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Citation: Dixon, Hugo (2021) To what extent is a meaningful life an integrated one? [Thesis] (Unpublished)

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To what extent is a meaningful life an integrated one?

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2017

The work presented in this thesis is my own

Signed

Date.....

Abstract

I argue for two main links between a meaningful life and an integrated one. First, if we give meaningfulness its proper role in our conceptions of happiness and morality, we will be likely to be less pulled in different directions and so likely to be more integrated. Second, if we are integrated, our lives will be more meaningful.

My conclusions largely hinge on my definition of a meaningful life as one that is *effectively engaged in things we care for, which we can see we have reasons to care for*. As such, a meaningful life has subjective and objective aspects. I explain that reflection plays a central role in this conception of meaningfulness, not least because it is often the spur to seeking meaning in the first place. I defend my conception of meaningfulness against other alternatives.

I then argue that reflective beings have no reason to pursue a happy life unless their conception of happiness embraces meaningfulness and that they have no reason to pursue an ethical life if that alienates them from their *raison d'être*. This leads to the first of my main conclusions: that if meaningfulness takes its proper place in our conceptions of happiness and morality, we will be likely to be less pulled in different directions and so likely to be more integrated.

I next look at the issue from the other direction: to what extent an integrated life contributes to a meaningful one. I examine three ways a life can be integrated: integrating one's agency, integrating oneself and integrating with one's world. In each case, I argue that integration enables us to understand better why the things we care for matter and to engage more effectively in promoting their wellbeing. As such, integration contributes to a meaningful life.

Contents

1. Introduction
 - a. *Plan of thesis*
 - b. *Meaning of meaningfulness*
 - c. *Assumption of minimal objectivity*
 - d. *Centrality of reflection*
 - e. *Role of autonomy*
 - f. *Importance of caring*
 - g. *Why effective engagement matters*
 - h. *Integration as dynamic harmony*
 - i. *Gradations of meaning*
 - j. *Socrates and Gandhi*

2. Reflectiveness and the pursuit of meaning
 - a. *Reflection is a distinctive and important feature of human nature*
 - b. *Cosmic perspective on meaningful lives is incoherent*
 - c. *Egoism of the moment is incoherent as a perspective on meaning*
 - d. *Why reflect?*

3. Meaningful lives add up subjectively and objectively
 - a. *What if God exists?*
 - b. *What's wrong with subjectivism?*
 - c. *Pursuing a meaningful life is a creative endeavour*

4. Why reflective beings should pursue meaningful lives
 - a. *Source of normativity*
 - b. *A good life is, at least in part, meaningful*
 - c. *We can't be morally required to give up our *raison d'être**
 - d. *A meaningful life can properly include caring for oneself*
 - e. *Accepting role of meaning leads to less fragmented lives*

5. Integrating one's agency
 - a. *What is integration of agency?*
 - b. *Principles provide the intellectual architecture of our agency*
 - c. *Integrating agency through reflection*
 - d. *Integration of agency contributes to a meaningful life*

6. Integrating oneself
 - a. *Self is constructed*
 - b. *Psychological integration contributes to a meaningful life*
 - c. *Making sense of our past contributes to a meaningful life*
 - d. *Integrating our future selves contributes to a meaningful life*

7. Integrating with one's world
 - a. *What does integrating with our world mean?*
 - b. *Integration with other individuals*
 - c. *Integrating with our work*
 - d. *Integrating with our political environment*
 - e. *How integrating with one's world contributes to a meaningful life*

8. Conclusion

Bibliography

1

Introduction

In this thesis, I argue for two main links between a meaningful life and an integrated one. First, if we give meaningfulness its proper role in our conceptions of happiness and morality, we will be likely to be less pulled in different directions and so likely to be more integrated. Second, if we are integrated, our lives will be more meaningful.

A meaningful life, for me, is one that is *effectively engaged in things we care for, which we can see we have reasons to care for*. As such, a meaningful life has subjective aspects – in that we care for things and we can see we have reasons to do so. It also has objective aspects - in that there must be actually be reasons for the things we care for and we must be able to engage effectively with them.

Integration, for me, is creating a *dynamic harmony of diverse elements* rather than forcing uniformity. I look at three main ways that a person's life can be brought together: integration of agency, integration with oneself and integration with one's world. I argue that these three types of integration, which are themselves connected, contribute to leading a meaningful life because they enable a person to see why she cares for what she does and to engage effectively in what she cares for. They also enhance her ability to feel deeply for things.

I accept that my definition of meaningfulness is by no means the only one that could be given – and that my thesis that a meaningful life is, in important ways, integrated largely hinges on this definition. However, I seek to defend my particular conception of meaningfulness not merely as a plausible clarification of the concept but also as a desirable way of living. My main basis for this claim is an argument that the pursuit of meaning is one of the fundamental sources of reasons for action. Insofar as one is a reflective being exercising one's capacity to reflect, I therefore contend one should seek a meaningful life.

Although I don't just analyse the concept of meaningfulness, I do engage in conceptual analysis. In particular, I aim to show that some of the connections I draw between meaningful and integrated lives are conceptual, rather than empirical generalisations. These conceptual conceptions are often in the form of what Wittgensteinians call "defeasible" criteria. The prominent Wittgensteinian, Peter Hacker, defines criterion as follows: "Unlike inductive evidence, criterial support is determined by convention and is partly constitutive of the meaning of the expression for whose application it is a criterion. Unlike entailment, criterial support is characteristically defeasible."¹ I will often make arguments to the effect that two things *normally* or *typically* go together, but that this normality is a conceptual rather than an empirical link.

Plan of thesis

In the rest of this chapter, I flesh out my conception of meaningfulness. I explain: my assumption that values are at least minimally objective; the centrality of reflection; the role of autonomy; why caring is important; and why effective engagement matters. I then explain in more detail how I am using the word integration. Finally, I give two examples of people who have, in my view, led paradigmatically meaningful lives: Socrates and Mohandas Gandhi.

The rest of the thesis is in two main parts. The first, covering Chapters 2, 3 and 4, defends the conception of meaningfulness I have chosen and spells out its connection with other related concepts. In Chapter 2, I defend the central role that reflection plays in my conception of a meaningful life. I argue that our reflective nature can both lead us to worry that life is meaningless and prompt us to seek meaning in our lives. In Chapter 3, I consider alternatives to my contention that meaningful lives add up both subjectively and objectively. I question the coherence of various nihilistic, theistic and voluntaristic approaches. In Chapter 4, I argue that we have no reason to seek a happy life unless our conception of happiness embraces

¹ In Honderich.

meaningfulness; that we have no reason to pursue an ethical life if that alienates us from our *raison d'être*; and that it is legitimate and important in seeking a meaningful life to take care of ourselves. Looking at life in these ways will lead to a less fragmented life. This is the first way in which I argue that a meaningful life is integrated. It is part of the answer to my thesis question: to what extent is a meaningful life and integrated one?

The second part of the thesis, Chapters 5, 6 and 7, looks at the question from the opposite direction, exploring how an integrated life contributes to a meaningful life. Chapter 5 examines the integration of agency, by which I mean the alignment of what one cares for with one's principles, values, specific judgments and actions. Chapter 6 looks at integration of oneself, by which I mean mainly the alignment of emotions, memories, purposes, projects and plans. Chapter 7 discusses integration with one's world, by which I mean caring for, understanding and being supported by things outside oneself. I argue that integration enhances a person's ability to make sense of the things she cares for and engage effectively with them – and, as such, contributes to the meaningfulness of her life.

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 8, I show how the different types of integration reinforce one another. The integration of agency and integration of oneself are two aspects of the integration of a person; and the integration of a person and the integration with her world go hand in hand, as we are creatures that cannot be divorced from our environment. Somebody who is integrated in this way, I argue, will have a meaningful life.

Meaning of meaningfulness

It is important to distinguish between three types of meaning: semantic meaning, existential meaning and cosmic meaning. Semantic meaning concerns the meaning of language. Existential meaning, the focus of this thesis, concerns the meaning of a life. Cosmic meaning concerns the meaning of the universe. Although these are separate concepts, there are some connections between them. As I argue in the next

chapter, reflecting on our smallness in the context of the vast expanse of space and time can be a fruitful impetus for thinking about how to find and create meaning in our lives. Meanwhile, although a meaningful sentence and a meaningful life aren't the same, semantic and existential meaning share concepts such as intelligibility, interpretation and coherence. Both sentences and lives can be intelligible, interpreted and coherent.

My definition of a meaningful life is one *effectively engaged in things we care for, which we can see we have reasons to care for*. I have arrived at this definition through an Aristotelian endoxic method: considering some of the features meaningful lives are commonly thought to involve, and then refining them. Aristotle explained this method as follows: "We must... set out people's perceptions and, after first discussing the problems, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the reputable opinions about these phenomena or, failing this, of the greatest number and the most authoritative."² I end up with a definition which isn't exactly like those used by others but which still bears a resemblance to common usage and which helps explain why wise people throughout the ages have often thought it is important for humans to lead meaningful lives.

My definition is somewhat similar to Aristotle's own definition of a good life (εὐδαιμονία): "The human good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with virtue."³ What's more, in the passage preceding this, he talks about the human's way of life as being "activity of soul in accordance with reason".⁴ Of course, Aristotle is defining a good life rather than a meaningful one. But, as I explain in Chapter 4, if we accept that an important element of a good life for a reflective being is that it should be meaningful, there may not be such a big difference between the two.

Meanwhile, Susan Wolf outlines the following conception of meaningfulness: "What is valuable is that one's life be actively (and lovingly) engaged in projects that give

² Aristotle p134.

³ Aristotle p225.

⁴ Aristotle p225.

rise to [the] feeling [of being fulfilled], when the projects in question can be seen to have a certain kind of objective worth.”⁵ This definition is also similar to the one I am using. Wolf further argues that “meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.”⁶ This, too, is similar to my contention that a meaningful life has both subjective and objective aspects. For me, the subjective aspects are: caring for things, and being able to see we have reasons to do so. The objective aspects: are there actually being reasons for what we care for, and being able to engage effectively with them.

Assumption of minimal objectivity

Both Wolf’s and my account of meaningfulness assume there is at least some minimal objectivity to what we care for. In Chapter 4, I explore the sources of normativity. But, for now, I just wish to remark that we can’t have good reasons to care for absolutely anything. Somebody may be a passionate neo-Nazi or jihadist, but that won’t mean she has a good reason to drive into crowds of peaceful people killing them. There are various ways of considering what might be acceptable reasons, but I think the most promising may be to say that a purely private reason is not a genuine one. By purely private, I mean a reason that could never be justified in public, not one that just happens not to have been aired in public. Kantians such as Christine Korsgaard take a similar approach.⁷

This raises the further question of what determines whether a public reason is a good one. Mere agreement by other people can’t be the answer, because that would leave the validity of reasons to the whims of society. Perhaps we need a wise person, who according to Aristotle can “deliberate well... about what sorts of things conduce to the good life”⁸, to advise us. Or maybe we need an unbiased process, such as John Rawls’ community, which can make impartial decisions because the

⁵ Wolf, 2010, p27 .

⁶ Wolf, 2010, p9.

⁷ Korsgaard, 1996, pp136-145.

⁸ Aristotle p120.

agents are operating behind a “veil of ignorance” about their personal characteristics.⁹ Alternatively, we could have an account that ultimately grounds reasons in certain features of human nature such as our reflectiveness and sociability. In this thesis, I will not attempt to set out, let alone defend, any particular approach to value objectivity. I just note that my argument assumes that values are objective on at least a minimal level.

Centrality of reflection

My definition of meaningfulness is not uncontentious. There are rival conceptions, which suggest either that what the subject thinks about her life is irrelevant or that objective considerations are irrelevant. I consider these in Chapter 3. But there are differences of emphasis even among those who think a meaningful life has both subjective and objective aspects. In particular, I stress reflection more than Wolf does. Her definition merely insists that the projects we are engaged in “can *be seen*” as objectively valuable whereas I say “*we can see*” the reasons for caring for them. That said, although reflection isn’t centre-stage in her account, she does at times acknowledge its importance. For example, she writes: “‘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.”¹⁰

Reflection plays a central role in my account of meaningfulness for two reasons. First, as I argue in the next chapter, reflection is the impetus that drives some people to seek meaning in their lives. Second, for somebody’s life to make sense to her, she needs to find it intelligible why she cares for what she does. This requires reflection. Also, without thinking, she won’t be able to interpret her life to herself. She needs to be aware of what she’s doing and the significance of what she is doing. In other words, concepts such as sense, intelligibility, interpretation and significance would have no place in a meaningful life unless that life was also a reflective one. While it may be possible to think of meaningfulness without these concepts, doing so would

⁹ Rawls pp118-123.

¹⁰ Wolf, 2010, p24.

involve severing any link between semantic meaning (where sense, intelligibility, interpretation and significance play an essential role) and existential meaning.

Some philosophers argue that it is mistaken to look for any connection between these two types of meaning. For example, Antti Kauppinen says: “Clearly, life doesn’t have a meaning like words or signs do. It does not signify anything, and it would be misleading to look for meaning of life in this direction.”¹¹ However, others such as John Cottingham, agree with me. He writes: “For something to be meaningful to an agent, that agent must *interpret* it or *construe* it in a certain way.”¹²

One consequence of arguing that a meaningful life has to involve reflection is that creatures, which are incapable of reflecting about their lives, cannot have meaningful ones. Nor, for that matter, would their lives be meaningless. The concept just doesn’t apply to their lives. So a baby doesn’t have a meaningful life, though she may grow into having one. Nor does a dog or a monkey. A normal adult human, by contrast, can have a life that is more or less meaningful – and more or less meaningless.

Role of autonomy

Meaningful lives don’t just involve reflection – or thinking for oneself. They also involve autonomy – or deciding and choosing for oneself. The two go hand-in-hand. Somebody who cannot or will not reflect is unable or unwilling to decide for herself – and thereby act for herself. On the other hand, somebody who thinks for herself but then allows somebody else to decide for her what to do is not leading a meaningful life. She is adopting a slave mentality.

Many philosophers accept the importance of autonomy for a meaningful life. Cottingham, for example, argues that a meaningful life “implies an agent’s

¹¹ Kauppinen pp352-353.

¹² Cottingham p22.

involvement in projects that reflect his or her free and autonomous choices.”¹³ Julian Baggini writes: “The ability to choose one’s own purposes is part of what distinguishes what Jean-Paul Sartre calls a conscious ‘being-for-itself’ from an unconscious ‘being-in-itself.’”¹⁴

It might, though, be argued that my account of meaningfulness fetishizes autonomy. Why couldn’t somebody have a perfectly meaningful life by joining a sect, like the Scientologists, where she is not supposed to question what she is doing? Couldn’t people actually have a more meaningful life by deferring to authority rather than trying to decide how to live for themselves? Isn’t it precisely because there has been such a decline in deference since the Enlightenment – of intellectuals to dogma, working classes to the aristocracy, women to men, young to the old, and everybody to God – that the West is now witnessing what the existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom describes as a “malady of meaninglessness”?¹⁵

My answer to these questions is that, although the decline of deference has in practice spawned a malady of meaninglessness, it doesn’t have to. Autonomy, as I argue in Chapter 4, doesn’t have to lead to an “anything goes” mentality. The problem we face at this moment in history is, therefore, not that we have swept away ignorance, bigotry and oppression; but rather that we have not adequately replaced our old cultural practices with new meaningful ones.

That said, I accept that people can have lives that are meaningful up to a point if there are constraints on their autonomy. The devout believer in Scientology can engage in meaningful projects and have meaningful relationships. But, if at some point, reflection about what to do and what they care about has to stop, at that point their ability to make sense of their lives also has to stop. If we ask them “why do you do that?” and they reply “that’s what Ron Hubbard says”, the intelligibility of their lives has reached a limit. Meanwhile, if they say something like “I don’t

¹³ Cottingham p25.

¹⁴ Baggini p13.

¹⁵ Yalom p447.

question the rules because I am not good at rule-making”, we could sympathise with the answer but still believe that their lives would be even more meaningful if they had the capacity to decide for themselves. This is not to say that the most meaningful life has to involve rejecting our culture. If we consciously buy into traditions, we are still acting autonomously.

What about the objection that I too am guilty of belonging to a sect, the “liberal” sect that values autonomy? Isn’t this just as parochial a position as that of the Scientologist? Aren’t I just as much brainwashed by my culture as she is? My answer is that my approach values openness – in particular, reflecting on why I care for what I do care for. Often, no doubt, I will in practice fail to be sufficiently open to alternative ways of creating meaning in life, but this is not a structural fault in my conception of meaningfulness. Say I was critical of polyamorous marriages without giving much thought to them. That could well be parochial. But somebody following my conception of meaningfulness should be open to reflecting on the merits of such relationships and might, then, change her mind. The person who deals with difference by reflecting on it rather than dogmatically insisting on her point of view is the opposite of parochial.

Importance of caring

I have several times referred to the importance in a meaningful life of caring for things. There are lots of things we can care about that contribute to a meaningful life: objects, institutions, causes, nature, animals and, above all, other people and ourselves. In talking about caring, it is perhaps most natural to think about emotions. When we care about something, we have positive feelings towards it and negative feelings towards anything that might damage its wellbeing. Both Harry Frankfurt and Wolf emphasise the emotional side of caring and the essential role that plays in meaningful lives, arguing that when you act because you care about something, you are acting out of “reasons of love”.¹⁶ Wolf adds the important insight that loving

¹⁶ Frankfurt, 2004, and Wolf 2010, p4.

something also gives us “reasons to live”¹⁷. This is why caring is so important for having a meaningful life.

In my mind, though, caring is not just a feeling. It also involves thought and action. Reflection enters the picture in two ways: we think about what is good for the thing we care about; and we think that this thing is important for us. As Frankfurt puts it: “Caring about something *makes* that thing important to the person who cares about it”.¹⁸ What’s more, in caring, you are prepared to act to advance the wellbeing of what you care about. Caring in all these ways is constitutive of a meaningful life. For example, you love your daughter, you realise she’s really important to you, you consider what is good for her and you are prepared to make sacrifices on her behalf. You both have reasons to engage effectively on her behalf and you have a reason to live.

Why effective engagement matters

This then brings me to the third aspect of my definition of meaningfulness – “effective engagement” in things one cares for. There are two parts to this: engagement and effectiveness. If one is merely a passive observer, one is not engaged in the things one cares for. One is then not really caring for them. If one is engaged but totally ineffective, one won’t be caring for them either. A meaningful life, therefore, normally has to have some chance of beneficial impact. Wolf takes a similar line saying that to combat the feeling that life is meaningless one must be “somewhat successfully... engaged in projects of independent worth”¹⁹.

One doesn’t strictly speaking need to succeed. It can be meaningful to strive for a noble cause against the odds, even if one ultimately fails. When the prize is big enough, it can be worth putting effort into attaining it even if the chances of success are slim. One can imagine abnormal cases where the most meaningful thing is to

¹⁷ Wolf, 2015, 191.

¹⁸ Frankfurt, 1998b, p92.

¹⁹ Wolf, 2010, p28.

fight heroically and even die in a hopeless struggle because one really doesn't have any other options to do anything more valuable. But, in most normal situations, if there was zero chance of success and there was no consolation prize to be had from fighting valiantly but failing, the struggle would be meaningless. It would be better to devote one's energies to something else.

Success will partly be down to how effectively one deploys one's talents and energies. This is why it is important if one is seeking a meaningful life to develop one's powers and marshal them effectively. If one buries one's talents in the ground as in the Biblical parable²⁰, one will not be effectively engaged in life. Even if what one wants ends up happening, by luck, this will not be the result of one's own agency and will not, therefore, contribute to a meaningful life. The connection between a meaningful life and deploying one's talents is therefore not an empirical generalisation. One of the criteria for leading a meaningful life, albeit one defeasible by bad luck, is to use one's powers effectively.

Integration as dynamic harmony

Integration, as I use the term, is creating a dynamic harmony of diverse elements. I will examine integration of agency, integration of oneself and integration with one's world in future chapters – and argue that such dynamic harmony contributes to making sense of the things one cares about and being able to engage effectively with them. In this way, integration contributes to a meaningful life.

This clearly is not the only way of understanding the concept. Integration can mean fusion that leads to uniformity, rigidity and stasis. But an integrated society doesn't have to be like the one Mao Zedong tried to impose on China, where everybody was supposed to wear the same clothes. When somebody loves another, it doesn't have to involve a smooshing together, where one or other or both lose their identities.

²⁰ *The Bible, The Gospel according to Matthew*, Chapter 25, verses 14-30.

The word harmony derives from the Ancient Greek verb ἁρμόζω, which means to fit together or join. Two musical notes don't need to be the same to be in harmony. In fact, if the two are the same, although you won't have a clash, you won't have harmony either. You'll have a monotone. Or consider the Chinese notion of yin and yang. They are considered complementary not opposing forces, which create a dynamic system where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The pictorial representation of yin-yang has teardrop shapes, with the black and white colours reversed, that fit together in a circle. Or take a dovetail joint in carpentry. One plank has "tails", the other "pins". They fit together to form a strong bond. If both planks had uniform right-angled teeth, they would pull apart easily. If they both had plane edges, they wouldn't hold together at all. The union of a couple doesn't imply uniformity either. It involves creativity and interplay. You can dance by yourself. But there's normally more joy dancing with another. There's tension that comes from being unsure how the other will move. She may inspire you to move in ways you hadn't imagined. Of course, you can be a creative solo dancer too – but even that involves the interplay of different parts of yourself.

The harmony I have outlined typically involves reflection. We think about how we relate to ourselves and to others in order to integrate. It is also dynamic because we don't reach a final end point, except in death or perhaps dementia. Any equilibrium is a temporary one. In response to changes in our environment or within ourselves, we need to reflect again on how to reach a new harmony. In other words, integration is a process. And for this to result in a meaningful life, the process should be guided by truthful inquiry and openness. If the inquiry – whether reflecting on one's own or in dialogue with others - isn't truthful, one's life will be based on dishonesty. Although one may dupe oneself that one has reasons to care for the things one does, one won't really have reasons to do so.

Openness means revealing oneself to others, as well as oneself, and being open to learning from them. It means being able to see something from the other's perspective – and then integrating what is good from her perspective with one's own. That, in turn, means being prepared to change rather than being frozen in

one's ways. Cottingham makes a similar point: "A truly meaningful life as a human being can be achieved only by ones whose pattern of living is in a certain sense *open* rather than closed; that is, whose fundamental dispositions are structured in such a way as not to foreclose the possibility of genuine emotional interaction and genuine critical dialogue with their fellows."²¹

One objection to this argument could be that it is unrealistic or unhealthy to expect people to open up fully, either to others or to themselves. People sensibly put up barriers to others because they are afraid of getting hurt. They shut off parts of themselves, after traumas, as well as less wounding experiences. Many people also live double lives. Consider a gay person in some countries. If he is open about his sexuality, he will be persecuted. But such compartmentalisation is a second-best option, not the ideal. It would be better if the country didn't persecute gays in the first place. People are forced to defend themselves from others – and indeed from themselves – because they lack trust. If one was not at risk of being persecuted by others (or by oneself), it would be better to open up and integrate. Trauma victims are healthier if they can gradually come to terms with what they suffered rather than live in denial. Most gay people find it is a huge relief if they can come out rather than live in the closet. As I argue in Chapter 7, we have more meaningful relationships with lovers if we let them into our inner world – while at the same time recognising that we are autonomous and need our private zones. I will also argue in Chapter 5 that radical fragmentation militates against a person's ability to engage effectively in what she cares about.

Gradations of meaning

Human lives are rarely fully meaningful or totally meaningless. Rather, they lie somewhere in between. They are somewhat meaningful, very meaningful, largely meaningless and so forth. This gradation goes too for the main ingredients of meaningfulness. People can reflect more or less deeply on what they care for, they

²¹ Cottingham p29.

can be more or less autonomous in their choices, they can care for things passionately or not so passionately, and they can be more or less effectively engaged with these things. Similarly, lives can be more or less integrated. A person's actions, principles, specific judgments and what she cares for can match one another, more or less. She can be more or less in touch with her emotions and her past, and more or less connected with the world around her.

It is also possible for somebody's life to be more meaningful in one dimension (say, feeling passionately for things) than in another (say, actually advancing the well-being of what she cares for). Similarly, her life can be more integrated in one dimension (say, aligning her principles and her actions) than in another (say, being in touch with her emotions). It may also be the case that in a world where people have limited time and other resources, there are trade-offs between different dimensions of meaningfulness and integration. For example, time spent on examining one's life may detract from one's ability to spend time fighting for those one loves; or money spent improving one's intellect (say, on a philosophy course) could instead be spent sorting out one's emotional life (say, by seeing a shrink). On the other hand, we shouldn't assume there will always be trade-offs. Progress in one dimension of meaningfulness (say, understanding why one cares for something) may enhance progress in another dimension (say, one's ability to improve its wellbeing).

Socrates and Gandhi

Throughout this thesis, I will refer to Socrates and Gandhi as examples of people who led meaningful lives. I do not mean they were perfect, or that one can't have a meaningful life unless one is a Socrates or Gandhi. Rather, I take it that, their lives were especially meaningful. In particular, they were engaged in things they had reason to care about, they reflected deeply on life and they had a high impact with their actions. What's more, their agency was integrated in that their actions and principles were aligned.

Socrates cared for several things he had good reason to value: wisdom, living a virtuous life and examining life. His dictum – “the unexamined life is not worth living”- could even be rephrased as “the unexamined life is not meaningful”. Socrates was famous for his moral fibre. Deep soul-searching was presumably one reason he developed such a strong set of principles. What’s more, he didn’t just espouse principles. He lived by them. He even died by them – choosing to ask for a pension after he was found guilty instead of suggesting a lesser punishment than the death penalty proposed by his accusers, and drinking the hemlock rather than running away ignobly into exile. This showed that he really valued his principles; he didn’t just pay them lip service. If he had fled, as his friends urged, that would have undermined the meaning of his life.²² Socrates also had a huge impact on the world – partly because of his teachings, partly because of his method of inquiry and partly because of the example he set. Not only did Socrates have an influence on his immediate circle including Plato and, via him, Aristotle. He has been an inspiration to Western philosophers, and many people who aren’t philosophers, for two and a half thousand years.

There are some similarities in Gandhi’s life. He too had good reasons to care for the things he devoted his life to: nonviolent struggle and Indian independence. One of his key principles was Satyagraha, normally translated as “nonviolent struggle” but whose etymological meaning is “truth force” – which I interpret as meaning that if you are honest to yourself, truthful to others and realistic about the political situation, you can make the world more just without destroying a lot of things in the process. Gandhi, too, was known for his moral fibre. As he developed his philosophy, Gandhi tried to be honest with himself about his feelings and motivations – setting out some of his thoughts in his revealing and aptly titled autobiography “The Story of my experiments with truth.”²³ His integrity was a function of his soul-searching. What’s more, he had the courage of his convictions. Nonviolent struggle didn’t mean shirking from confrontation – either with his supporters or the British occupiers.

²² See Plato’s *Apology* for Socrates’ trial and Plato’s *Crito* for his explanation of why Socrates would not flee into exile.

²³ Gandhi, *An Autobiography – or The Story of my experiments with truth*.

Witness his multiple hunger strikes. Again and again, he put himself in danger for his beliefs. He was eventually assassinated. Finally, Gandhi had high impact. Not only did he actually help achieve Indian independence, he has been an inspiration to political activists elsewhere including Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi.

Reflectiveness and the pursuit of meaning

In the last chapter, I defined meaningfulness as being *effectively engaged in things we care for, which we can see we have reasons to care for*. I further argued that the insistence on being able to see the reasons we have for caring for things meant that meaningful lives have to be intelligible to the people living them, and that this means we have to be able to reflect on our lives and what we care for.

In this chapter, I look at how reflectiveness provides the impetus to pursue a meaningful life in the first place. I start by arguing that our reflective capacity is a distinctive and important feature of our humanity. I then explain how reflection can lead to the conclusion that life is unavoidably meaningless. This typically stems from taking a “cosmic” perspective on life’s meaning. After dismissing this perspective as incoherent, I look at its polar opposite – what I call the “egoism of the moment” or the view that life can be meaningful if we care only about ourselves in the here and now. I dismiss this too as incoherent and advocate a middle position, which involves connecting over space and time. I end by considering some objections to the view that we should reflect at all. While I accept that we shouldn’t fetishize reflection, I defend the view that it plays an important role in a meaningful life. I also suggest that we should seek to lead such lives – an argument I develop more fully in Chapter 4.

Reflection is a distinctive and important feature of human nature

Humans are not just determined by instinct. We have big brains, which allow us to figure out what to do. As generations of humans have figured out what seems to work well, this has been codified in culture. Our intellect can be used not just to determine suitable means to an end, but also to question the ends that our instincts and our culture provide for us. This ability to step back and think about things is what I mean by reflection. It is closely linked to self-consciousness, our awareness of ourselves. It is also closely linked to rationality: often, when we reflect, we are

looking for reasons to believe this or do that, although we can sometimes just let our minds wander, something which is normally not considered part of rationality.

Philosophers who otherwise have somewhat different perspectives agree that this capacity to step back and take a view on whether we buy into our desires and instincts is important. Frankfurt calls it our ability to form “second-order desires”²⁴. Charles Taylor terms this our ability to be a “strong evaluator”, classifying desires into categories such as virtuous or vicious rather than merely deciding how best to satisfy them.²⁵ It’s also what makes us like John McDowell’s “rational wolf”, which is wondering whether to follow his nature and pull his weight by hunting with the pack or whether to “idle through the hunt but still grab his share of the prey”.²⁶ We have the capacity to question what we should care for and what we should do - and even whether we should care for or do anything at all.

We reflect about a lot of things. For example, we can consider what we should eat for dinner, whether we would prefer to go for a swim or do yoga, whether we should get married and even whether we should commit suicide. There is a spectrum of reflection – from the more practical to the more existential. But there’s no hard and fast line between the practical and existential. Even reflection about seemingly small practical matters, such as what to eat, involves deciding what we care about. However, as I argue in Chapter 4, on similar lines to Korsgaard²⁷, it is our ability to reflect on existential questions, which is the ultimate source of normativity – and this is one of the reasons it is a particular important feature of human nature.

Cosmic perspective on meaningful lives is incoherent

When we don’t just take a bit of distance from ourselves but go the whole hog and take a cosmic perspective on life, this can cause giddiness. We seem so small

²⁴ Frankfurt, 1998a, p12.

²⁵ Charles Taylor, 1982, p112.

²⁶ McDowell p171.

²⁷ Korsgaard, 1996.

compared to the vast expanse of space; and our life seems so short compared to the vast expanse of eternity. Taking this perspective can lead us to think life is meaningless – or, as some philosophers say, “absurd”.

Leo Tolstoy, in his autobiography, provides a good description of how this can happen: “My question, the one that brought me to the point of suicide when I was fifty years old, was a most simple one that lies in the soul of every person, from a silly child to a wise old man. It is the question without which life is impossible, as I had learnt from experience. It is this: what will come of what I do today or tomorrow? What will come of my entire life? Expressed another way the question can be put like this: why do I live? Why do I wish for anything, or do anything? Or expressed another way: is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?”²⁸

Existentialist philosophers were much exercised by the problem of life’s meaning. A classic text, Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, opens with the sentence: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.”²⁹ Among contemporary philosophers, Thomas Nagel has explored the problem extensively – both in a series of essays collected in the volume *Mortal Questions*³⁰ and in a later book, *The View from Nowhere*³¹. He writes: “In seeing ourselves from outside we find it difficult to take our lives seriously. This loss of conviction, and the attempt to regain it, is the problem of the meaning of life.”³²

Camus and Nagel have a similar diagnosis of the source of the problem: reason, according to the French existentialist, and self-consciousness, according to the American. Camus writes: “If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to

²⁸ Tolstoy pp34-35.

²⁹ Camus p11.

³⁰ Nagel, *Mortal Questions*.

³¹ Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*.

³² Nagel, 1986, p214.

this world.”³³ Nagel says that “humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand.”³⁴ He contrasts this human capacity with that of other creatures. “Why is the life of a mouse not absurd?... Because he lacks the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse.”³⁵

Although Camus and Nagel have similar diagnoses, they have different solutions to meaninglessness, with the French philosopher advocating scorn³⁶ and the American suggesting irony. In what follows, I will focus on Nagel’s arguments. His diagnosis of the source of the problem, in self-consciousness, is correct. But his conclusion that “there is no escape from alienation or conflict of one kind or another”³⁷ is based on the error of assuming that the cosmic perspective on a meaningful life is a coherent one. This involves ripping words like “meaning” and “importance” out of the context where they have semantic meaning.

Nagel’s use of the wonderful phrase “the view from nowhere” hints that the cosmic perspective may not really be a view at all. After all, how can you have a view from *nowhere*? But ultimately he can’t rid himself fully of the illusion that the cosmic perspective on a meaningful life is a coherent one – and like Wittgenstein’s fly he remains trapped in a fly-bottle.³⁸

Consider, for example, Nagel’s contention that one thing that “emerges from an objective view of my birth is its unimportance.”³⁹ What does it mean to say something is *important*? As argued in the previous chapter, the concepts of importance and caring are intimately linked: things can only be important in the

³³ Camus p46.

³⁴ Nagel, 1979, p 15.

³⁵ Nagel ,1979, p21.

³⁶ Camus, pp97-98.

³⁷ Nagel, 1986, p221.

³⁸ Wittgenstein, Section 309, p110.

³⁹ Nagel, 1986, p213.

context of beings that care about something. My birth can be important to me. It can also be important from the point of view of other beings that care: say my parents, children or colleagues. If I have a really meaningful life, like Socrates or Gandhi, my birth can be important even if we take a very distant vantage point – say the perspective of all of 21st Century humanity. But from the cosmic perspective, the view from nowhere – or perhaps we should say “the view from nobody”, where there’s nobody to care about anything - the term “important” doesn’t have any use. My birth isn’t important from that perspective, but it’s not unimportant either.

To dramatise his view from nowhere, Nagel introduces a “visitor from outer space”, for whom our lives are assumed to be unimportant.⁴⁰ This device betrays the incoherence of his account. As soon as we have a *visitor* from outer space, we do indeed have a point of view. But we can no longer conclude that our lives have no importance for her. Why shouldn’t they, especially if she can find a way of reaching out to us? Science fiction is full of stories of creatures from other galaxies mattering to one another – in either good or bad ways. Meanwhile, if we posit a God, who can be seen as a sort of supernatural visitor from outer space, there is no problem at all thinking our lives could matter to her. Indeed, she could be holding us in her mind the whole time. Nagel’s idea that our lives don’t matter from the cosmic perspective only has plausibility if there’s no being at all considering us from that point of view. But, if that is so, there is no view either. The concepts of importance, caring and meaning are then out of place. While it’s true that from the cosmic point of view life isn’t meaningful, it isn’t meaningless either.

Nagel gives short shrift to this sort of critique. He says the history of philosophy is the “continual discovery of problems that baffle existing concepts” and that to the extent that “no-nonsense theories have an effect, they merely threaten to impoverish the intellectual landscape for a while by inhibiting the serious expression of certain questions.”⁴¹ But Nagel protests too much. Pointing out the incoherence of the cosmic perspective on meaningful lives doesn’t mean we have to abandon the

⁴⁰ Nagel, 1986, p216.

⁴¹ Nagel, 1986, p11.

pursuit of meaning in our lives. Nor does it mean we have to go to the other extreme and look at our lives only from the perspective of “me” and “now”. Indeed, Nagel himself makes clear that there aren’t just two perspectives: “The distinction between more subjective and more objective views is really a matter of degree, and it covers a wide spectrum.”⁴² So in grappling with the issue of how to lead meaningful lives, we can fruitfully look at our lives from the outside - from perspectives where words like “meaning” and “importance” have semantic meaning – without zooming off, like Buzz Lightyear in Disney’s *Toy Story*, to Infinity and Beyond.

Egoism of the moment is incoherent as a perspective on meaning

If it is incoherent to look for meaning in our lives from a cosmic perspective, what about the opposite extreme: looking for meaning in the here and now without any consideration of the spatial-temporal context? I will call this perspective the egoism of the moment. The only thing an egoist cares for is herself. She doesn’t care for other people, other beings or the world around her. If we add that she only cares for what happens now – and doesn’t care for either the past or the future – we have the egoism of the moment. At the level of what matters, this can be seen as parallel to what could be called the solipsism of the moment: the theory that the only thing that exists is me in the here and now.

I am not going to explore whether solipsism is a coherent point of view, although I doubt it is. What I am going to argue is that a person cannot have a meaningful life if she is radically wedded to the egoism of the moment. This is because she will not be able to care for anything. She will be unable to have rich emotions, understand why things matter or be effectively engaged with anything, even herself.

But first I wish to distinguish two types of egoist of the moment. The most radical really doesn’t care for anything beyond herself in the here and now, either because

⁴² Nagel, 1986, p5.

she doesn't want to or because she lacks the capacity to. The less radical does care for other things but not in themselves. She only cares for other things instrumentally, insofar as they advance her wellbeing in the here and now. I am not seeking to prove here that this less radical type of egoist cannot have a meaningful life, although in future chapters I will aim to show that being deeply connected to oneself, other people and one's world typically leads to a more meaningful life. My target in this chapter is the polar opposite of the cosmic perspective, the person who is so totally concerned with herself in the here and now that she is radically disconnected from her past, her future and her world. My aim is to show that, to have a meaningful life, she has to be at least to some extent connected in space and time.

Our radical egoist, by definition, does not care for anything beyond herself. She doesn't care for her family, friends, material possessions and environment – not even instrumentally as a means to her own wellbeing. But now imagine that her children and husband are killed, her friends are put into prison, she loses all her property and her neighbourhood is destroyed in a Biblical flood. Since these things are beyond the bounds of her self, she doesn't care. By definition, our radical egoist of the moment also only cares for the present. Because she doesn't care for the future, she doesn't have any purposes, projects or plans – either for herself or for anyone else. Nor does she have any emotions that relate to the future, such as fear or hope. She doesn't worry, for example, that she might die or suffer pain. If she did, she would then be caring about the future. Meanwhile, because she is indifferent to the past, history doesn't matter either. She doesn't feel emotions that relate to the past such as pride and shame. She doesn't care for either her own history or anybody else's. A girl comes to her in agony; it's her daughter; but the fact that she gave birth to her, suckled her and brought her up is irrelevant. If she allowed these factors to matter, she would be caring about another person's past and so no longer a radical egoist of the moment.

Now consider whether this person can lead a meaningful life. It seems that her ability to care falls short on all three levels that I argued for in the last chapter:

emotion, reflection and action. It's doubtful whether she really cares for anything, even herself in the present. She can still, presumably, feel pain and pleasure. But because she lacks any connection with the past or the future, she has no rich emotions. It's even harder for her to make intelligible to herself why she matters. She has no story she tells herself about who she is, where she came from or where she might be going that would help her explain why she supposedly cares for herself. Finally, she is not effectively engaged in life. She isn't engaged in anything because she is not connected to anything. She is she lacks the capacity to or because s also not doing anything with any purpose in mind because she is radically disconnected from her future and that prevents her doing anything effectively.

I have argued that two extreme perspectives on a meaningful life – the cosmic and the egoism of the moment – are incoherent. But I have not argued against more moderate positions. Indeed, my aim has been to show that, in order to have meaning in our lives, we have to see ourselves as beings situated in space and time. The answer to both the cosmic and egoism-of-the-moment perspectives is, at one level, the same: if we are mere blips, there is no meaning; for life to add up, it cannot exist in spatial and temporal isolation.

Reflective humans, faced with the apparent absurdity of life, seek meaning by transcending the egoism of the moment and so connecting over time and space. In practice, given our creative and social natures, this mainly involves engaging in meaningful projects and meaningful relationships.⁴³ We reach across time mainly by connecting to ourselves, a topic I explore in Chapters 5 and 6. We reach across space by connecting to other people and other aspects of our world, something I discuss in Chapter 7.

⁴³ I borrow from Kauppinen the idea meaningful lives are, in practice, mainly about meaningful projects and meaningful relationships. See Kauppinen, p360.

Why reflect?

But why should we go through the effort, and sometimes even the mental agony, of reflecting deeply on our lives? Why shouldn't we just live for the moment, or slavishly follow tradition, or go along with the herd wherever it is charging? Wouldn't that lead to an easier life?

These questions are partly based on empirical assumptions – for example, that going along with the herd will actually lead to an easier life. The veracity of these assumptions could be examined, and it seems that the evidence won't all point in one direction. Remember that we are talking about beings that have the capacity to reflect – not animals, or babies that are yet to reflect, or old people with dementia that have lost the capacity to. Insofar as reflective beings deliberately run away from examining their lives, mental agony may crop up elsewhere. What Freudians call “denial” and what existentialists call “bad faith” rarely leads to mental health. Those who sweep things under the carpet in these ways can suffer from anxiety, bouts of anger, insomnia and depression. They can behave in ways that are destructive, both to others and to themselves, for example by resorting to alcohol or drugs. These costs of not reflecting need to be set against the benefits of sticking one's head in the sand.

The question of whether to reflect and, if so, how deeply is also a utilitarian one. If you know what you like, what you value, what your skills are and what your character is, you will make better choices about how to live – just as somebody who knows about aerospace will make better choices about how to build an aircraft. Only some people need to build aircraft. But everybody needs to live. Hence, we should all know ourselves. Hence, too, the validity of the motto from the Delphic oracle - γνῶθι σεαυτόν – know yourself!

This argument, of course, doesn't show we should spend all day reflecting deeply, any more than the argument that we sometimes need to run to catch a bus means we should spend all day running. Quite apart from the mental agony it may provoke,

deep reflection consumes energy that can be devoted to other activities. There is an opportunity cost to reflection. Deep thinking can suffer from diminishing returns. As Hallvard Lillehammer argues, apathy can be a virtue when people are faced with so many potential things to care about that a proper survey of them would be “impossible, counterproductive, or downright silly.”⁴⁴ It is also necessary to take breaks from reflection in order to refresh one’s thinking – just as a farmer won’t try to grow the same crops continuously on a plot of land but will allow for fallow periods or crop rotation in order to increase productivity in the long run.

These empirical and utilitarian arguments, though, aim off from the main point. When people wonder whether they should examine their lives deeply, they are asking whether in failing to do so they will be missing out on some important aspect of what it is to be a human. Socrates thought so. That was the point of his dictum, “the unexamined life isn’t worth living”.⁴⁵ So did John Stuart Mill. He wrote: “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is only because they only know their own side of the question.”⁴⁶

But were Socrates and Mill right? There are two main objections. First, that it’s not necessary to reflect on the meaning of life in order to lead a meaningful life. Second, even insofar as a meaningful life depends on existential examination, that doesn’t mean we should engage in it. I deal with these in turn.

Bernard Williams makes the first objection as follows: “One good testimony to one’s existence having a point is that the question of its point does not arise.”⁴⁷ Wolf makes a similar point, less categorically, when she writes: “If we want to live meaningful lives, we cannot try *too hard* or focus *too much* on doing so.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Lillehammer p113.

⁴⁵ Plato's *Apology* (38a5-6), p33.

⁴⁶ Mill p10.

⁴⁷ Williams, 1981a, p12.

⁴⁸ Wolf, 2010, p52. My italics.

There is much wisdom in the idea that it can be pathological to fetishize reflection and meaningfulness. We can be so concerned agonising over the meaning of life that we will not be in a fit state to lead such a life. However, I am not advocating a life of perpetual navel-gazing. My definition of meaningfulness has three main pillars: caring, effective engagement and intelligibility. People are different, and they won't all emphasise each pillar equally. It is also quite possible, as argued in the previous chapter, that excessive focus on one aspect of meaningfulness will militate against the other components. For example, endless reflection may get in the way of effective action and even balanced emotions. On the other hand, often the pillars reinforce one another. Reflection can help sort out one's feelings and clarify the best way of acting.

Nor am I saying that a person can only have a meaningful life if she has first walked through the valley of the shadow of meaninglessness. While I think existential doubt is often a spur to finding meaning in life, some people may be so blessed that their lives are naturally fulfilled and they see no need to question the meaning of them. Imagine a doctor who is saving lives and who has great colleagues, a loving husband, wonderful kids and lots of friends. Imagine, too, she has all this without having gone through a period of existential doubt. Her life will be a meaningful one.

However, reflection will still play a role in her life. Even if she isn't plagued with existential questions, she will still normally be able to think about her job, family and friends, and why she cares for them. She will also be able to reflect when something happens that challenges her way of life or the things she cares for. Imagine she now comes across a patient who has suffered female genital mutilation. Or perhaps her husband is going through a mid-life crisis, or one of her kids suffers from depression or a friend is bereaved. To have a meaningful life, she will need to engage effectively with her patient, family and friends. To help them, she will need to relate to them deeply. And to do that, she will now need to reflect on things that perhaps she hadn't thought about before, including life's meaning. She will be like the Buddha who thinks more deeply about life when he comes across sickness, old age and death after a childhood shielded from such things.

Now look at the second objection to the Socratic view that the unexamined life is not worth living: that, even if reflection is to some extent needed to live a meaningful life, we could still be better off as a happy fool or a happy pig.

We can approach the question from Socrates' point of view. We can imagine some exceptional situations where he might, indeed, be willing to trade his life for that of the fool or the pig. Say the Athenian court had not required him to drink hemlock but, instead, condemned him to perpetual torture without any ability to communicate with the outside world. Given that he was going to live in agony for the rest of his life without the ability ever again to do anything meaningful, he might choose to become a happy fool. Or imagine some evil demon gave him the choice between becoming a happy pig or witnessing the destruction of the planet. Sacrificing his ability to lead a meaningful life could thereby be a final meaningful act.

But unless there is some such exceptional reason, no Socrates would exchange his life for that of either a fool or a pig. Doing so would mean abandoning forever the world of meaning. He would lose the ability to lead a life that was engaged in things he had reasons to care for.

Somebody might still ask: "But why *shouldn't* I give up a life of reflection? I know that I will be sacrificing depth, autonomy and meaning – and settling for a life that is shallow, slavish and meaningless. But so what? It might be more pleasurable than your meaningful life." To answer this question, we have to examine the sources of normativity. That will be my task in Chapter 4. But, to anticipate my argument, a key conclusion is that, if we abandon the world of meaning, we no longer have any ability to say we should or shouldn't do anything.

Meaningful lives add up subjectively and objectively

In Chapter 1, I outlined my conception of a meaningful life as one that is *effectively engaged in things we care for, which we can see we have reasons to care for*. It has both a subjective aspect in that what we care for must make sense to us; and an objective aspect in that there must be reasons for what we care for. As such, my approach can be seen as being an example of what Kauppinen calls the “new standard view”⁴⁹, which combines subjective and objective elements. As already explained, Wolf takes a similar approach, although reflection takes a more central role in my account than in hers.

However, combining the subjective and objective is not the only way of looking at what a meaningful life is. At this high level of abstraction, there are three other positions one could take. One could say that a meaningful life is entirely objective – so it is totally irrelevant what the subject thinks. This is closely related to what Kauppinen terms a “higher purpose” view, under which meaning is given by some supernatural purpose. Alternatively, one could say that a meaningful life is entirely subjective – so it only matters what the subject thinks. This is what Kauppinen calls a “voluntaristic” view – under which “our lives are meaningful when our heart is in what we do, for whatever reason”. Finally, one could say that it is impossible to find meaning on either a subjective or objective level. This is nihilism.

In the last chapter, I discussed and dismissed one nihilistic argument to the effect that life is meaningless. I don’t claim to have addressed every type of nihilism – only the version based on taking a cosmic perspective on a meaningful life. In this chapter, I first question whether the existence of God could make our lives meaningful for us irrespective of what we think about them. I then argue against the idea that our lives could be meaningful merely on the basis of us feeling passionate about what we do, without there being any reason to do so. I end by arguing that

⁴⁹ Kauppinen pp353-357.

this doesn't mean that choice and creativity have no role in a meaningful life. To the contrary, I suggest that leading a meaningful life is typically a creative endeavour and that, even if it involves endless routine, it is supported by the autonomous decision to buy into that routine.

What if God exists?

It is conceivable that there could be a higher purpose for the universe, most obviously if God exists. In such a situation, she might have a plan for us. And our lives could have meaning for her. The situation is somewhat similar to a human who has a plan to build a house with a garden. The stones in the walls, the wood beams, the glass in the windows, the brass fittings and so forth all have roles in the plan. So do the fruit trees, flowers and watering system. For the person designing the house, all these elements could have meaning in her life. But that doesn't mean that the stones, glass and flowers have meaningful lives in themselves.

Nagel makes this point eloquently: "If we learned that we were being raised to provide food for other creatures fond of human flesh... that would... not give our lives meaning... Although we might acknowledge that this culinary role would make our lives meaningful to them, it is not clear how it would make them meaningful to us. Admittedly, the usual form of service to a higher being is different from this. One is supposed to behold and partake of the glory of God, for example, in a way in which chickens do not share in the glory of coq au vin."⁵⁰

There is, of course, an important difference between watering systems and human beings. Watering systems can't have meaningful lives – or for that matter meaningless lives. But humans can. It is, therefore, possible that we could find some meaning for ourselves from buying into God's plan for the universe in a way that a watering system couldn't find meaning from buying into a human's plan for her garden. But it's not clear that there is any automaticity here. Perhaps there is a

⁵⁰ Nagel, 1979, p16.

satisfactory theological explanation about how our lives can be meaningful to us without us thinking God's plan for the universe matters. But, if not, for her purpose to have meaning for us, it would seem that we ourselves would need to buy into it. In other words, even if God exists and has a plan for us, it would appear that following it would only make our lives meaningful insofar as the plan made sense to us subjectively.

What's wrong with subjectivism?

Why not go to the other extreme and say that the only thing that determines whether a life is meaningful is whether the person living it finds it meaningful? On this view there are no reasons for choosing any particular course of action to give one's life meaning. There is no external anchor or objectivity. Such a subjectivist approach comes in two main varieties. Under one, the person has a meaningful life if she feels passionate about what she is doing. Under the other, she has a meaningful life if she has chosen what she is doing. The two can go together. David Wiggins uses the term "non-cognitivism" to encompass both of these views.⁵¹ I consider these in turn.

Following Wiggins, I take Richard Taylor's retelling of the Ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus as an example of the first type of subjectivism. Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to roll a rock to the top of a hill, only for it to come tumbling all the way down and for him to have to roll it back up again – and to go through this unchanging cycle of activity forever.⁵² Taylor uses Sisyphus with his "repetitious, cyclic activity that never comes to anything" as the paradigm of a meaningless life.⁵³

Taylor's argument has two parts. The first is to say that there is no objective meaning to life. We are deluded in thinking that we are any different from Sisyphus. We are also deluded if we think we are different from any creature that is trapped in an

⁵¹ Wiggins, p547.

⁵² Richard Taylor, Chapter 18, *The Meaning of Life*.

⁵³ Richard Taylor p257.

endless cycle of activity, such as glow-worms that devour each other and migratory birds that circle the globe.⁵⁴ He argues that most of our achievements are bubbles and any “that do last, like the sand-swept pyramids, soon become mere curiosities, while around them the rest of mankind continues its perpetual toting of rocks, only to see them roll down.”⁵⁵

This part of Taylor’s argument suffers from the same weaknesses as the attempt to show life is meaningless by taking a cosmic perspective, which I considered in the last chapter. Insofar as he looks at human achievement from a human perspective, what he is saying is false. After all, the pyramids are not “mere curiosities”. They provoke awe. They inspire us to think about a sophisticated civilisation four and a half thousand years old, its extraordinary architectural triumphs, the socio-political system that enabled them and its attitudes to life and death. Such reflection can enrich our lives today. Taylor’s attempt to say the pyramids are valueless would only have plausibility if he tried to look at them from some point in the infinite future when the universe and everything in it, including the pyramids, had been destroyed. But, as I argued in the last chapter, meaningfulness, importance and caring have no semantic sense if we take such a view from nowhere. Our achievements aren’t meaningful from that perspective, but they aren’t meaningless either.

The second part of Taylor’s argument, which distinguishes him from the nihilist, is to assert that meaning is entirely down to how we feel. He asks us to consider this idea by imagining that the gods implant some stuff in Sisyphus’ veins that gives him a “strange and irrational impulse” to roll stones. He now has “but one obsession, which is to roll stones” and, as a result, “his life is now filled with mission and meaning”.⁵⁶

The problem with this part of Taylor’s argument is it isn’t clear how our newly drugged Sisyphus could think that his life is filled with meaning, unless he reflects on

⁵⁴ Richard Taylor p262.

⁵⁵ Richard Taylor p263.

⁵⁶ Richard Taylor p259.

what he is doing and buys into it. We can certainly imagine that his life is pleasurable. He may, in some happy-go-lucky way, feel that everything is going fine. But that's not the same as thinking it is meaningful. To think that, even on a purely subjective level, Sisyphus must reflect. But there doesn't seem to be any reflection at all going on in Taylor's story. It's not just that Sisyphus doesn't reflect. Taylor states that a human "no more asks whether [his life] will be worthwhile, or whether anything of significance will come of it, than the worms and the birds."⁵⁷ This statement is false. Quite a lot of humans do precisely this.

As Wiggins rightly argues: "Where the non-cognitive account essentially depends on the existence and availability of the inner view, it is a question of capital importance whether the non-cognitivist's account of the inner view makes such sense of our condition as it actually has for us from the inside."⁵⁸ Taylor purports to give us an account of meaningfulness that is purely subjective. But when we look at it, the life doesn't add up from even an internal perspective.

Let's now look at an alternative variety of radical subjectivism – the existentialist view that we give meaning to our lives purely by choosing what to do, unconstrained by any objective factors. Sartre summarises this view with the phrase that, for human beings, "*existence* comes before *essence*."⁵⁹ He contrasts humans with objects such as paper-knives, whose essence or conception in the mind of the artisan comes before their existence. He rightly argues that man is "a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower."⁶⁰ But he then goes on to make the more extreme point that whatever we choose is right: "To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better."⁶¹ Describing a student who comes to him during World War Two for advice on whether to join the Free French forces or stay at home with

⁵⁷ Richard Taylor p267.

⁵⁸ Wiggins p548.

⁵⁹ Sartre p26.

⁶⁰ Sartre p28.

⁶¹ Sartre p29.

his mother, for whom he is the only comfort, Sartre says his reply was: "You are free, therefore choose - that is to say, invent."⁶² And yet he also insists that a man has a great responsibility in how he chooses because "in choosing for himself, he chooses for all men"⁶³ and that anybody who pretends he doesn't have this responsibility is engaged in "a kind of self-deception"⁶⁴.

How can Sartre square this circle, asserting at the same time that nothing determines what is a good choice and that what we choose really matters? Charles Taylor attacks this notion of radical choice, unconstrained by any reasons, as deeply incoherent. He argues that the supposed terrible dilemma faced by Sartre's student is a dilemma "only because the claims themselves are not created by radical choice. If they were, the grievous nature of the predicament would dissolve, for that would mean that the young man could do away with the dilemma at any moment by simply declaring one of the rival claims as dead and inoperative. Indeed, if serious claims were created by radical choice, the young man would have a grievous dilemma about whether to go and get an ice cream cone, and then again he could decide not to."⁶⁵

The existentialist approach to meaningfulness is an Indian rope trick. It wants to construct a theory that we can invent what is important by the mere exercise of the will, unconstrained by any reason to choose anything at all. Charles Taylor rightly points out that Sartre "maintains a semblance of plausibility by surreptitiously assuming" that things really do matter⁶⁶. Not only does Sartre assume that we have to decide between issues that are somehow important; he also argues that if we fail to take responsibility for our choices, we are guilty of self-deception. But if radical choice is really the only thing that determines what matters, why does it matter if we deceive ourselves?

⁶² Sartre p38.

⁶³ Sartre p29.

⁶⁴ Sartre p31.

⁶⁵ Charles Taylor, 1982, p119.

⁶⁶ Charles Taylor, 1982, p121.

Pursuing a meaningful life is a creative endeavour

I have argued that objective meaning, even if it existed say in the form of God having a purpose for us, seems not to be sufficient to make life meaningful for us unless we also buy into that meaning. I have also argued that the idea of purely subjective meaning, without any anchor outside ourselves, seems incoherent because if anything goes we could not make sense to ourselves that anything matters.

But just because I concur with Wiggins and Charles Taylor in rejecting the Indian rope trick of hyper-subjectivism doesn't mean that I am arguing that choice plays no part in giving meaning to our lives. We, at the bare minimum, need to buy into a life that has been given to us by others. Normally, too, we will create elements of our own life. As such, leading a meaningful life is partly a creative endeavour. Humans are creative beings, as much as we are reflective ones. Indeed, creativity and reflection stem from the same source: nature only partly determines how we behave and our large brains help fill in the gaps. Creativity is the ability to do things differently, rather than just going round and round in the same circular routine – like Sisyphus pushing his rock up the hill – or drifting aimlessly.

We don't just find meaning in our lives. Most of us create meaning. Creativity helps lives be meaningful from a subjective perspective. If things never change, life will usually be dull. Relationships that never develop normally become stale. People typically become alienated from jobs that are endlessly repetitive. Equally, if somebody is totally bereft of creativity, she will not find it easy to engage effectively with things that she cares for. When circumstances change in some project she is engaged in, she will not be able to change her behaviour and take advantage of the new situation. If her husband suffers some setback in his life, she will not be able to think outside the box – and that will militate against her ability to help him. Somebody totally lacking in creativity will be hard-pressed to have meaningful projects and meaningful relationships.

To be clear, when I talk about creativity, I'm not saying everybody needs to be a Picasso or Mozart to have a meaningful life. Life is full of endless possibilities to be creative in small ways as well as big ones. Brushing one's daughter's hair in a new way so she doesn't scream when the tangles are removed; taking a new route to work so one sees a different part of one's neighbourhood; subtly changing the recipe of a dish one cooks to improve the taste or one's diet. These are all creative activities that help make life meaningful. We can see reasons to do these things.

Nor am I saying that everybody needs to be involved in an endless whirl of creative activity. Quite apart from the fact that some people are naturally more creative than others, we also need stability in our lives. Though there are advantages in varying our routines, there are benefits in having routines in the first place. If everything was in perpetual flux, nothing solid would get done. Before people had learnt how to exploit a new innovation, it would be jettisoned and replaced by an even newer one. In the last chapter, I argued that there were diminishing returns and opportunity costs to reflection. The same goes for being creative.

Although creativity can contribute to a meaningful life – and meaning can be created as well as found – creativity is not necessary to having a life that adds up both subjectively and objectively. The essential element rather is buying into what one is doing because one can see a reason for doing it. This seems to be what Wiggins means when he writes that our lives cannot add up “unless each of us supplies something extra, some conception of his own, to make sense of things for *himself*.”⁶⁷ If one takes ownership of one's life in this way, even what might superficially seem like mindless activities can have meaning. Consider somebody whose job is to count the number of people passing a particular crossroads day in day out, week in week out. This may seem like a Sisyphean activity. But if she can see a reason for doing this – say that she is actually counting undercover enemy troops and accurate information on their numbers is vital to foil an invasion of her homeland – what might otherwise seem like a boring activity could be deeply meaningful. We are back

⁶⁷ Wiggins p564.

with Wolf's slogan: "Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness."⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Wolf, 2010, p9.

Why reflective beings should pursue meaningful lives

In previous chapters, I've set out my conception of a meaningful life. In Chapter 1, I argued that a meaningful life is one *effectively engaged in things we care for, which we can see we have reasons to care for*. In Chapter 2, I explained why reflectiveness was an important aspect of human nature that can lead us to pursue meaning. In Chapter 3, I showed why meaningful lives have both subjective and objective aspects. What I haven't done yet is show why reflective beings should pursue meaningful lives rather than be Mill's happy fool. Without this, my thesis consists of an analysis of a meaningful life rather than a recommendation to lead such a life. The purpose of this chapter is to supply such an argument.

I start off by discussing the source of normativity. I argue that this is our ability to choose and to seek reasons for selecting one option over the alternatives. When considering what to do, we can ask the question "why?" we should do one thing rather than another. The "why?" question can be paraphrased in three main ways: "for the sake of what?", "for what reason?", and "what's the point?" These three formulations are associated with three high-level answers about what to do: lead the best life; do what is right; and live a meaningful life. At this high-level of abstraction, we have theories that are virtually tautologous. So it is incumbent on those advocating each approach to spell out their respective conceptions.

I first consider the best life a reflective being could live, distinguishing between two types of happiness: what I call buffet-happiness and track-happiness. I argue that a life that is merely buffet-happy will not be meaningful, whereas a track-happy life can be. I further argue that somebody who is dedicated to mere buffet-happiness cannot give a reason why she should lead such a life without accepting the relevance of being on the right track – and therefore that the only type of good life we could have reason to follow is one that includes track-happiness.

Next I turn to the moralist, who argues that we should do what is right. I distinguish between two types of morality: those which people can buy into; and those which alienate them from their *raison d'être*. I argue that an advocate of alienating moralities cannot give us reasons why we should follow her advice – and therefore that the only morality we have reason to follow is one that doesn't alienate us from what is meaningful.

Then I look at the meaning theorist. I have already spelt out my conception of meaningfulness. I now clarify that, in pursuing a meaningful life, we have reason to care for ourselves not just other people and other things. I then argue that we can give reasons for following my conception of meaningfulness.

Finally, I consider whether a good life that includes track-happiness, a moral life that doesn't alienate us from what is meaningful and a meaningful life that includes caring for ourselves offer radically different ways of living. I accept that looking at a good life, an ethical one and a meaningful one in these ways won't put an end to tragic conflicts. But I argue that doing so will lead to a life that is less fragmented than that of somebody who seeks to follow conceptions of happiness and morality that do not give an important place to meaningfulness. This is my first answer to my thesis question: to what extent is a meaningful life an integrated one?

Source of normativity

Normativity stems from our ability to choose and, in doing so, to seek reasons for selecting one option over the alternatives. Unlike other creatures, we don't just do things. We choose. It is in looking for reasons for action that the world of "should" is born.

Anybody who has spent time with children – or who remembers being a child – knows that an answer to a "why should I do this?" can be followed with "and why should I do that?" and so on, leading to a seemingly infinite regress. This sort of

chain of questioning can easily end up with the existential questions I explored in Chapter 2 such as “why should I do anything at all?”

Aristotle offers one approach to stopping the infinite regress. For him, “why?” could be rephrased as “for the sake of what?” He argued that we do things “for the sake of” other things – or with other “ends” in mind. So we need medicine for the sake of health, generalship for the sake of victory and building for sake of having houses. He then considers whether there is anything for the sake of which we do everything we do. He asks whether there is a final end we aim at. He concludes that εὐδαιμονία – sometimes translated as happiness but perhaps best translated as a good life – is that thing, “for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else.”⁶⁹

Having reached this point, Aristotle remarks: “Perhaps, however, to say that εὐδαιμονία is the chief good seems a platitude.” What he has said isn’t quite a tautology. After all, he doesn’t consider what Camus says is the “one truly serious philosophical problem”, namely suicide.⁷⁰ Some people choose suicide – and maybe some of them are right to do so - and it would sound strange to say we choose suicide for the sake of a good life. But if we allow for εὐδαιμονία to include death in those cases where death is better than the best life possible, it does seem we have a tautology. It wouldn’t make sense to ask: “For the sake of what should I lead the best life possible?”

There are at least two alternative ways of bringing the potentially infinite regress of questioning to an end. One, what I will call the moralist approach, starts by rephrasing “why?” as “for what reason?” This is the route taken by Korsgaard. She argues that our capacity to think about our desires “sets us a problem no other animal has. It is the problem of the normative.” A reflective mind can question

⁶⁹ Aristotle pp223-224. I depart from the Barnes/Kenny translation in using the term εὐδαιμονία instead of happy/happiness.

⁷⁰ Camus p11.

whether a desire is a reason to act. Without a reason “it cannot commit itself or go forward.”⁷¹

One answer that could bring this particular line of questioning to a halt, albeit not an approach explicitly taken by Korsgaard, is: “Because there’s most reason to do this.” It doesn’t make sense to ask: “For what reason should I do what there’s most reason to do?” Do what there is most reason to do is a platitude, just as lead the best life possible is. It is, though, possible to open a new line of questioning about whether there is, indeed, most reason to do any specific course of action recommended – just as one can open a new line of questioning over whether there is reason to follow any particular conception of εὐδαιμονία.

A third option, favoured by the meaning theorist, rephrases “why?” as “what’s the point?” The answer that can bring this particular line of questioning to an end is: “Because doing this is the most meaningful thing you can do.” Again, it doesn’t make sense to ask: “What is the point of doing what’s most meaningful?” But that’s only because it is a platitude to say it makes sense to do what’s meaningful. Yet again it is possible to open a new line of inquiry into whether there is reason to follow any particular conception of what is meaningful.

At this very high level, the three answers to the “why?” question are three tautologies. The prescriptions they offer – live the best life possible, do what there’s most reason to do and lead the most meaningful life possible – may seem similar or possibly even the same. However, when the conceptions are spelt out in detail, it may be that they will lead to different conclusions about what to do. For example, the advocate of the good life may recommend the pursuit of happiness or self-interest; the advocate of doing what there’s most reason to do may suggest leading a moral one; and the meaning theorist may say we should do what we care for.

⁷¹ Korsgaard, 1996, p93.

Wolf suggests precisely such a trichotomy. She says that to the two main philosophical models of practical reason – self-interest and morality – we should add meaningfulness. She argues that the things we care about “give meaning to our lives.” This sort of reason “is not reducible to or subsumable under either happiness, *as it is ordinarily understood*, or morality.”⁷² However, until we have examined different conceptions of happiness, morality and meaning – and seen whether reflective beings have reason to pursue some ordinarily understood ideas of happiness and morality - we shouldn’t assume that there will be a radical conflict between the courses of action they propose.

A good life is, at least in part, meaningful

Immediately after acknowledging that it seems a platitude to say the good life is the chief good, Aristotle spells out his conception of the good life in his famous *ἔργον* argument⁷³. *ἔργον* is typically translated as task or function and, viewed in this way, the argument has lots of problems. Aristotle argues that the human *ἔργον* is “activity of soul in accordance with reason, or not without reason” and the good life is “activity of soul in conformity with virtue”. But why, we may ask, do humans have any task or function in the first place?

I will return to Aristotle’s *ἔργον* argument shortly and seek to repair it. But I first wish to consider two rival conceptions of the good life: what I call buffet-happiness and track-happiness. Imagine you are in the first-class carriage of a train eating a delicious meal with delightful companions. You are “buffet-happy”. But the train is going in the wrong direction. So you are not “track-happy”. Now imagine you are sitting on the floor in a crowded second-class carriage, but you are going where you want to. You are not buffet-happy, but you are certainly track-happy.

A life that is only buffet-happy is one filled with pleasure and with little or no pain. A person leading it eats, drinks, has sex and lounges around in the sun – on an endless

⁷² Wolf, 2010, pp2-3. My italics.

⁷³ Aristotle, pp223-224.

holiday, as it were. Such a life is perhaps not so different from the one a non-reflective animal such as a cat can enjoy. By contrast, lives that are track-happy are meaningful. It seems that Aristotle might advocate such a life. After all, he concludes his ἔργον argument by saying: “We must add ‘in a complete life’. For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and εὐδαίμων.” A good life is, therefore, in my terminology one that involves track-happiness and so meaningfulness.

Somebody who is only concerned with buffet-happiness seeks to satisfy her desires rather than evaluates whether her desires are any good. She is what Charles Taylor calls a simple “weigher” of alternatives for satisfying her desires rather than a “strong evaluator” of them.⁷⁴ She cannot be track-happy because she doesn’t reflect deeply about whether she is on the right track. As such, she is not just failing to exercise a distinctive part of herself; she is also missing out on the special pleasures that come from leading a meaningful life. If our simple weigher of alternatives sees that strong evaluators are enjoying life in potentially richer ways than she is, she can’t say “Oh, I’d like a bit of that track-happiness to mix with my buffet-happiness” while remaining a simple weigher. This is because the only way to be track-happy is to evaluate her desires and, in doing that, she ceases to be a simple weigher.

The simple weigher may then respond: “I don’t want your track-happiness. I’m not interested in strong evaluation. I’m fine as I am in the buffet.” It’s at this point that we could roll out a modified version of Aristotle’s ἔργον argument. We first need to follow David Bostock in interpreting the ἔργον of a living creature not as its task or function but as its nature-determined capacity to live “a certain kind of life”⁷⁵. The argument then becomes that, for humans, a key part of our nature-determined way of life is to reflect on and choose our way of life.⁷⁶ By refusing to evaluate her desires, the simple weigher is therefore denying an important part of her humanity – namely, her ability to reflect on how to live. She then has two options. She can start

⁷⁴ Charles Taylor, 1982, p112.

⁷⁵ Bostock p16.

⁷⁶ I elaborate on this in one of my MPhil Stud essays, 2016a.

reasoning and providing an argument for why it is good to follow the desires she has – in which case, she’s no longer a simple weigher. Alternatively, she can just fall silent.

In other words, a simple weigher cannot give us any reason to focus just on buffet-happiness. This means that the only type of good life that we could have reason to pursue is one that includes track-happiness – or meaning.

We can’t be morally required to give up our raison d’etre

A second way of looking at the source of normativity is to express “why?” as “for what reason?” This naturally fits in with the moralist’s way of looking at things – although it is, of course, possible to give reasons without being a moralist. Just as we can identify two types of happiness, we can distinguish two kinds of morality: heteronomous and autonomous. In the former, moral demands are imposed on us from the outside. In the latter, we make demands on ourselves; even when these are suggested to us by our culture, we buy into them.

Most conventional morality is of the former kind. A set of rules is imposed in order to make society run smoothly. The Ten Commandments in the Bible are a typical example. If we exclude the four commandments which relate to how we should behave towards God, the remaining ones all concern how we should behave to other people: honour your parents and don’t steal, commit adultery, murder, covet your neighbour’s possessions or bear false witness.

Such heteronomous morality is imposed on us via incentives. Society puts huge effort into socialising the young through a system of carrots and stick: gold stars or treats if you are good, black marks or detention if you are bad. The system continues in adult life: praise and honour for those who behave well; criticism and punishment (even up to death) for those who behave badly.

Subtler forms of pressure reinforce the crude form of carrots and sticks. Religious myths promise heaven in the after-life for those who follow the rules and threaten hell for those who break them. There are also various types of pressure that play on our emotions, especially guilt and pride. If we behave badly, as defined by our society, we often feel guilty as well; and if we behave well, we may feel proud. The dictates of our culture can in this way become embodied in what Sigmund Freud called the superego, internalising a system of carrots and sticks.

All these forms of socialisation are heteronomous. They train us to behave “morally”, in the same way that somebody might train her horse to jump fences by whipping it or giving it sugar lumps. They give us incentives not fully-fledged reasons that persuade us to act in the right way because we perceive the inherent value of doing so.

But insofar as we are reflective beings, such heteronomous morality can never be satisfactory. We can ask why we should go along with these commands. We can question whether we are being told the truth and whether we are being manipulated. Even if we have already internalised the demands of our culture via our emotions, we can question those emotions. Sometimes, of course, we will find reasons to do what we’ve been conditioned to do. Family, friends, teachers and society at large may give us good explanations. But if reasons are not forthcoming, we will feel rules are being imposed upon us – unless, that is, we break them.

It was part of Immanuel Kant’s genius to highlight the fact that any type of morality that we don’t buy into isn’t truly morality. We are not morally required to do something that is imposed upon us without any reason for doing so. He wrote: “We cannot possibly conceive of a reason as being consciously directed from outside in regard to its judgments; for in that case the subject would attribute the determination of his power of judgment, not to his reason, but to an impulsion. Reason must look upon itself as the author of its own principles independently of

alien influences.”⁷⁷ This led him to the conclusion that morality had to be autonomous. It is important to stress that this insight is separate from his further contentions that morality means living by principles that one can will as universal laws and that such laws, in turn, have to range impartially over all rational beings. It may be possible to have autonomous morality without universal principles let alone such principles being applied impartially.

A reflective being doesn't just demand reasons to act. She also will not accept as a reason any argument that would alienate her from what gives her life meaning – which, as I argued in Chapter 1, involves being an autonomous agent. Korsgaard says that to violate your conception of yourself “is no longer to be able to think of yourself under the description under which you value yourself and find your life worth living and your actions worth undertaking. That is to be for all practical purposes dead or worse than dead.”⁷⁸

Williams makes a similar point. In attacking utilitarianism, he argues that it is “absurd” to demand that somebody sacrifices what he cares about at the deepest level on the grounds that it would increase overall happiness. “It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions.”⁷⁹ In a separate paper, Williams attacks impartial morality, which he takes to include Kantian morality, saying: “There can come a point 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 that world at all.”⁸⁰

Whether Williams' attacks on impartial morality are valid depends on what one means by Kantian morality. The requirement that morality cannot alienate somebody from what gives her life meaning is not, in itself, inconsistent with the

⁷⁷ Kant p109.

⁷⁸ Korsgaard, 1996, p102.

⁷⁹ Williams, 1988, p49.

⁸⁰ Williams, 1981a, p14.

categorical imperative. It would, after all, be possible to will as a universal law that “nobody should be required to sacrifice what gives her life meaning.”

Nevertheless, both Williams and Korsgaard are right in saying that we cannot be morally required to alienate ourselves from what gives our lives meaning. To understand why, consider how a moralist could give us a reason to do so. Imagine she was a utilitarian. She might, for example, persuade us that we should sacrifice our own happiness in the interest of the greater good by pointing out that the increase in other people’s wellbeing would outweigh the loss of our wellbeing many times over. But, insofar as we accept this as a genuine reason - rather than going along with it because we have been manipulated, bullied or incentivised by extraneous factors - we are buying into it. We will therefore be changing what we care about. As such, acting as the moralist proposes will not ride roughshod over what gives meaning to our lives. Any reason the moralist can give us which we accept as autonomous beings cannot therefore alienate us from our *raison d’être*.

A meaningful life can properly include caring for oneself

The third source of normativity is the “why?” question phrased as “what’s the point?” In previous chapters, I have set out and defended my conception of a meaningful life. I wish, though, to make one further clarification: caring for oneself is normally, and appropriately, part of a meaningful life. It might seem unnecessary to stress this, in that my definition of meaningfulness doesn’t put any restriction on what we can care for so long as we can see a reason to care for it. However, Wolf takes the opposite view. She argues that a meaningful life has to be involved with “something *other* than oneself – that is, with something the value of which is independent of and has its source *outside of oneself*”.⁸¹

There are actually two different ideas here, vying for attention. To give meaning to our lives, does one need to be concerned with something other than oneself - or

⁸¹ Wolf, 2010, p19.

with something that has value independent of oneself? The arguments I deployed in the last chapter pointed to the conclusion that we can't just invent what we have reason to care for, but that doesn't exclude caring for ourselves.

Caring for ourselves – including the basics such as physical and mental health but also looking after our skills, reputation, financial wellbeing and so forth - is normally an essential element of leading a meaningful life. If we are mentally or physically ill, have low skills, have a bad reputation and little money, we will rarely be able to achieve much. We, therefore, have every reason to care for ourselves – and that, under my conception of meaningfulness, means caring for ourselves contributes to a meaningful life.

Wolf accepts that a meaningful life doesn't have to be focussed on other people. We can derive meaning from caring for things like playing the cello, doing philosophy or keeping our garden free of weeds. However, because she wrongly thinks that only things independent of ourselves can have value independent of ourselves, she thinks we can't derive meaning from caring for ourselves. She states that "a life lacks meaning if it is totally egocentric, devoted solely toward the subject's own survival and welfare".⁸² This leads her to a paradox: "If finding food and shelter for one's child, nursing one's partner back to health, rescuing one's wounded comrade from the hands of death, are worthwhile activities, why shouldn't feeding, sheltering, healing, and rescuing *oneself* be worthwhile as well?"⁸³ She aims to resolve her paradox by saying that looking after oneself can have *value* but that doesn't make a life *meaningful*.

Wolf has created an unnecessary paradox and there is therefore no need to engage in such verbal somersaults to escape it. Given her worldview, Robinson Crusoe's efforts to survive and take care of his mental and physical health would not contribute to a meaningful life. Nor do our own, whereas in fact they are normally a necessary component of a meaningful life.

⁸² Wolf, 2010, p41.

⁸³ Wolf, 2010, pp41-42.

If we accept that caring for oneself is an important and legitimate part of leading a meaningful life, we will also see that such a life may well be a happy one. Not only is there the special track-happiness that comes from living meaningfully. If somebody succeeds in taking care of herself, she will probably have lots of other pleasures too. She will, for a start, be physically and mentally healthy, have a good reputation and sufficient financial resources. These are typically the basis for much buffet-happiness. What's more, enjoying life is not an irrelevant extra for somebody pursuing a meaningful life. After all, it is often a sign that she is functioning well, which in turn enhances her ability to engage effectively in things she cares for – which is part of my conception of meaningfulness. By contrast, if she is stressed, in pain and grouchy, she will normally not be as effective as an agent.

Having clarified that the pursuit of a meaningful life can properly involve caring for oneself, I am now finally ready to explain why reflective beings have reason to pursue a meaningful life. Remember that I have defined a meaningful life as one *effectively engaged in things we care for, which we can see we have reasons to care for*. Imagine somebody disputes this. Which element is she going to dispute: that we should care for things: that we should do so effectively; or that we should be able to see why we should do so?

My answer to these potential objections is as follows: first, we have reasons to care for things because doing so gives us, as Wolf rightly says, reasons to live; second, we have reasons to do this effectively because we will then live better; third, we have reasons to be able to see why we care for what we do to make sure that we are not wasting our lives on worthless endeavours.

Accepting role of meaning leads to less fragmented lives

I have argued in this chapter that we don't have reason to pursue a good life unless our conception of a good life includes leading a meaningful one; that we don't have reason to lead an ethical life if this involves alienating us from our *raison d'être*; and

that a meaningful life properly includes caring for ourselves. I now wish to consider whether these three types of life, suitably defined, are in radical conflict in the way that Wolf suggested. Each purports to give recommendations about what we should do. Could they end up giving conflicting recommendations?

These definitions of happiness, morality and meaningfulness would seem to reduce the extent of conflict, but not to eliminate it. What's more, it would seem that people pursuing these types of life would still be susceptible to tragic conflicts.

For example, while I have argued that pursuing a meaningful life has its pleasures, it is not guaranteed to make us buffet-happy. It will sometimes involve hard work, pain and suffering. Fate may deal us an unlucky hand, requiring us to suffer great hardship if we want to keep acting meaningfully. We may face a choice between being track-happy or buffet-happy – say, if we need to sell out on what we deeply care for in return for an easy life. This was the choice the Chinese authorities gave the Liu Xiaobo, the pro-democracy Nobel Laureate, according to his lawyer: freedom in return for a confession of guilt. He turned it down and died in jail.⁸⁴ So somebody seeking a meaningful life won't necessarily be fully happy. But she will have the happiest life a reflective creature can live in the circumstances that she finds herself in – even if she goes the whole way and dies for something she rightly cares for, as Socrates, Gandhi and Liu Xiaobo did.

Or consider a young man on the 24th floor of a burning tower block. He knows that if he runs down the stairs, he can save himself. But his elderly parents, whom he adores, are also on the 24th floor and not in a position to save themselves. He thinks he has time to carry one of them slung over his shoulder to safety. But he's not sure – and, in any case, he certainly can't carry them both or do the round trip, taking one down before climbing the stairs to rescue the second. There's a further complication. On the same floor there are two young children he barely knows who moved in the previous week. He thinks he could probably carry both of them to

⁸⁴ BBC, 2017.

safety – one under each arm. What should he do? This is not such a fanciful example. The UK press carried stories in June 2017 of a young man who carried his disabled mother to safety from the Grenfell Tower fire.⁸⁵ His father died.

This man may suffer a conflict of values. If he is concerned with his narrow self-interest, he will run down the stairs and save himself. If he is a utilitarian, he will put himself at some risk and try to save the two young children. If he is concerned with what he cares about, he will again put himself at some risk but in this case try to save one of his parents. But even if he chooses to fight for what he cares for, he will still face a dilemma. Which parent should he save? In other words, he will face a conflict not just between three perspectives over what to do – but, even within the perspective of what is meaningful, there will be a terrible dilemma.

Williams thinks that in such a kind of tragic conflict of values, “an agent can justifiably think that whatever he does will be wrong”.⁸⁶ Whether that’s the case isn’t clear. After all, Williams acknowledges that “it can actually emerge from deliberation that one of the courses of action is the one that, *all things considered*, one had better take.”⁸⁷ So it’s possible that the young man will decide that the course of action he actually takes is the least bad option available – and, as such, that he hasn’t done anything wrong. Perhaps he decides to rescue his mother, reflecting that he couldn’t live with himself if he saved his skin but left her to die. Perhaps he chooses to save his mother rather than his father, in part because he knows that this is what his father would expect him to do. Perhaps he thinks that he can’t be morally required to sacrifice his mother for two children he barely knows. He will probably be haunted by the trauma for a long time. But maybe eventually, through deep reflection and love, he will also conclude that he hasn’t after all done anything wrong.

⁸⁵ The Sun, 2017.

⁸⁶ Williams, 1981b, p74.

⁸⁷ Williams, 1981b, p74. My italics.

I'm not arguing that it will necessarily be possible to resolve such conflicts. I leave this as an open question. What I am, though, suggesting is that the clash of values will be less sharp if we accept that for reflective creatures a good life has to include meaning, that an ethical life can't ride roughshod over meaning and that a meaningful life can legitimately include caring for oneself. By giving a place for meaningfulness in our conceptions of happiness and morality, we will therefore be less fragmented than if we don't. This is the first part of the answer to my thesis question: to what extent is a meaningful life an integrated one?

Integrating one's agency

In the last chapter, I argued that giving a place for meaningfulness in our conception of happiness and morality will lead to a less fragmented life. In the next three chapters I look at the connections between integration and meaningfulness from the other direction. Rather than exploring how pursuing a meaningful life contributes to living an integrated one, I examine how an integrated life contributes to a meaningful one. In this chapter, I consider integrating one's agency. In Chapter 6, I look at integrating oneself. In Chapter 7, I examine integrating with one's world. There are links between three types of integration, which I explore in the concluding chapter.

In this chapter, I first explain that I mean by the integration of agency the alignment of what we care about with our judgments, values, principles and actions. Then I argue that principles provide the intellectual architecture of agency, before looking at how wide and deep reflection is a central way of integrating one's agency. I argue that such integrated agency contributes to a meaningful life by enabling us both to understand more deeply the things we care about and engage more effectively with them. Finally, I consider a challenge to the effect that fragmented agency might be more meaningful than integrated agency.

What is integration of agency?

An agent is a being that acts. By acting, I don't mean just moving her limbs but doing things for a purpose.

People's actions are influenced by what they care about. Typically, they care about lots of specific things. They also make specific judgments about what is the right thing to do in a particular situation. What's more, people have values, which express what they care about at a more general level. Such values, in turn, can be expressed in principles. Principles are rules about how to act in particular types of situation.

They generalise, in the sense that the same sort of action is supposed to follow if the same sort of situation arises. Principles usually express in more detail the essence of what is contained in values. People also typically care deeply about their values and their principles.

The integration of agency is the alignment of what we care about with our judgments, values, principles and actions. What we think should be done in general dovetails with what we think should be done in specific cases. What's more, insofar as we are the ones who are supposed to be acting, we are then able to do what we should do and then actually do it. This requires willpower. Integration of agency is partly what is meant by integrity.

Such integration is an ideal. Few, if any people, meet it. Integration comes in degrees. It is possible for our agency to be fragmented in many ways. Broadly speaking, we can distinguish between conflicts within a class of things relevant for our agency (for example between specific things we care about); and conflicts between classes of things relevant for our agency (for example between our actions and our principles).

Principles provide the intellectual architecture of our agency

Korsgaard states that “the reflective structure of human consciousness requires that you identify yourself with some law or principle that will govern your choices.”⁸⁸ G. A. Cohen, in his commentary on Korsgaard's Tanner lectures, flatly disputes this, saying: “It is not true, that the structure of my consciousness requires that I identify myself with some law or principle.... sometimes the commands that I issue will be singular, not universal.”⁸⁹

Cohen is right. The things I care for – which, in turn, gives me reasons for action - can be very particular. I love my daughter. I care for my garden. I think Britain's

⁸⁸ Korsgaard, 1996, pp103-104.

⁸⁹ Cohen p176.

membership of the European Union is valuable. These, in turn, give me reasons to help my daughter, water my plants and fight Brexit. Principles, on the other hand, generalise what should be done beyond the specific situation. We don't strictly speaking need them to act. Korsgaard has overstated her case.

However, this doesn't mean that principles don't matter. To the contrary, they provide the intellectual architecture for our agency. This is because principles are both general and articulated. If all we had were specific things we cared about, specific judgments and specific actions, our agency could only be partly integrated. Our actions, judgments and what we care about could be aligned in particular cases; but there wouldn't be any thread linking our agency in one case with other situations.

Values are also general. But they are normally not as articulated as principles. Imagine you value honesty. That could mean a lot of different things. Principles tend to spell out more precisely what is meant. For example, the value of honesty could be articulated as "I should tell the truth", "politicians should tell the truth", "people should tell the truth" or all three. It is also possible to elaborate principles in more detail. For example, I could modify "I should tell the truth" to read "I should tell the truth to people who care for me but not to those who don't".

Principles don't just group specific cases of agency under a common rubric; lower-level principles can in turn be grouped under higher-level ones. Consider three fairly low-level principles: "take regular breaks when using the computer", "always pay for a bus ticket" or "make sure there's always enough food in the fridge". The first could be included with other maxims such as "brush your teeth before going to bed" under the slightly higher-level principle, "take care of your physical health". This, in turn, could be grouped with other maxims such as "take care of your reputation" and "look after your finances" in a still higher-level principle, "lead a good life".

Meanwhile, "always pay for a bus ticket" could be included with other maxims such as "don't cheat when playing games" under a higher-level principle, "act honestly".

This, in turn, could be grouped with other maxims such as “stand up to bullies” or “treat people fairly” under the still higher-level principle, “act morally”. Finally, “make sure there’s always enough food in the fridge” could be included with maxims such as “feed the cat twice a day” under the higher-level principle, “care for the physical needs of your nearest and dearest”. This, in turn, could be included with maxims such as “don’t waste energy on futile pursuits” in the still higher-level principle, “engage effectively with what you care for”.

Integrating agency through reflection

By saying that principles provide the intellectual architecture of agency, I don’t mean to suggest that our principles should trump our specific judgments, what we care about or our values in deciding what to do. When there’s a clash we need to reflect. And this could mean adjusting our principles, values, intuitive judgments or what we care about – or more than one of these.

Consider the following example. I have agreed to go to a friend’s birthday. I care for him. I want to go and he wants me there. I also think it’s important to keep my promises. So I have reasons to go, some of which stem from the fact that I care for him and one of which is a general principle about keeping promises. But since I agreed to attend, there has been a fire in a tower block in my neighbourhood killing 100 people. There’s a church ceremony to commemorate the dead at the same time as my friend’s birthday. I didn’t know anybody who died but I do know somebody who survived. I think it’s important to show solidarity with my community. So I have good reasons to go to the church. But I can’t be in two places at the same time. What should I do?

Well, I can reflect on how strong each of the reasons is. How much would I be missed in each case if I didn’t attend? Is there any way of making amends to my friend, say by inviting him to dinner at a separate time? If I explain why I might not attend and apologise, will he release me from my promise? Equally, is there an alternative ceremony to honour the dead? I can reflect on how important the

principle of keeping my promises is – and whether honouring the dead matters more.

In finally deciding what to do, I clarify what I really care for and what my principles are – and therefore I make clear to myself what is meaningful in my life. I may, for example, modify my principle about keeping promises to something like “keep promises except when there is a good reason to break them – in which case, apologise and make amends”. This may be a useful elaboration of my initial principle. But, even then, the new principle won’t cover all possible situations. It may, for example, be impossible to apologise or make amends if, say, the person one should be apologising to dies before I’m able to – and it leaves open the question of what would be a good reason to break a promise.

This process of integrating our agency through reflection is akin to what Norman Daniels, following Rawls, has termed seeking “wide reflective equilibrium”⁹⁰. However, there are several differences between the system Daniels sets out and the approach I am advocating. For a start, Daniels views the process as achieving coherence between one’s moral principles, specific judgments and background theories, such as one’s theory of a person. I think these are all relevant, but I have included actions and what one cares in the mix. In fully integrating our agency, we need to align all of these. I also view principles as any rule of thumb over how to act, such as brushing one’s teeth regularly, not merely those that are viewed as narrowly moral.⁹¹

Such reflection is not a one-off process that achieves stability once and for all. It leads, at most, to a temporary harmony. The work needed to integrate a reflective being’s agency never ends, except in death or dementia. What’s more, the process of seeking reflective equilibrium is not confined to integrating one’s agency. It can also be used to integrate oneself and integrate with one’s world – processes to be

⁹⁰ Daniels, pp256-282. See also Rawls, especially p 11, pp39-44 and pp506-509.

⁹¹ I explore the process of seeking reflective equilibrium in one of my MPhil Stud essays, Dixon, 2016b.

explored in future chapters. In such endeavours, it is important to reflect on many others things too – including one’s emotions, plans and desires and how one came to be who one is, as well as the feelings, projects and histories of those we care for.

In other words, the reflection we engage in to integrate ourselves may need to be very wide indeed. It may also, as argued by Charles Taylor, be very deep, going to the core of our being. He notes this is challenging: “It is those [evaluations] which are closest to what I am as a subject, in the sense that shorn of them I would break down as a person, which are among the hardest for me to be clear about.”⁹² That said, we should be clear that such deep reflection – and the consequent deep integration of our agency – is an ideal, rather than something that is essential. In this, I part company with Taylor who says this radical evaluation “engages my whole self” and is “essential to our notion of a person.” Similarly, I take issue with Korsgaard who writes that it is “essential” to the concept of agency that an agent sees her actions as the expression of her “self as a whole.”⁹³ How many of us, if indeed any of us, are really able to engage our *whole* selves in action?

Integration of agency contributes to a meaningful life

Such integration of agency contributes to a meaningful life in two ways. First, we will be better able to interpret who we are and the purpose of our lives. On a subjective level, our lives will add up more because our principles, values, specific judgments, actions and what we care about will be aligned. By contrast, if our agency is highly fragmented and we are pulled in different directions, it will be nigh impossible to tell a story to ourselves about what we stand for and why the things we care for matter.

Second, if our agency is integrated, we will normally be able to engage more effectively with the things we care for. We will have clear aims. We will have harnessed our energy and talents, and directed them towards hitting those goals.

⁹² Charles Taylor, 1982, p124.

⁹³ Korsgaard, 2009, p18.

And we won't be so beset by internal conflict, which hamstring us from acting decisively and with vigour.

What's more, given our intensely social nature, influencing others is an especially important element of our ability to engage effectively with what we care for. Mostly this relies on persuading rather than telling them what to do. Hypocrites find it hard to get people to do what they want because what they do doesn't match up with what they say. By contrast, somebody who has integrated her agency will be in a particularly good position to influence others because she will be living according to principles and her actions will be in accord with those principles. She will be practising what she preaches. Gandhi and Socrates both exemplified this type of integrated agency to a great degree and both had a huge impact on humanity with the result that their lives were especially meaningful.

To be clear, I am not arguing that agents should be insensitive to the circumstances in which they operate – that they should, as it were, adopt a cookie cutter approach to life. Far from it. Effective action needs to be deeply sensitive to the circumstances. As such, I have no issue with the idea that, given our complex societies and the multiple roles we inhabit within them, that a particularly useful skill is to practise what Lillehammer calls the art of separation, “whereby people who occupy different social roles may cultivate the ability to distinguish between different ‘spheres of life’ and the proper place of different ethically relevant considerations in some spheres of life as opposed to others.”⁹⁴ However, tailoring one's actions appropriately to the circumstances is different from being fragmented. Indeed, reflecting on the nuances of different circumstances can enhance the art of separation. It can also help integrate rather than divide one's agency by articulating more sophisticated views about how to act.

It could be objected that saying people will normally engage more effectively with what they care for if their agency is integrated is an empirical generalisation.

⁹⁴ Lillehammer p119.

However, as I already argued briefly in Chapter 1, integration of agency is a defeasible criterion for effective engagement – by which I mean that there is a conceptual connection between integration of agency and effective engagement, albeit one that can be defeated by circumstances. Similarly, somebody whose agency is fragmented may still have an impact in the world but it won't be the purposeful directed action that is necessary to give our lives meaning.

Imagine a politician who is radically fragmented, so much so that she has two rival value systems and doesn't reflect on why it might be appropriate sometimes to follow one set of values and sometimes the other. Let's say her two value systems are self-interest and morality. When she's in the realm of self-interest, she believes the ends justify the means. Because she believes it's in her interest to become prime minister, she thinks she is therefore justified to lie, bribe and make false promises to the electorate in order to win an election. But when she puts her ethical hat on, she thinks lying, bribing and making false promises are wrong. By definition, because she's deeply fragmented, she cannot even attempt resolve this conflict.

So what happens? Well, perhaps she's paralysed by indecision – in which case she certainly won't engage effectively with anything. Or perhaps she flips in a Jekyll-and-Hyde-like fashion between acting ethically and acting ruthlessly. In each case, we can say she has agency because she is acting with a purpose. But won't her two types of action, in the normal case, undermine one another? When she has qualms about lying, she won't be as brazen in pushing out alternative facts as some other politicians and so may lose out in her attempt to become prime minister. Equally, when she lies and cheats, she will undermine her ability to pursue the things she cares about when she's wearing her ethical hat.

But isn't it also possible that, by accident, her actions will support rather than undermine one another? Imagine that she sacks a colleague found guilty of bribery and does this for ethical reasons with her Jekyll hat on, but that it wins plaudits with the public and helps her advance her Hyde-like agenda of becoming prime minister. Or imagine, in the contrary case, that she sacks the colleague in order to win plaudits

with the public with her Hyde hat on, but that this has the by-product of advancing her Jekyll-like ethical agenda. In both of these cases, she accidentally achieves a goal that her alter ego happens to hold. But when she's acting like Jekyll, she doesn't achieve his goals; and when she's acting like Hyde she doesn't achieve his goals either.

I, therefore, conclude that integrated agency does, in the normal case, contribute to more effective engagement in what one cares for.

Integrating oneself

In the last chapter, I argued that integrating our agency – the alignment of what we care about with our values, judgments, principles and action – contributes to a meaningful life. In this chapter, I consider the integration of emotions, memories, purposes, projects and plans – and how this contributes to a meaningful life. But, as already mentioned, there isn't a sharp divide between these two types of integration. I highlight some conceptions between them in the final chapter.

In this chapter, I first argue that human beings have complex psychologies. The self is not a simple thing that exists fully formed at birth and continues unchanged until death. A person, rather, is constructed throughout a life.

I then argue that psychological integration typically leads to mental health and, with it, an ability to harness one's talents and energies and therefore to engage effectively with what one cares deeply about. It also normally gives one a deeper understanding of oneself and what one cares for.

I next look at a closely linked phenomenon, temporal integration. This has two aspects, making sense of one's past and connecting with one's future selves. I argue that understanding one's past is an important part of making sense of the things one cares about – and that the knowledge that comes from being integrated with one's past contributes to one's ability to engage effectively with those things.

I finally turn to integration with one's future. A big part of such integration is having purposes, projects and plans. These help somebody engage effectively with what she cares about and clarify what caring about specific things actually amounts to.

Self is constructed

For people who believe in an immortal soul, the self is a simple concept. The self or the person is merely the soul, which exists eternally and is the subject of experience and action. Pretty much the same goes for those who believe in a mortal soul, the only difference being that the self comes into existence fully formed at birth (or perhaps conception) and then vanishes at death. But, for those who rely on their observations, the self is more complex. It doesn't emerge at birth like Athena springing in her shining armour from the head of Zeus. It develops as the foetus becomes first a baby, then a child, then an adolescent and then an adult. It often decays in old age with dementia. The person changes through life. It's not just her body that changes. So does her mind. As Heraclitus wrote, πάντα ῥεῖ "everything flows" – and that goes for the self too.

What's more, it's not just that the self develops over time. At any point in time, there is a complex mass of reflections, emotions, desires, beliefs, memories, purposes, projects, plans and other things we are conscious of. There's also a special part of our consciousness – our ability to reflect on the contents of our mind and, indeed, on whom we are. As already argued in Chapter 2, it is this reflective capacity that can set us off on the journey of seeking meaning in the first place.

Freud added further depth to our understanding of the self by revealing the powerful role the unconscious mind plays in our lives.⁹⁵ Our selves don't just evolve over time; there are huge chunks of our selves that we are unaware of. This is partly because they just don't come to mind; but Freud's key insight was that feelings, memories and perceptions may be repressed because being aware of them is painful. These repressed parts of the self don't go away; they often erupt in unexpected ways.

⁹⁵ See Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

The self is, therefore, not a simple thing that continues unchanging through life. Rather it is something that is constructed over time. What's more, the job of integration is not a one-off effort. It continues through life.

Psychological integration contributes to a meaningful life

A person who is psychologically integrated is able to access and bring into harmony the different parts of her personality. In this section, I will focus mainly on being in touch with one's emotions and aligning them with our intellect. In the following sections, I will look at being in touch with one's past, via one's memories, and with one's future, via one's purposes, projects and plans. I accept, though, that there is no sharp division between these aspects of integrating oneself.

Psychological integration leads to mental health. This is why the psychoanalyst Margot Waddell writes that: "The aim of psychoanalysis could be described as seeking to make available to the patient more aspects of the self."⁹⁶ Meanwhile, psychological disintegration is equated with madness. As Søren Kierkegaard put it: "Can you think of anything more frightful than that it might end with your nature being resolved into a multiplicity, that you really might become many, become, like those unhappy demoniacs, a legion, and you thus would have lost the inmost and holiest thing of all in a man, the unifying power of personality?"⁹⁷

There are many forms of fragmentation that fall short of madness but are still unhealthy. Psychoanalytical literature, starting with Freud, is full of examples of how personalities can be splintered. The general idea is that suppressing feelings, memories and the like are defence mechanisms that help us deal with mental pain. These may be reasonably healthy short-term options, but they are sub-optimal if they become chronic.

⁹⁶ Waddell p61.

⁹⁷ Kierkegaard p164.

I will briefly describe some examples of defence mechanisms by way of illustration. One identified by Freud is “denial”. Although this succeeds in pushing an unpleasant feeling underground, the individual typically suffers from psychosomatic symptoms, destructive behaviour or various types of mental illness, such as depression, anxiety and rage. Somebody who has repressed parts of her personality will not be able to tap into her emotions properly and reflect upon the messages they are sending her. Another common defence mechanism is to expel our pain and anxiety by “projecting” it onto others, often in the form of anger. This is most clearly seen in babies, who howl when they are anxious or in pain. Meanwhile, a typical defence mechanism for somebody who lacks self-confidence is to retreat into a shell. But, as Waddell, notes: “The brittle, protective façade may suddenly crack, exposing an absence of inner resources and a panic about being torn away from protective structures.”⁹⁸

Making sense of our feelings is not just a matter of getting in touch with what is in our gut. Emotions also have a large cognitive component. We begin to understand how our feelings connect with what is happening around us. So, for example, somebody hurts you and you are angry and want her to suffer in return. Or somebody does something good to you and you feel gratitude or love and want her to feel good too. Making sense of our feelings goes hand in hand with making sense of how we interact with the world. Feelings make sense when they are lined up with the context in which they occur. What’s more, as we reflect, our emotions change and deepen. They become more articulated. For example, when you love somebody, you don’t just feel a flutter in your heart. You have a heightened awareness of her existence. You imagine how she is and what she’s feeling. You imagine being together and weave plans to make that happen. Given our psychological complexity, being in touch with our emotions involves the integration of what we feel with what we think.

⁹⁸ Waddell p54.

Being psychologically integrated contributes to living a meaningful life in two ways. First, it enhances a person's ability to make sense of her life. Somebody who is psychologically integrated will be a deep interlocutor with herself. What's more, because her emotions and her intellect will be connected, she will have a better understanding of what she cares about and why.

Second, psychological integration enhances a person's ability to engage effectively in what she cares for. Rather than being riven with conflict, she will be able to harness her energies and talents, and focus them on what she considers important. By contrast, a person who is crimped, psychologically impoverished and hamstrung – let alone somebody whose personality has splintered into a legion of conflicting shards - will find it hard to live a meaningful life.

Making sense of our past contributes to a meaningful life

Any life, whether meaningful or not, is lived in the present. The present is suspended between past and future. A meaningful life is one that integrates both the past and the future in the present. In this section, I look at integration with one's past; in the next, at integration with one's future.

We are not just here today, without any history. We have a back-story, which influences who we are. It influences our values – and what we care about. As argued in Chapter 2, a radical egoist of the moment, who is totally disconnected from history, will be unable to make sense of what she cares for. Think of love for a daughter. How can we love her unless, on some level, we are connected to our past life with her – how we had sex with her mother, helped bring her up and so forth? Or think of patriotism. How can we make sense of the fact that we care for our country unless we are somehow connected to it and its practices in the past – how we were born in or came to the country, took pride in its achievements, got angry if it was attacked and so forth?

Such connections do not have to be fully conscious. We might have suppressed various memories but they could still be operating at an unconscious level. However, often the connections will be conscious – or, at least, capable of becoming so. We will be able to tap into our personal history and find what links us, say a shared life, to what we care about. The more we are conscious of these links, the more we will understand who we are, how we became what we are and why we care for the things we do care about.

Understanding ourselves means telling stories about ourselves. We connect ourselves to our past by joining the dots. In this sense, narrative is an important part of constructing a meaningful life. In constructing these stories, the virtues required for achieving dynamic harmony listed in the introductory chapter are important: honesty and openness. We need to reflect truthfully about our lives and we need to be open to ourselves. Just telling stories that make us feel good isn't good enough. If they are false, we will be like a mad person who thinks she is Napoleon.

Sometimes the third person sees us more accurately than we see ourselves. Often the interplay between the first person and the third person perspectives can help the subject tell a better story that helps her integrate herself better. That's one reason why people find it useful to talk about their problems to their friends and partners. That's why they see shrink. That's also why they write diaries: by putting something down on paper, they get a distance from it and may be able to look at what they've written more objectively.

Just because there are false stories, which underpin people's delusions, doesn't mean there's only one way of telling the story of our lives. We can thread the events of our life as we look backwards in many ways. Often it makes sense to go over the past again and again, telling and retelling the story from different perspectives - or going deeper, as we try to make sense of it. This is especially so when we are troubled or traumatised. That's why psychoanalysis often involves the patient going over the same events again and again from different angles until they no longer

trouble her. When a past event is no longer so frightening, she can look at it rather than sweeping it under the carpet and then integrate it with the rest of herself.

This account of how people tell and retell stories to make sense of their lives – and, in the process, integrate themselves – is not uncontroversial. Alasdair MacIntyre makes the much stronger claim that “stories are lived before they are told”⁹⁹. He says: “We all live out narratives in our lives and... we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out”.¹⁰⁰ MacIntyre partly bases this claim on the assertion that personal identity and narrative, as well as intelligibility and accountability, are interdependent concepts¹⁰¹. If this is true, you can’t understand what a person is without understanding what a narrative is – and vice versa.

But this seems muddled[. People don’t live stories; they live lives and tell stories. It is the concepts of person and life, which are interdependent - not those of person and narrative, as Williams points out. He argues that we couldn’t identify stories about a person’s life unless we first had a conception of a person’s life “any more than we could recognize a story about a penny unless we knew, more or less, what a penny was.”¹⁰² He continues: “We could not use the idea of narrative to model a person’s life unless we could independently pick out a person; and since what is in question is a person’s life... we need to have that notion as well.”

But Williams goes too far in dismissing the importance of narrative. He quotes approvingly a remark from Kierkegaard’s journal for 1843: “It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition, it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time

⁹⁹ MacIntyre p246.

¹⁰⁰ MacIntyre p246.

¹⁰¹ MacIntyre p

¹⁰² Williams, 2007, pp306-7.

simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting point from which to understand it – backwards.”¹⁰³

True, there is no final resting point except death, at which point I am no longer in a position to understand my life. And Williams is right to say that “the idea of a *completed*, unified, or coherent narration is of no help in leading a life”¹⁰⁴ – unless perhaps we believe there is a God who has already planned out our lives for us and we buy into her project. But there are plenty of temporary resting points when we are still alive, from which we can view our lives up to that point and interpret them. If we are looking for multiple, partial interpretations which help make our lives intelligible at different points of time – rather than searching for a single, complete, true story – telling such stories can be very useful in helping us lead our lives.

So we should concur with Williams in his criticism of MacIntyre’s claim that “narratives are lived before they are told” but not throw the baby out with the bathwater and assume that, as we seek to lead meaningful lives, there’s no value in telling stories about the past.

Integrating with our past doesn’t just help us make sense of who we are, it also helps us engage effectively in what we care for. Without knowledge of the past, we are condemned to repeat the same mistakes again and again. Being radically disconnected with our history undermines our agency. Imagine I love my daughter. Couldn’t it be enough that I rush in and help her if she is in need? Well, in some cases, that could be sufficient. Say she is about to be run over by a bus and I yank her away. But, normally, given the complexity of our lives, having knowledge about her will be vital to caring for her. If I rush in – like the Americans invading Iraq with little knowledge of its history – I may thrash around like a bull in a china shop, having impact but not in line with my goals. Practical knowledge is a defeasible criterion for effective action, not just contingently connected to it. After all, it wouldn’t be knowledge if it wasn’t conceptually linked to doing things successfully.

¹⁰³ Williams, 2007, p309.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, 2007, p312. My italics.

Integrating our future selves contributes to a meaningful life

We don't just tell stories about the past. We have hopes and dreams for the future. We also have purposes, projects and plans. All these integrate our future selves with our present self and play an important role in giving our lives meaning.

For a start, without such projection of ourselves into the future, it is hard to see how we could make sense of our lives. If we had no purposes at all, it's not clear we could see any point in living. We would, surely, think our lives were meaningless. Meanwhile, our projects spell out in more detail what we care about. They make our purposes more concrete. Finally, our plans set out how we intend to execute our projects and achieve our purposes. They can be seen as stories about how we intend the future to be. They enhance our understanding of what we care about.

Plans also increase our ability to engage effectively with what we care about. Of course, our plans may be thwarted. But this doesn't mean that the link between having a plan and effective engagement is merely an empirical generalisation. Rather, plans are a defeasible criterion for effective engagement. After all, what would the word "plan" mean if it wasn't linked to achieving purposes?

The importance of plans in a meaningful life doesn't, though, mean we need a life-plan to lead such lives. Kauppinen makes a useful distinction between chapters of lives and whole lives. In particular chapters, we pursue projects – and, I would add, need plans. The question, then, is how the various chapters can come together to form a meaningful life. He distinguishes four options: a) disconnection b) repetition c) single purpose and d) coherence.¹⁰⁵

The first, "disconnection", isn't really a connection at all – and is relatively easily dismissed. If there's no connection between the different parts of one's life, it wouldn't add up and so couldn't be meaningful. The repetition option involves each

¹⁰⁵ Kauppinen pp365-369.

chapter repeating the previous one. Kauppinen rejects this on the basis that such Sisyphean circularity won't be meaningful although, as I mention in Chapter 3, there could be unusual situations where endless repetition could make sense to somebody. Kauppinen dismisses a single purpose life on the grounds that, unless the single purpose was something really overarching like justice, it would lead to the atrophying of important aspects of oneself because one would not develop one's talents to the full – and doing so is an essential part of leading a meaningful life. That leaves Kauppinen with a coherent life as a model for how a meaningful one is integrated, namely one “whose chapters build on one another without being subsumed under a single goal” – and this is the option he plumps for.

Although Kauppinen makes useful distinctions between ways of integrating the chapters of one's life, it's not clear that he is right to choose his conception of a coherent life as the only way of leading a meaningful one. A coherent life, as he describes it, would be a meaningful one. But why wouldn't a single purpose life be meaningful too? While Kauppinen may be right that developing one's talents to the full would contribute to the most meaningful life, we will never in practice achieve such an idealistic goal. What's more, there is a trade-off between putting lots of energy into developing a few of our talents and spreading it thinly over all aspects of ourselves. Mightn't somebody lead a more meaningful life by devoting herself obsessively to a single purpose, such as becoming a brilliant tennis player or fighting for democracy in China, rather than by trying to be a Renaissance person? Even if she may need to develop some other talents to achieve her main goal, she is unlikely to become an all-rounder.

Kauppinen also dismisses too quickly the idea that the separate meaningful projects in each chapter of his ideal coherent life can be subsumed under a single goal. What about Gandhi's life? Couldn't it be seen as devoted to a single extremely meaningful goal – securing Indian independence through nonviolent means? Even if it couldn't, mightn't there be some higher, overarching goal that incorporates both the struggle for Indian independence and his other purposes? Why should we dismiss *a priori* the possibility that Gandhi sought to give unity to his life by thinking of his various

projects as aspects of a bigger struggle for justice through love and truth – as, indeed, he seems to have done? Or look at Socrates: the courageous soldier, waspish interrogator of people who thought they knew more than they really did, moral philosophy pioneer, educationalist, and role model in death. We could view these as separate chapters of a life that built on one another. But Socrates himself seems to have seen them as more integrated than that. They were all part of an attempt to seek wisdom by examining life and, hence, live a virtuous one. Didn't that give even unity, and meaning, to his life?

Kauppinen also doesn't seem to consider the possibility that one project gives birth to new ones, but not by intention or purpose – although perhaps this is implicit in his conception of a coherent life. Ex post, we might well be able to see the threads that linked our different projects but we wouldn't plan all the connections ex ante. Indeed, it is quite possible that many lives without such life-plans are more meaningful than those that have them. After all, it is only as we journey through life that we clarify to ourselves what we care for. If we tried to fix everything at the start, we might end up being too rigid to see what really mattered. As C.P. Cavafy wrote: "As you set out for Ithaka hope the voyage is a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery."¹⁰⁶

There are, therefore, several ways in which the different chapters of our lives can be integrated. However, Kauppinen's focus on chapters of lives building on one another contains an important insight, which applies not just to the way he defines a coherent life. Our future lives build on the past in two ways that are relevant for my argument. First, through reflection about how the chapters of our lives connect, we deepen our understanding of the things we care about and why we care about them. Second, in our voyage of discovery, we can develop a vast array of skills and knowledge that can be deployed in the future and which then enhances our ability to engage effectively with what we care about. In this way, integrating our lives' chapters contributes to their meaningfulness.

¹⁰⁶ Cavafy, introduction to *Ithaka*.

Integrating with one's world

Leading a meaningful life involves transcending the egoism of the moment. We reach out across time and connect our past and future selves, as argued in the last chapter. We also reach out across space and connect to our world. That's the topic of this chapter.

I start by explaining what I mean by integrating with one's world. Humans, like other creatures, have habitats. Our world is particularly complex – made up of other humans, physical things we have created, non-physical things we've created such as culture and institutions, and our natural environment. I argue that integrating with this world involves caring for it and being supported by it. Because we don't always feel at home in our world, we often need to adapt it to our needs.

I then look specifically at how we integrate with other individuals. Given our intensely social nature, relationships play a vital role in our lives. Since this is a vast topic, I focus just on friendship and love, which are hardly small subjects. I argue that caring is a central feature of friendship and love. I further argue that loving another means treating her as an autonomous source of creativity and trying to understand her. Friendship and love enable us both to care and to be cared for.

Next I look at integration with our wider world. I focus on two aspects of this equally vast topic: work and politics. I discuss how work can both be supportive of an individual and give her things to care for, but also how it can be alienating. I also consider how the political environment can support individuals but also persecute them.

Finally, I explain how integration with our world contributes to a meaningful life. There is a direct link via caring, which is central to both integration with our world and leading a meaningful life. Meanwhile, feeling supported and at home with our world gives us the resources to engage effectively with what we care for, while the

process of understanding our world also enables us to engage effectively with it. I argue that it's hard to lead a meaningful life if we are alienated from our world and that there are conceptual links between integration with our world and meaningfulness.

What does integrating with our world mean?

Humans, like other creatures, have habitats. Our world is particularly complex. It's not just the natural environment. Relations with other humans are especially important. Our families, friends, neighbours, colleagues and other people are a central element of our world. But given human inventiveness, our world consists of much more than nature and other people. For a start, there are the physical things humans have created: most obviously homes, infrastructure, artefacts and technology. And then there are the non-physical things we've created: stories, music, bodies of knowledge, laws, institutions and so forth. When I talk about our world, I mean all of these things. However, because the subject is so vast, I will focus in this chapter on three aspects of our world: friends and people we love; work; and politics.

By integrating with our world, I mostly mean two things: caring for it and being supported by it. Most obviously, we care for other people. But we also care for causes such as justice, activities such as doing philosophy, other animals, things of beauty, the physical environment and so forth. Indeed, we can care for pretty much anything in our world. And, as argued in Chapter 1, caring has three elements: intellectual, emotional and practical. When we care for something, we think it is important, we have positive feelings towards it and we are ready to act to advance its interests. Given the complexity of our world, effective engagement with what we care for typically involves understanding it, often deeply.

Being supported by the world means being at home with it. We can be supported by virtually any aspect of our world, most obviously by other individuals. But we can also feel at home with physical nature, our built environment, our work, our culture,

our political system and so forth. When other individuals support us, they typically care for us or even love us. Given the complexity of our natures, a vital component of caring for us is understanding us.

We don't, though, always find the world supportive and caring. Instead of being at home in it, we can be alienated by it. Other people can be abusive, bullying and manipulative. Work can be mind-numbing. Our political system can be unjust or just plain incompetent. Like any life form, we are most effectively integrated with our world when we are well adapted to it. But unlike other animals, we have a special ability to adapt our environments to our needs. We do this in so many ways. For example, we typically put a huge amount of effort into our homes – not just building them so we can withstand the ravages of the weather, but also fitting them out so that they satisfy a host of refined needs and desires. When other people – or institutions created by other people - are not supportive, we may also be able to change them to meet our needs. Sometimes this can be done through persuasion but, at other times, it may be necessary to fight. Integrating with one's world is not always a conflict-free process.

Integration with other individuals

Given our intensely social nature, relationships play a vital role in our lives. A central feature of such relationships is caring for the other. This is a vast topic and here I will focus on friendship and love.

This is not to say that all friendships are caring or that all love affairs are loving. Relationships can be abusive and manipulative – among supposed friends and lovers as well as among strangers and enemies. However, when I talk about integration with other individuals as a positive thing, I am focussing on healthy friendships that involve caring genuinely for the other. When we care for or love another, we have

reasons to act to advance her wellbeing. We also have what Wolf calls “reasons to live”¹⁰⁷. Meanwhile, when another cares for us, we are supported and feel at home.

It is possible to distinguish friendship from love, and to distinguish different types of love: for example, love for children, parents, friends and partners. There are differences in the depth of various types of friendship; and romantic love can be especially intense. What’s more, genuine romantic love, unlike say love for a young child, is a two-way street: you care for the loved one and she cares for you.

However, what is common to all types of healthy human relationships is caring for the other. It is such caring which is the main glue that integrates us with society.

Caring for others doesn’t just mean having positive feelings towards them. When we care, the full range of our emotions can potentially be triggered. We fear for their safety, we are angry when they don’t look after themselves, we hate and feel vengeful towards those who oppress them, we feel guilty when we haven’t taken care of them ourselves and so forth. As argued already, caring isn’t just a feeling. There’s also a cognitive component, which articulates and enriches the emotion. What’s more, caring involves being prepared to act to advance the wellbeing of the person we love.

Many philosophers accept the idea that caring is a central feature of love – and that caring involves both an emotion and a willingness to act on the loved one’s behalf. Nozick, for example, writes: “What is common to all love is this: Your own well-being is tied up with that of someone (or something) you love... When something bad happens to one you love... something bad also happens *to you*.”¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, Wolf says: “Though loving someone need not in general involve a desire actively to benefit her, the *disposition* to benefit, to comfort, to help the loved one *if* she needs it follows directly from the fact that you care about her good.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Wolf, 2015, 191.

¹⁰⁸ Nozick p68.

¹⁰⁹ Wolf, 2015, p190.

This view has not gone unchallenged. David Velleman, for example, attacks the idea that caring about others “necessarily coincides with caring *for* them or taking care *of* them... In most cases, a love that is inseparable from the urge to benefit is an unhealthy love, bristling with uncalled-for impingements.”¹¹⁰ Instead, he thinks love is the “arresting awareness of [a person’s] value”¹¹¹. Love can, indeed, involve a heightened sensitivity to a person’s value. But a love that is purely passive admiration or worship without any active component would not involve any integration with the other. I will not be considering this type of love.

If one cares genuinely for another, one also treats her as an autonomous being. She is an end in herself, not an instrument to be used to advance one’s own ends. Again this is something that many philosophers agree on. Wolf, for example, says: “When one loves someone, one values the beloved as an end in herself.”¹¹² Treating somebody as an autonomous being doesn’t just mean you don’t dominate or manipulate her. One consequence of relating to others this way is that you can learn from her, whereas you couldn’t if she was totally under your thumb. As Nozick puts it: “Only someone who continues to possess a nonsubservient autonomy can be an apt partner in a joint identity that enlarges and enhances your individual one.”¹¹³

And precisely because caring for another involves respecting her autonomy, it also means one should not fuse with her. This applies even to romantic love, where there can be a tendency to lose one’s identity in the other. Because humans are autonomous sources of creativity, when they come together in harmony, they need to maintain some separateness. They need their private zones, where they can reflect and create for themselves, before they share their creations with each other and the wider world. Healthy love does not squish this source of initiative. In other words, it is possible to integrate with another without obliterating either person’s

¹¹⁰ Velleman p353.

¹¹¹ Velleman p360.

¹¹² Wolf, 2015, p191.

¹¹³ Nozick p74.

individuality. This is in keeping with my definition of integration in Chapter 1 as creating a *dynamic harmony of diverse elements*.

An important feature of all friendship and love is wanting to understand the other. The desire to know is mainly an end in itself. But there's also an instrumental aspect: if we understand the other, we will be better able to help her. In order to know another, we need to be sensitive to her, but she needs to open up too. Letting somebody into our innermost sanctum can be risky. But relationships can be deeper if we can reveal ourselves honestly to the other. People are only willing to do this if they trust the other – and, to gain such trust, we typically need to press the right buttons. It's a mixture of open sesame and the dance of the seven veils. We say the right words and do the right things, and are rewarded by a gradual revelation of who the other person is.

In romantic love, the desire to know the other and to be known deeply by her is especially intense. By knowing the other – what she cares for, what she fears, her hopes, how she came to be what she is and so forth - lovers integrate. We integrate spatially with the other by also integrating with her temporal dimension. Sexual intimacy is a special, albeit not the only way, of achieving this deep understanding. As Nozick writes: "In intimacy, we let another within the boundaries we normally maintain around ourselves... Through the layers of public defenses and faces, another is admitted to see a more vulnerable or a more impassioned you."¹¹⁴

Such deep love can transform the lovers. By integrating with the other, one integrates oneself. The demons that lurk within almost all of us to a greater or lesser extent can be exhumed, shared and found less tormenting. If one trusts the other enough to open up and share those bits of oneself that cause one pain – and if she repays that trust by treating one sensitively – love can be a healing experience.

¹¹⁴ Nozick p64.

I will explore in the final section of this chapter how such integration with others, both by caring for them and being cared for by them, contributes to a meaningful life.

Integrating with our work

Friendship and love are not the only ways we connect spatially. Work figures prominently in most people's lives, absorbing much of our energy. How we engage with our work therefore normally has a huge influence on how meaningful our lives are. As with friendship, there are two main aspects: how well supported are we by our work; and how much do we care about what we are doing? These two aspects often go hand in hand: if we are well supported at work, we are more likely to care about what we are doing there.

E. F. Schumacher attributes to Camus the following quote: "Without work, all life goes rotten. But when work is soulless, life stifles and dies."¹¹⁵ This brings out neatly how we need to deploy our energies in some productive way, although not necessarily in paid work, in order for our lives to be meaningful; but that there are also so many ways in which work can be meaningless.

People typically work in order to make money. But if we consider work to be only about earning money, we are likely to be alienated from it. For a start, the workplace is an environment that can be supportive or abusive. Bosses can motivate their staff, unleash their creativity and help them develop their talents; alternatively, they can oppress and exploit them. Developing somebody's talents isn't simply, or even mainly, a matter of giving her formal training, although that is normally important. It is also a matter of stretching her mind and allowing her to contribute her own ideas to how to do her work. It is about treating an employee as an autonomous source of creativity, rather than as somebody who is to be told what to do.

¹¹⁵ Schumacher p4.

Meanwhile, colleagues can become friends and care for us, or they can work against our interests. Bosses cannot always ensure that their employees get on with one another, but they can have an impact in this area too. In particular, they can establish systems that minimise bullying and harassment.

It's not just whether work supports the individual that matters; it's also whether the individual cares for her work. In the so-called caring professions, the connection can seem obvious. Doctors, nurses and carers help those who are sick, teachers help people learn, and so forth. On the other hand, the mere fact that one works in a caring profession doesn't mean one has a meaningful job. There are many people who are alienated from their work because of difficult working conditions, bad management, inadequate resources or whatever.

Equally, many people who work in jobs that aren't considered caring professions can care deeply about what they do. They can take pride in the goods or services they produce if these are genuinely valuable. Entrepreneurs who create businesses, managers who run efficient organisations and get the best out of their people, inventors who develop new technologies and intellectuals who produce new ideas can take pride in their work too.

On the other hand, it is easy to feel alienated from one's work if one cannot see how the final good or service one is producing – or the specific role one is playing in the enterprise - is useful. One can feel one is merely a wage slave, even if one is a highly-paid worker. For example, during the global credit crunch of 2007 and 2008, few traders and bankers could give a coherent account of whether what they were doing contributed to the human good and, if so, how. They were often so focussed on one small part of the giant financial machine that they couldn't see the big picture. Lacking a vision of how their work was socially useful, they concentrated on what their work could give to them – and that probably enhanced the greed endemic the financial system. Indeed, it was partly because hardly anybody could see the big picture that the machine ran amok. As Adair Turner, chair of the UK's Financial

Services Authority, said, the financial sector had “swollen beyond its socially useful size.”¹¹⁶

Bosses, again, can play an important role in enabling their employees to see the big picture – provided, of course, that they can see it themselves. They can explain their strategy and invite their employees to contribute their thoughts about it. Doing so not only enables the employee to see how her specific activity fits into some larger valuable activity; it can also inspire the employee and get her buy-in to what she is doing. Such an employee will not be alienated from her work.

Integrating with our political environment

The other aspect of our wider world I wish to consider is integrating with is our political environment. This, I take to include: the system of government we live under; the laws of our land and whether they are obeyed; and the people in power and the policies they pursue. I also include our relations with other countries, for example whether we are at peace or war with them.

The nature of our political environment will have a huge influence on how well supported we are as individuals. Do we feel at home in our country or are we alienated? Political systems vary from democracies which treat their citizens as reasonably autonomous beings to tyrannies which treat their people as cannon fodder. Politicians vary from those who act reasonably honestly to those who lie, cheat and manipulate. And, of course, the range of laws and policies governments adopt varies considerably. Laws, taxes and the provision of public services can be reasonably fair or discriminatory. What’s more, government can be more or less efficient – and that matters too.

This is not the place to consider, in any detail, what sorts of political environment are likely to be the most supportive. However, I think Martha Nussbaum is largely right

¹¹⁶ Interview with Prospect Magazine.

to say that: “Leaders of countries often focus on national economic growth alone, but their people, meanwhile, are striving for something different: meaningful lives for themselves.”¹¹⁷ If so, the question then becomes what do people need in order to live meaningful lives and what sorts of political systems are most likely to support their quest.

Our political environment doesn’t just determine how supported we are; it is also a field which many individuals feel passionate about. They devote their talents and energy to causes, great and small. They work to improve their communities, they get involved in politics and they fight against injustices of numerous types. In doing this, they are seeking to adapt their political environment to their vision of a better world.

Insofar as one is fighting injustice, one can rarely avoid conflict. But what is the best way of conducting a struggle in order to achieve a just society? Do the ends justify the means, as Marxists and Machiavellians argue? Or do dishonest, exploitative and violent means ultimately corrupt the end? These are huge questions that it is not possible to answer in this thesis. The only point I wish to make here is that there are alternatives to the Marxist/Machiavellian approach which are likely to lead to a person being more integrated with her world.

In representative democracies, the alternative is for activists to behave with integrity and for voters to elect politicians who themselves act with integrity. In this context, I consider integrity to mean broadly speaking sticking to one’s core principles, practising what one preaches and keeping one’s promises. Voters should care that politicians behave with integrity because, when politicians don’t, it’s normally a warning sign that they are acting in their own interests rather than in the interests of the population at large. Moreover, a lack of integrity by politicians can alienate voters from the political system. This corrupts the democratic process and so can open the way for demagogues to take power.¹¹⁸ By contrast, if politicians are honest with voters and treat them as autonomous beings rather than trying to manipulate

¹¹⁷ Nussbaum p1.

¹¹⁸ I expand on these ideas in one of my MPhil Stud essays, Dixon 2016c.

them, the electorate is more likely to buy into the political system and feel at home with it. This constitutes being well integrated with their political environment under my definition of integration.

In more dramatic cases, where there is no democracy to start off with, an alternative to violent revolution is Gandhian-style nonviolent struggle. Gandhi's theory of political action, Satyagraha, emphasises improving our world while inflicting the minimum amount of destruction in the process. Although Satyagraha is usually translated as nonviolent struggle, its etymological meaning is "truth-force". My interpretation of his philosophy of political change is that truth figures in three ways. First, there is being true to oneself, or integrity. Second, there is being truthful to others, or honesty. Third, there is being truthful to the situation, or realism. It is the combination of these three types of truthfulness that has sometimes succeeded in righting injustices without causing massive collateral damage.

There is sometimes an assumption that India's independence struggle was a special case and that resorting to violence is normally the most effective way of winning such battles. However, this doesn't seem to be borne out by research. For example, Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth examined 323 violent and nonviolent resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006 and discovered that 53 percent of the nonviolent campaigns succeeded, roughly double the 26 percent success rate for violent ones. They said the relative success of nonviolent struggle was because it enhanced a struggle's "domestic and international legitimacy" while "regime violence against nonviolent movements is more likely to backfire against the regime."¹¹⁹

Nonviolent struggle will not, of course, always win the day. But insofar as it does succeed, people are likely to feel more at home with their fellow citizens and so integrated with their world than if their country is smashed up in a violent frenzy.

¹¹⁹ Stephan and Chenoweth pp8-9.

How integrating with one's world contributes to a meaningful life

I have considered three main aspects of how we integrate with our world: friendship and love; work; and politics. I have, in each case, sought to show how integrating with our world means caring for it, understanding it and being supported by it. I now wish to show how such integration contributes to a meaningful life. Remember how I defined a meaningful life in Chapter 1 as one *effectively engaged in things we care for, which we can see we have reasons to care for*.

Caring is central both to how we integrate with the world and my definition of meaningfulness. If we love our friends, family and partners, our lives will have meaning. If we care deeply about the work we do, that too will give meaning to our lives. So will our engagement in political causes.

Understanding our world, meanwhile, helps us make sense of ourselves as beings in our world. What's more, such knowledge is often practical. As such, this helps us engage effectively with what we care for – and that too enhances the meaningfulness of our lives. We are better able to help our friends, family and lovers; better able to be effective in our work; and better able to advance the causes we care for. As argued in Chapter 6, the link between practical knowledge and effective engagement is a conceptual one, not just an empirical generalisation.

Finally, being supported by our world gives us resources to lead a meaningful life. A good family life, deep romantic love, a workplace that enhances our skills and unleashes our creativity, and a political environment that supports rather than persecutes us will all normally enhance our ability to engage effectively with what we care for. Again this is not an empirical generalisation. There is a conceptual link between being supported and being able to act. Of course, there are abnormal cases, when somebody who is thwarted by her environment triumphs or when somebody supported by her environment gains no benefit from this. But it would be hard to understand what being supported meant if it didn't normally enhance our ability to act. Being supported is a defeasible criterion for effective action. This is

another way in which integration with one's world contributes to a meaningful life. By contrast, if we care for nothing in our world, don't understand it and are alienated it, we will not be connected to our environment and it will then be hard for us to lead meaningful lives.

Conclusion

Let me recap my argument. I have defined a meaningful life as one that is *effectively engaged in things we care for, which we can see we have reasons to care for*. My definition of meaningfulness has subjective aspects: one cares for things and one can make sense of what one cares for. It also has objective aspects: there are reasons for caring for these things and one is effectively engaged with them. A meaningful life, therefore, is one that adds up both subjectively and objectively.

I then argued that we have no reason to pursue a happy life unless our conception of happiness embraces meaningfulness and that we have no reason to pursue an ethical life if that alienates us from our *raison d'être*. I argued that if meaningfulness takes its proper place in our conceptions of happiness and morality, we will be less likely to be pulled in different directions. This is the first part of the answer to my thesis question: to what extent is a meaningful life an integrated one?

I then looked at the issue from the other direction: to what extent an integrated life contributes to a meaningful one. I argued that integration enables us to understand better why the things we care for matter and to engage more effectively in promoting their wellbeing. This is the second part of the answer to my thesis question.

At various points, I mentioned that the distinctions between integrating agency, integrating oneself and integrating with one's world are not sharp. I now wish to point out a few of the connections. For a start, integrating agency and integrating oneself are two aspects of integrating a person. Although I have put principles, values, actions, judgments and what one cares about in the integrating agency bucket, with emotions, desires, memories, plans and so forth in the integrating oneself bucket, this is for ease of explanation. There is clearly a lot of mixing between the buckets: an integrated person will have her actions aligned with her emotions, her plans matched up with her principles and what she cares about in

harmony with her memories. The deep reflection that leads to integration will range across all these areas. What's more, the integration of a person and integration with her world are intimately linked. A person who is psychologically integrated will find it easier to love. A person who lives in a caring family and a fair society is more likely to be psychologically balanced. A person who is willing to change in response to honest and fair reflection about her family and society is likely to become more integrated in herself and with those around her.

I have argued that a meaningful life involves transcending the egoism of the moment by connecting in time and space: reaching out to one's past and future selves is the temporal dimension, while reaching out to others and the wider world is the spatial one. But the two dimensions can't be separated. We can only pursue our purposes via projects, supported by plans, if we engage with the world around us and typically with other people too. Meanwhile, loving somebody or something doesn't just mean connecting to them now; it also involves appreciating their history and taking care of their future.

A person's life adds up subjectively when she knows who she is, where she comes from, what she cares for, what she stands for and what her plans are. All these things reinforce each other. Her life is objectively meaningful when she can harness her talents and energies and make things happen that are valuable. Being integrated as an agent, integrated with herself and integrated with her world will all enable this. Instead of being a fragmented person who is pulled in different directions by conflicting forces, she will be a unified person with a deep understanding of the things she cares for and better able to advance their wellbeing.

Meaningfulness comes in degrees. So does integration. Somebody can have a more or less meaningful life, and be more or less integrated. However, in general, somebody who is integrated in the ways I have described will have a meaningful life. She will be track-happy. She will also be well placed to achieve good things in her life and be buffet-happy. Of course, she will not be omnipotent and bad luck or the actions of other autonomous agents may frustrate her plans. So neither success nor

buffet-happiness is guaranteed. But such a life will still be the most meaningful one she can live.

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