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The Meaningfulness of Lives

By *TODD MAY*

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Who among us has not asked whether his or her life is a meaningful one? Who has not wondered — on a sleepless night, during a long stretch of dull or taxing work, or when a troubled child seems a greater burden than one can bear — whether in the end it all adds up to anything? On this day, too, when many are steeped in painful reminders of personal loss, it is natural to wonder about the answers.

The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre thought that, without God, our lives are bereft of meaning. He tells us in his essay “Existentialism,” “if God does not exist, we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct. So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us.” On this view, God gives our lives the values upon which meaning rests. And if God does not exist, as Sartre claims, our lives can have only the meaning we confer upon them.

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This seems wrong on two counts. First, why would the existence of God guarantee the meaningfulness of each of our lives? Is a life of unremitting drudgery or unrequited struggle really redeemed if there’s a larger plan, one to which we have no access, into which it fits? That would be small compensation for a life that would otherwise feel like a waste — a point not lost on thinkers like Karl Marx, who called religion the “opium of the people.” Moreover, does God actually ground the values by which we live? Do we not, as Plato recognized 2500 years ago, already have to think of those values as good in order to ascribe them to God?

Second, and more pointedly, must the meaningfulness of our lives depend on the existence of God? Must meaning rely upon articles of faith? Basing life’s meaningfulness on the existence of a deity not only leaves all atheists out of the picture; it leaves different believers out of one another’s picture. What seems called for is an approach to thinking about meaning that can draw us together, one that exists alongside or instead of religious views.

A promising and more inclusive approach is offered by Susan Wolf in her recent and compelling book, “Meaning in Life and Why It Matters.” A meaningful life, she claims, is distinct from a happy life or a morally good one. In her view, “meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.” A meaningful life must, in some sense then, *feel* worthwhile. The person living the life must be engaged by it. A life of commitment to causes that are generally defined as worthy — like feeding and clothing the poor or ministering to the ill — but that do not move the person participating in them will lack meaningfulness in this sense. However, for a life to be meaningful, it must also *be* worthwhile. Engagement in a life of tiddlywinks does not rise to the level of a meaningful life, no matter how gripped one might be by the game.

Leif Parsons

Often one defends an idea by giving reasons for it. However, sometimes the best defense is not to give reasons at the outset but instead to pursue the idea in order to see where it leads. Does it capture something important if we utilize it to understand ourselves? It’s this latter tack that I would like to try here. The pursuit of this core idea — that a meaningful life is both valued and valuable — allows us to understand several important aspects of our attitudes toward ourselves and others.

In this pursuit, the first step we might take beyond what Wolf tells us is to recognize that lives unfold over time. A life is not an unrelated series of actions or projects or states of being. A life has, we might say, a trajectory. It is lived in a temporal thickness. Even if my life’s trajectory seems disjointed or to lack continuity, it is *my* life that is disconnected in its unfolding, not elements of several different lives.

If a life has a trajectory, then it can be conceived narratively. A human life can be seen as a story, or as a series of stories that are more or less related. This does not mean that the person whose life it is must conceive it or live it narratively. I needn’t say to myself, “Here’s the story I want construct,” or, “This is the story so far.” What it means rather is that, if one reflected on one’s life, one could reasonably see it in terms of various story lines, whether parallel or intersecting or distinct. This idea can be traced back to Aristotle’s “Ethics,” but has made a reappearance with some recent narrative conceptions of what a self is.

What makes a trajectory a meaningful one? If Wolf is right, it has to feel worthwhile and, beyond that, has to be engaged in projects that are objectively worthwhile. There is not much difficulty in knowing what feels worthwhile. Most of us are good at sensing when we’re onto something and when we’re not. Objective worthiness is more elusive. We don’t want to reduce it simply to a morally good life, as though a meaningful life were simply an unalienated moral life. Meaningful lives are not so limited and, as we shall see, are sometimes more vexed. So we must ask what lends objective worthiness to a life outside the moral realm. Here is where the narrative character of a life comes into play.

There are values we associate with a good narrative and its characters that are distinct from those we associate with good morals. A fictional character can be intense, adventurous, steadfast or subtle. Think here of the

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adventurousness of Ishmael in “Moby-Dick,” the quiet intensity of Kip in “The English Patient,” the steadfastness of Dilsey in “The Sound and the Fury” or the subtlety of Marco Polo in “Invisible Cities.” As with these fictional characters, so with our lives. When a life embodies one or more of these values (or others), and feels engaging to the one who lives it, it is to that extent meaningful. There are narrative values expressed by human lives that are not reducible to moral values. Nor are they reducible to happiness; they are not simply matters of subjective feeling. Narrative values are not felt, they are lived. And they constitute their own arena of value, one that has not been generally recognized by philosophers who reflect on life’s meaningfulness.

An intense life, for instance, can be lived with abandon. One might move from engagement to engagement, or stick with a single engagement, but always (well, often) by diving into it, holding nothing back. One throws oneself into swimming or poetry or community organizing or fundraising, or perhaps all of them at one time or another. Such a life is likely a meaningful one. And this is true even where it might not be an entirely moral one.

We know of people like this, people whose intensity leads them to behavior that we might call morally compromised. Intense lovers can leave bodies in their wake when the embers of love begin to cool. Intense athletes may not be the best of teammates. Our attitudes toward people like this are conflicted. There is a sense in which we might admire them and another sense in which we don’t. This is because meaningful lives don’t always coincide with good ones. Meaningful lives can be morally compromised, just as morally good lives can feel meaningless to those who live them.

We should not take this to imply that there is no relationship between meaningfulness and morality. They meet at certain moral limits. An evil life, no matter how intense or steadfast, is not one we would want to call meaningful. But within the parameters of those moral limits, the relationship between a meaningful life and a moral one is complicated. They do not map directly onto each other.

Why might all this matter? What is the point of understanding what makes lives meaningful? Why not just live them? On one level, the answer is obvious. If we want to live meaningful lives, we might want to know something about what makes a life so. Otherwise, we’re just taking stabs in the dark. And in any event, for most of us it’s just part of who we are. It’s one of the causes of our lying awake at night.

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There is another reason as well. This one is more bound to the time in which we live. In [an earlier column](#) for The Stone, I wrote that we are currently encouraged to think of ourselves either as consumers or as entrepreneurs. We are told to be shoppers for goods or investors for return. Neither of these types of lives, if they are the dominant character of those lives, strike me as particularly meaningful. This is because their narrative themes — buying, investing — are rarely the stuff of which a compelling life narrative is made. (I say “rarely” because there may be, for example, cases of intensely lived but

morally compromised lives of investment that do not cross any moral limit to meaningfulness.) They usually lack what Wolf calls “objective attractiveness.” To be sure, we must buy things, and may even enjoy shopping. And we should not be entirely unconcerned with where we place our limited energies or monies. But are these the themes of a meaningful life? Are we likely to say of someone that he or she was a great networker or shopper, and so really knew how to live?

In what I have called an age of economics, it is even more urgent to ask the question of a meaningful life: what it consists in, how we might live one. Philosophy cannot prescribe the particular character of meaning that each of us should embrace. It cannot tell each of us individually how we might trace the trajectory that is allotted to us. But it can, and ought to, reflect upon the framework within which we consider these questions, and in doing so perhaps offer a lucidity we might otherwise lack. This is as it should be. Philosophy can assist us in understanding how we might think about our lives, while remaining modest enough to leave the living of them to us.

*The author **will be speaking** on the meaningfulness of lives at the New School for Social Research in New York City on Thursday, Sept. 15 at 6 p.m.*

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