective criterion; rather, we should see it as a criterion that functions in tandem with an expectation about the subjective feelings and attitudes that contributing to something larger will engender. Analogously, the suggestion that a life is meaningful insofar as one finds one's passion and goes for it (thereby being fulfilled) is best understood as a subjective criterion meant to function not in isolation but rather in

which I take to be more or less identical to what I am describing as experiences of fulfillment, offers an especially good characterization of the kind of appreciation of value at issue that avoids over-intellectualizing it. The account of human welfare he develops in Chapter Four has much in common with the description of meaningfulness I defend here.

conjunction with the assumption that the objects of one's passions will fall within a certain objective range.

The conception of meaningfulness that I proposed at the beginning of this lecture brings these two criteria together. That conception, you will remember, claimed that meaningfulness in life came from loving something (or a number of things) worthy of love, and being able to engage with it (or them) in some positive way. As I have put it on other occasions, meaning in life consists in and arises from actively engaging in projects of worth.¹² On this conception, meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it or with it.

The popular view that takes meaningfulness to consist in finding one's passion and pursuing it can be taken as a way to emphasize the role that love, or subjective attraction, plays in meaning. The equally familiar view that associates meaning with a contribution to or involvement with something larger than oneself can be understood as emphasizing the role of objective value or worth. The endoxic method thus supports the conception of meaningfulness I propose here. It supports the view that when people talk about meaningfulness, they often have roughly the thing I have identified in mind; it supports the idea that the feature I have identified is, at some level, recognized as desirable; that it is thought, or perhaps better, *felt* to answer to a certain kind of human need. The question remains, however, why such a feature should be thought or felt to be desirable. What, if anything, is so good,

¹² See Susan Wolf, "The Meanings of Lives," in *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, eds. John Perry, Michael Bratman, and John Martin Fischer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 62–73; and Susan Wolf, "Meaningful Lives in a Meaningless World," *Questiones Infnitae* 19 (June 1997), publication of the Department of Philosophy, Utrecht University, 1–22. This formulation fails to emphasize the element of love (or passion or identification) as much as the others.

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 that yields an intelligible and plausible answer to this question.

We have already noted that being able to be actively engaged with things that one loves, being able, in other words, to indulge one's passions, affords 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 kind of objective worth. It is not enough, on this view, that one is occupied with doing things that one loves. The things one loves doing must be good in some independent way. 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 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 capacity, indeed the tendency, to see (or try to see) oneself from an external point of view.¹³ Humans have a tendency to aspire to see things, including themselves, without bias, to observe their lives from a detached perspective. 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. If one is prone to imagine oneself from an external point of view, to see oneself as if from without, the wish quite naturally follows that from that point of view one will be able to see oneself and one’s life as good, valuable, and a rightful source of pride.

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’s life is like a bubble that, upon bursting, will vanish without a trace can lead some people to despair. The thought that one lives in an indifferent universe makes some people shudder. Reminding oneself of the fact, if it is a fact, that one is actively and, we may stipulate, somewhat successfully, engaged in projects of independent worth may put these feelings to rest. By living in a way that is partly occupied by and directed toward the preservation or promotion or creation of value that has its source outside of oneself, one does something that can be understood, admired or

¹³ See especially Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

appreciated from others’ points of view, including the imaginary point of view of an impartial indifferent observer.¹⁴

The fact that the feature focused on by the Fitting Fulfillment View can have bearing 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 some 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 that our lives 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, it seems to me, can be thrilling. Why? At least part of the reason, 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

¹⁴ 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—do not speak directly to this concern. Such people will just have to get over it. Their desire is unsatisfiable. For further discussion of this topic, see my “The Meanings of Lives” (fn 12, above).

poem—then presumably others will be able to appreciate what we are doing, too. Others may actually appreciate what we are doing, or they may at least appreciate the same values as the 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 will understand and value it.¹⁵

Although I have suggested that the desirability of living in a positive relation with something the value of which does not depend solely on ourselves 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 their contemporaries 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 bourgeois interests, commonly of concern only to persons from a certain place, time, and social class. Perhaps it will be

¹⁵ 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 that is larger than oneself.

thought that these concerns are confined to a class that is narrower still; namely, to those who are excessively intellectual or unusually reflective. 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, concern over whether one is engaged in projects of independent worth may seem a 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 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."¹⁶ 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, even if not universal. By engaging in projects of independent value, by protecting, preserving, creating, and realizing value the source of which lies outside of ourselves, we can satisfy these interests. Indeed, it is hard to see how we could satisfy them in any other way.

¹⁶ Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) 87.

Reflecting on the pervasiveness of these interests, and on 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 this lecture, I have stressed the subjective aspect of a meaningful life—that is, the aspect that assures a meaningful life of being fulfilling, and to that extent feeling good. This emphasis brought out what my view of meaningfulness has in common with the more popular Fulfillment View (the view that says one should find one’s passion, and go for it) and allowed me easily to demonstrate one 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, the objective aspect of such a life needs to be stressed. Our interest in living a meaningful life is not an interest in a life *feeling* a certain way, but rather an interest that it *be* a certain way, specifically, that it be one that can be appropriately appreciated, admired, or valued by others;⁷ 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 can satisfy our interest in not being alone by thinking or feeling that we are not alone. To have a life that not only

⁷This 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. See, e.g., T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). The interest I have in mind, to which meaning rather than morality answers, however, is broader, 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.

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, however. In particular, I have not yet addressed, or even so much as acknowledged, the resistance many readers 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 objects of one’s life’s central passions. I shall begin the next lecture by responding to these concerns. Let me warn you in advance, though, that I shall not be offering a *theory* of objective value, much less a foolproof procedure for determining which things have it. In light of this, one might reasonably wonder why I bother to bring up the subject at all. The remainder of the second lecture will be aimed at answering that question. By the end of the second lecture, then, I shall have tried to convince you not only of what meaning is, but also of why it matters.