Philosophical Papers
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rppa20

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Available online: 01 Jun 2010

To cite this article: Robert Audi (2005): Intrinsic Value and Meaningful Life, Philosophical Papers, 34:3, 331-355

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/05568640509485162

Philosophical Papers
Vol. 34, No. 3 (November 2005): 331-355

Intrinsic Value and Meaningful Life

Robert Audi

Abstract: I distinguish various ways in which human life may be thought to be meaningful and present an account of what might be called *existential meaningfulness*. The account is neutral with respect to both theism and naturalism, but each is addressed in several places and the paper's main points are harmonious with certain versions of both. A number of important criteria for existential meaningfulness are examined, and special emphasis is placed on criteria centering on creativity and excellence, on contributing to the well-being of persons, and on human relationships, particularly those pervaded by love. In the light of a conception of intrinsic goodness, the good life is compared with the meaningful life, and the relation between the two notions is explored. I argue that goodness *in* a life counts towards its meaningfulness and that the goodness *of* a life is sufficient for an important kind of meaningfulness. I also suggest that the overall notion of *rewarding* elements in a life—intrinsically good elements that are typically but not necessarily pleasurable—is a significant unifying concept that helps both in understanding existential meaningfulness and in integrating the various kinds of constituents in a life that conduce to its meaningfulness.

Philosophers have often been expected to provide a vision of meaningful life. They have also been expected to clarify the difference between lives that are meaningful and those that are not. The problem of providing an adequate theory of meaningful life is particularly difficult on two important assumptions that many philosophers make. The first assumption is that it is possible for a life to be meaningful even apart from the truth of theism. The second is that 'meaning' and its cognates have their primary home in the semantic domain, or at least are clearest in reference to linguistic elements. I am proceeding on both assumptions. As to the second, however, I do not take it to imply that there are *no* clear non-semantic uses of 'meaningful' and 'meaningless', but the assumption does imply that we must be careful to sort the latter out in their own terms and without importing assumptions proper only or mainly to the semantic domain. I want to begin, then, with some examples that will set the stage for a substantive

account of meaningfulness in human life.[1] My account will be objectivistic but at the same time sensitive to the importance of subjective elements in a meaningful life, and it will be non-naturalistic but responsive to the importance of natural properties—particularly psychological properties—that substantially color the lives of individuals.

I. Some Dimensions of Meaningfulness

It should be clarifying to begin with a contrast between meaningfulness in relation to human life and something generically similar which may give rise to expectations that a theory of meaningful life should not be expected to satisfy: meaningfulness as a property of a linguistic item. Suppose that a man suffers head injuries in an accident and is uttering sounds in a way that seems to represent an effort to communicate. It might be natural to ask whether the sounds are meaningful. If they are, we may go on to ask what they mean. It is apparently a presupposition of an expression's having linguistic meaning that the question *what* it means is clearly intelligible and even that there is something it means—not in the sense of an entity we may call *a meaning*, but in the sense of a relation to something that is the same *in* meaning. That relation is notoriously difficult to explicate. Worse still, a language may have meaningful expressions for which it contains no synonyms; in that case there may be only a hypothetical expression (or one in another language) having the same meaning as the expression in question.[2] Suppose, however, that the presupposition is correct, i.e., that what has

1 For a wide-ranging discussion of the dimensions of meaningful life that includes a non-denominational treatment of the religious dimension of meaning, see John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003). A critical appraisal of this book is provided by Thaddeus Metz, "Baier and Cottingham on the Meaning of Life," *Disputatio* 1, 19 (2005), 215-228.

2 My wording here may raise the question whether a language can contain expressions that are *not* meaningful. I want to leave this open. But consider 'ugh!' It belongs to English and has a *function;* but although it may be used to express disgust, it does not *mean*, e.g., 'I'm disgusted by that'. A linguistic item with meaning has a function, but the converse is not true.

meaning means something in particular. Is there a counterpart of meaningfulness in human life—*existential meaningfulness*, as we might call it?

Consider a case of the kind that above all makes the question of meaningfulness in life urgent. A young woman who is repelled by the triviality of the lives of many around her aspires to lead a truly meaningful life. May we ask her what she wants her life *to mean*? She would doubtless understand the question in a general way, but may we expect her to say something analogous to the semantic point that 'The Latinic word 'ergo' means *hence*'? I think not. But there is one important similarity: in both the semantic and existential cases meaningfulness implies that there is a way to *make sense of* the phenomenon in question, indeed to *interpret* it in some way. This point provides a broad constraint on an account of meaningfulness in life, but probably nothing more. To be sure, one can imagine the woman replying, 'I want my life to mean being a great pianist' or 'I want it to mean really great piano playing', but this is surely not a specification of the meaning of her life. It is at best a description of what she thinks will *make* it meaningful.

If we are unduly influenced by the analogy between linguistic and existential meaning, we may find something of a paradox here: unlike a linguistic expression, a life can be meaningful even though there is nothing it means. As our example of the aspiring pianist suggests, however, this *paradox of existential meaningfulness* is not deep. For we do know at least what kinds of things are positively relevant to meaningful life. Let me mention some important ones before beginning to develop an account of existential meaningfulness.

First, on any plausible conception of existential meaningfulness, creativity and high-level excellence, i.e., roughly virtuosity in an important activity such as musical performance or scientific research, counts toward meaningfulness. If a person is creative—in the rich sense entailing the production of things that are *both* novel and "worthwhile"—or excellent in the way a genuine virtuoso is, this counts toward

(existential) meaningfulness. It is at least incompatible with utter meaninglessness.[3] A life's being creative in an overall sense is sufficient at least for its being somewhat meaningful. (A great deal could be said about what it is for a life to be creative or positive in the other ways that concern us here, but all the major points in this paper will be compatible with any of the plausible ways of determining this.)

Second, a substantial contribution to reducing suffering in the lives of others or (less clearly) to enhancing their happiness counts toward meaningfulness and is similarly sufficient for at least a somewhat meaningful life. For brevity we might speak here of contributing to *well-being*; no particular theory of well-being, such as hedonism, need be presupposed.

Third, rich human relationships—those exhibiting (at least) good communication, mutual affection and support, and shared activities felt to be mutually rewarding—are positive for meaningfulness. Whether they can also be sufficient in the same way is less clear. Imagine someone's saying, at the end of life, 'I've had rich friendships, loved and been loved, done things throughout my life that were rewarding for me and the others who participated, but my life has been meaningless'.[4] This is initially incredible. It is clear that there is some dimension of meaningfulness that such a life can lack, for instance the excellence sought by our pianist. But I doubt that such a life could be utterly meaningless. (It will be apparent that I take meaningfulness to admit of

3 I take 'meaningful' and 'meaningless' to be, in the existential cases, contraries rather than contradictories. Some mixed lives may have elements of meaning mixed with vacuous periods in a way that makes neither term applicable (or at least not clearly so—both are of course vague).

4 Rewardingness is not equivalent to pleasure, though what is rewarding is typically enjoyable. I have characterized the notion in some detail in *The Architecture of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. pp. 96-7. Instrumentalists about practical reason might hold a kind of desire-satisfaction view of rewardingness, but in Ch. 5 and (more extensively) in "Prospects for a Naturalization of Practical Reason: Humean Instrumentalism and the Normative Authority of Desire," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 10, 3 (2002), 235-63, I argue that this kind of view cannot account for intrinsic value (of which I take rewardingness to be a kind) or for reasons for action.

degrees; that it does seems evident from, among other things, the idea that certain activities make life "more meaningful.") To be sure, the imagined sad comment is quite believable as an expression of commitment to some criterion of meaningfulness that is idiosyncratic or inflated or otherworldly. Some people will not believe their lives have been meaningful unless they think those lives have been "authentic" in some special way, or that they have done truly great things, or have pleased God. We could treat some such considerations as necessary for a *kind* of meaningfulness or perhaps for a certain high degree of meaningfulness of the general kind I have in mind; but they are not necessary for every instance of that kind.

The fourth criterial element I want to describe has already appeared in characterizing a hypothetical reaction to a life that seems, in a general way, meaningful. It is pleasing God. To some readers this criterion may be of merely theoretical interest; to others it will open up a host of considerations bearing on existential meaningfulness. Let me put the point neutrally. Supposing there is a God who is omniscient and omnibenevolent, pleasing God counts toward meaningfulness (and is indeed apparently sufficient for it, at least as applied to the aspects of one's life in virtue of which divine pleasure is earned).[5] This is at least in part because a being who is both perfectly knowledgeable and wholly good could not be pleased with a life that is not meaningful—on the uncontroversial assumption, anyway, that meaningfulness in a life is desirable overall. There is a further assumption supporting this point, namely, that meaningfulness is a consequential property possessed by a life (ultimately) on the basis of its natural properties, such as being without pains of certain kinds, having pervasive physical

5 I leave open here whether the criterion should be taken to provide a necessary condition as well, in part because it would seem that a meaningful life might not be good and the person living it might on that count fail to please God (I here take a criterion, as is not uncommon, to be a consideration that is a basic kind of positive evidence, even if not necessarily by itself a sufficient condition, for what it is a criterion of—it need not be by itself necessary either). I also omit the usual third member of the theistic triad, omnipotence, since it does not figure in the points essential here.

health of a certain kind, and containing certain kinds of relations with other persons. An omniscient being could not fail to know all the relevant property-ascribing facts and what is consequential upon them, including meaningfulness; an omnibenevolent being could not be pleased with a life lacking meaningfulness or the properties that underlie it. The criterial point I am suggesting does not imply that the desirability of meaningfulness *in* a life entails that every meaningful life is desirable overall. That God's being pleased with a person at a time entails that the person's life is meaningful at least at that time; it thus entails that the life is not utterly meaningless, but it does not entail either that it is meaningful overall or that it is, on balance, a desirable kind of life.

Two points should be made here for clarity. First, that pleasing God is *sufficient* for meaningfulness in a life does not entail that it *grounds* that property, even in part. A mark of a property need not be a ground of it. Second, there is no reason why a theist must hold that it *is* a ground. Indeed, the basic grounds of normative properties can be seen to be natural properties not only on a theistic world view but (arguably) even on some versions of divine command ethics. That God (as understood in the Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) exists entails the falsity of naturalism as a comprehensive world view, but it does not entail the falsity of its relatively modest claim that normative properties (including meaningfulness as well as, say, obligatoriness) are consequential on natural properties.[6]

Given what has so far been said, we can raise several questions about existential meaningfulness that are important in understanding the subject. One is whether the property is intrinsic or relational. It would be relational if, for example, pleasing God were a necessary condition for its application. Another question is whether it is social or individual, i.e., whether it can characterize a solitary life. On the assumption that meaningfulness is a good thing in a life, we may also ask whether it is an

6 I argue for this in *Rationality and Religious Commitment* (forthcoming).

intrinsic or extrinsic good. Finally, we may ask whether the notion is naturalistically explicable, i.e., explicable as a "descriptive" property as opposed to one like obligatoriness or intrinsic goodness, which, though consequential upon "descriptive" properties, are apparently not themselves among them.[7] In what follows I will partially answer all of these questions. They are, however, quite large and it should be enough for my purposes to provide an account that indicates data relevant to full-scale answers.

My aim in bringing into the discussion the theistic assumption that pleasing God is sufficient for meaningfulness is to introduce a critical ideal and to bring into view one prominent position regarding existential meaningfulness. This position has received much attention,[8] and my purpose here is to explore meaningfulness in part from a point of view neutral with respect to theism. In doing this, I will keep in mind the kinds of positive grounds for meaningfulness so far introduced.

II. Philosophical Naturalism and Existential Meaningfulness

Philosophical naturalism may be the dominant intellectual outlook of our times. It is very roughly the view that nature is all there is and the only basic truths are truths of nature.[9] On a common version of the view, our universe consists of matter and energy, and we ourselves are purely biological systems that die and ultimately rot. There may be deep truths

7 This is not the place to try to clarify the descriptive-normative contrast, and it is enough for my purposes here that there is a *prima facie* distinction. If normative properties are ultimately causal, the distinction is at least less important; that they are not (and, by implication, that the distinction has this much force) is argued in my "Ethical Naturalism and the Explanatory Power of Moral Concepts," in my *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

8 For critical discussion of this theistic view and many references to relevant literature, see Thaddeus Metz, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," *Ethics* 112 (2002), 781-814, and "The Immortality Requirement for Life's Meaning," *Ratio* XVI (2003), 161-77.

9 I have discussed this characterization of naturalism and explored several versions of the position in "Philosophical Naturalism at the Turn of the Century," *Journal of Philosophical Research* (2000).

about us and our world, but knowledge of them depends on observation and scientific examination. For philosophical naturalists, scientific method is usually the paradigm of a rational way to achieve knowledge, and philosophy itself is continuous with scientific inquiry. Philosophy, to be sure, raises questions that are more general than scientific ones and treats problems not normally addressed by scientists, but it has no unique method of acquiring knowledge that enables it to reveal truths lying outside the province of science.

For many educated people, and certainly for many intellectuals in the Western world, some version of naturalism is presupposed even if not espoused. Can naturalism answer the question whether, under certain conditions, a human life is meaningful? This question is unmanageably broad unless we give it anchors, as I have done in a preliminary way in Section I. I offer no definition of 'meaningful'; but, in the light of what has emerged so far, I think it is plausible to maintain that if we are convinced we know what kinds of elements make a life *good*, at least with respect to some major dimension of goodness, such as creativity or reducing human suffering, we can rationally conclude that we know at least what kind of thing is *sufficient* to make life meaningful in the senses that interest us. If our outlook is naturalistic, what can we say about the good life?

Suppose we think of human life as above all constituted by experiences. Apart from experiences, say in dreamless sleep, we are only minimally alive. We are most alive when we are intensely experiencing something: beautiful music, good conversation, a zesty round in a favorite sport—the list is open-ended. I choose examples of good experiences because the view I propose is that a good life is one in which good experiences (of a certain kind) predominate. I mean experiences that are *intrinsically good*, hence good in themselves. The intrinsically good is commonly contrasted with the instrumentally good: what is good as a means. Something can of course be good in both ways, as reading a novel can be good in itself *and* a means to relaxing. Clearly, what is good will not help to make life meaningful if the only good things are

instrumentally good—say, one thing being a good means to a second, that being a good means to a third, and so on to infinity.[10]

It has not been generally noticed that there are things good in themselves that are not intrinsically good in the way experiences are and that indeed seem to be good only on the basis of their potential role in experience. I am looking at a majestic copperbeach tree perhaps 100 feet tall and almost as wide near the ground. Viewing it is aesthetically rewarding. The tree is, however, a constituent in my viewing it; it is not a means (in the instrumental sense) to that viewing. It is valuable *in itself*, because of its *intrinsic* aesthetic properties; but it should not be considered valuable in itself in the way the aesthetically rewarding viewing of it is. Its value is *dependent* on the value—actual or hypothetical—of its being experienced in a certain way; the latter value is not (or certainly not in the same way) dependent on the value of anything else. Instrumental value is of course also dependent; but whereas (on the view I am suggesting) a thing having instrumental value (in the standard sense) is, as such, replaceable without ultimate axiological loss by something equally good for producing the relevant intrinsic value, something valuable in itself in the way aesthetic objects are is not thus replaceable. It figures essentially in, and not just as a contingent producer of, the intrinsically valuable experience of it. Taking a medication may have as much instrumental relaxant value as a listening to a mellifluous sonatina, but the former may have no value in itself.

One way to see the difference here is to think of two worlds, one containing just the rewarding experience and what its existence entails—

10 Two points about value should be made here. First, arguably, there cannot be an infinite chain of instrumental values because any chain of instrumental value connections (as opposed to a chain of causes and effects) must terminate in something of intrinsic value (otherwise we have merely a series of means to further means). Second, I omit the apparent possibility of circle since it seems impossible for a thing to be a means to itself in the way it would have to be if, e.g., *A* could be a means to *B*, *B* a means to *C*, and *C* a means to *A*. Cf. Aristotle's point that "we do not choose everything because of something else since, if we do, it will go on without limit, making desire empty and futile …" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, 1094a20ff). For explication of these valuational notions see my "Intrinsic Value and Reasons for Action," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 41, Supplement (2003), 30-56.

including the person whose experience it is—and the other containing just the tree (and what its existence entails). The second has something good in itself, but not something *basically* good; if the tree could not figure in intrinsically good experiences, it might be instrumentally good—which is *not* to say that it would not be importantly good—but not (on my view) good in itself. I call this kind of goodness, which is a kind of goodness-in-itself that should be taken into account in the theory of value however one connects value with experience, *inherent goodness*. It is non-relational goodness—since there need be no actual relation to any experience of the thing or its properties—but the goodness is not basic, since it belongs to the thing in virtue of its potential to figure positively in an experience having intrinsic value.[11]

Suppose all this is right. What *sorts* of experiences, on a naturalistic view, can be known to be good in themselves? If we try to be scientific and begin with observation, we find that people virtually universally seek certain pleasures and avoid certain pains. The sources of pleasure are different for different people; but even at that, nearly everyone enjoys fellowship, good food, material comforts, and musical or dramatic entertainments. With pain and suffering, we seem more alike: vulnerable to fire and wind, subject to fear of injury and death, agonized by loss of family and friends. Still, should we assume that our natural desires reveal what is good? Certain theists might justify this, but can naturalists?

One might think we could simply argue: if we don't get what we basically want—pleasures and avoidances of pain—we are frustrated, and that is obviously bad. But why *is* it bad? One answer is that it is unpleasant and the unpleasant is intrinsically bad. But this is apparently not an answer a naturalist can give. For the statement that something is *intrinsically* bad (or good) does not seem to be a candidate to be a truth of

11 I have explicated inherent goodness and made a case for its non-basic status in "Intrinsic Value and Reasons for Action." As to the problem of why a hallucinatory experience of such a tree is not as good in itself as a veridical one, see Ch. 11 in *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character*. It should already be plain that a hallucinatory experience may differ from its veridical counterpart in *inherent* value.

nature or, specifically, one answerable through using scientific method. A *moderate naturalism*, to be sure, might allow such substantive non-empirical truths provided they do not require countenancing non-natural *properties*. But intrinsic goodness may be one. I leave this open, but that it is non-natural is strongly supported by its apparently being neither an "observable" property, nor the kind that causally explains phenomena, nor a theoretical property of the sort central in scientific theories.[12]

I have said that intrinsic goodness is *apparently* not a natural property because it is at best difficult to show that it is not one. Moreover, even if this is wrong, what I want to say about meaningfulness in human life is largely unaffected. The view I am presupposing is that the question of what kinds of things are intrinsically good is not empirical. It is a question for philosophical reflection (hence *a priori* in a broad sense of that term). This does not imply that we can answer it without *any* experience. We need the often extensive experience necessary for acquiring the concepts essential to understanding the question; and to justify any definite answers, we need at least the experience constituted by reflection.

III. Pleasure and Pain as Elements in Meaningfulness

It is time to be more concrete. Imagine a child of two burned in a fire. Think of the screams of agony and the intense pain the child suffers. Does anyone really doubt that this suffering is a bad thing? And is the question whether it is a bad thing *scientific*? Now consider the same child being relieved from the pain and, later, mirthfully laughing as its father

12. The nature of normative properties such as intrinsic goodness and the case for their having causal power are explored in my "Ethical Naturalism and the Explanatory Power of Moral Concepts." It may help to note that I there distinguish between the projects of naturalizing *moral explanations* (and by implication other explanations by appeal to normative statements such as that something is intrinsically good) and the project of naturalizing moral (and normative) properties. The former might be naturalized by giving a certain role to the natural properties on which normative ones are consequential; the success of this project would not entail the naturalizability of moral (or normative) properties themselves.

bounces it up and down, completely keeping it from any awareness of the bandages. These are good things.

My examples are elemental. We adults are pained by many more things than afflict two-year-olds; we also find pleasure in many more. But I see no reason to doubt that our enjoyable experiences are good and our sufferings are bad.[13]

So far, I may seem to be endorsing hedonism. This is roughly the view that pleasures are the only intrinsic goods and pains are the only intrinsic "bads." If we take 'pleasure' and 'pain' broadly enough, hedonism is plausible, but I prefer an even broader view: a conception of the good and the bad as the rewarding and the punishing. I leave open whether all rewards are pleasurable and all punishments painful. I also leave open whether there is a sense in which the rewarding is in some way beneficial to the person; but even if this is so, we cannot say that the punishing is necessarily harmful. It is not only non-harmful suffering that can be punishing; so can even shame and embarrassment that do not cause pain or suffering. This is one reason why, even apart from recognition of "deontological reasons" for action (such as the kind of negative reason provided simply by an act's being a killing of a person), I would not consider the view I am developing utilitarian.[14]

Suppose, however, that we concentrate on pleasure and pain as the least controversially good and bad things (though not, I shall assume, the only ones[15]). We can know that these have value or disvalue on the basis of reflection. But how will such knowledge help us identify what constitutes a meaningful life?

13 The status of pleasure in someone else's pain (*Schadenfreude*) is a difficult case: such pleasure can be good *in* the life of (say) the sadist without being good overall. I have discussed this problem in Ch. 4 of *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

14 This is not to say that my view has no affinities with a form of utilitarianism. For a related discussion of utilitarianism in relation to existential meaningfulness, see Thaddeus Metz, "Utilitarianism and the Meaning of Life," *Utilitas* 15 (2003), 50-70.

15 I have argued for this view in "Intrinsic Value and Moral Obligation," Ch. 11. of *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character*.

I have said that a good life is one in which good experiences (of a certain kind) predominate. But must a good life be meaningful, and must a meaningful life be good? I do not see how a good life could fail to be meaningful in *some* important sense. A person living it could *think* it meaningless; but this would be a mistake. It would not be reasonable to believe that one has had a good life and *still* consider it meaningless—as opposed to, say, not particularly important. Especially for those with the virtue of humility, it is common to think their contributions are not of great value. This is particularly easy regarding intrinsic value, such as beauty in a poem or profundity in an essay. Even great value can be slow in producing uptake or obscured by minor blemishes.

One could, on the other hand, have a meaningful life that is not good. We might manage to contribute much of value, say to art or philosophy or human well-being, and even see that our contribution is of value, yet suffer constantly and fail to satisfy most of our ideals. There is no doubt that such a life *contributes* to the good, but that does not make it good in itself (overall). Such a life may, however, show something of much importance: that lives are meaningful *in relation to the good*, for instance by *either* being good or contributing significantly to something else that is good. The rough idea here is that a life is meaningful on the basis of the good that is realized *in* it or the good created *by* it.[16] I leave open whether, other things being equal, goodness realized in a life counts more toward its meaningfulness than goodness realized by it. Whatever should be said about that, the suggested distinction between intrinsically and instrumentally good lives is worth observing; and a life can be good in both ways.

16 This formulation is rough in part because (among other things) it does not take account of wayward causal chains and does not address the question how *much* good is required. It is not clear that a life's creating a great deal of good by just *any* causal process will suffice (though the word 'create' itself tends to rule out wayward chains); and although there is plausibility is holding that the more good a life has, the more meaningful the life is, other things equal, it may be true that there is, for some possible lives, a point at which more good would not add meaningfulness, however significant the addition might be in other respects.

Given that I have allowed for the possibility that one might live a good life and mistakenly think it meaningless, one might have the impression that I take the way we view our lives to have no significance for their existential meaningfulness. This is not so. A persistent belief that one's life is meaningless (in the relevant sense) may make it less good and may even reduce its meaningfulness. But I do not see that the absence of such a belief is necessary for meaningfulness, even for a high degree of it. Perhaps I need not stress that *believing* one's life is meaningful is insufficient to make it so; but it may be that a well-grounded conviction to this effect can add a dimension of meaning. The conviction of meaning, and certainly the well-grounded sense of it, can be an element in it, even if a minor one in comparison with the major variables.

IV. Hedonic Qualities and Meaningful Lives

If pleasure is as important a good as most of us think—even if not the only good—we should ask whether *enough* of it in a painless life suffices to make life good. It does not. This is one reason why a good life is not one in which just *any* kind of good predominates. Even apart from brain manipulation that drastically limits one's capacity for pleasure, a person could simply take pleasure in too few things, and those might themselves be minimally rewarding. One could be so constructed—if only by manipulative training—as to get great pleasure from pretty much the same few decent foods, a few unchallenging games, prosaic conversation, and minimal bodily comforts. This might be a pleasant walk through life, but it has little variation in pace, no passion, and no flights of imagination. It exceeds bestial satisfaction, but is far below human aspiration.

These points might recall John Stuart Mill. Reflecting on the possibility of a person's having a great quantity of pleasure that is intuitively of little value, he distinguished higher from lower pleasures. As an empiricist and naturalist, he needed a criterion for distinguishing the higher ones that did not presuppose any route to their discovery

through (*a priori*) reflection. He said, "Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure" (*Utilitarianism*, Chapter 2). Mill's test is good within limits. Preference grounded on unbiased experience is an important basis of comparison. But we cannot wisely or even safely try out all the things we might enjoy, and even our thoughtful preferences are sometimes untrustworthy.

A different criterion for judging pleasures is suggested in a kind of Aristotelian principle: when other things are equal, we should prefer those experiences that engage our more complex faculties, especially our rational faculties—including the aesthetic—in virtue of which we are beings capable of thought and creativity. This is supported by the intuitive superiority of the pleasures of checkers over those of tic-tac-toe, and of the pleasures of hearing Bach over those of hearing Chopsticks. Do we know this principle *a priori*? This is arguable; but however we may argue for it, it is credible on the basis of reflection on the kinds of cases in question.

What if other things are not equal, however? Suppose there is more variety in an evening pursuing two pleasures at a lower level as opposed to one at a higher level of engagement of the faculties, say those of a swim followed by a soap opera, as opposed to those of a seeing a good performance of *Macbeth*. Here reflection alone does not favor any particular answer. It may permit either choice or, in some cases, as where one simply has not seen *Macbeth* in years, favor one option. But one thing reflection does not support is the view that there is *no* value in either kind of pleasure and that experiencing such pleasures does not conduce at all toward a good life.

Still, why should a life with a predominance of enjoyable experiences, even of a kind that engage our higher faculties, be *meaningful?* Might this kind of life still not be what we want—or should want? It might certainly fail to be what we want in the abstract, since we might happen to have an ideal it fails to fulfill. But is it possible to enjoy something and

not want it under some description or other, for instance, as a continuation of a good meal or of watching a play?[17] If this is possible, it is not in general rational. To be sure, it can be rational both to want a certain thing and also to want something else *more*. But for the most part, the rationality of a person's desire rises both with increases in the pleasure that the person can see its object to give and with enhancement of the quality—such as the aesthetic or intellectual quality—of the experience or activity yielding the pleasure.

If I seem to be suggesting that we should cultivate not only our capacities for enjoyment but also our desires—the engines of our conduct—I am. Ideally, we would want (for its own sake) only what is good in itself, and we would want *most* among such things those that are *best* in terms of how rewarding their realization is and how probable it is that they can be realized. To be sure, we can rationally regard as intrinsically good something we think no one can bring about, even something we think not possible given the laws of nature. If this poses a problem for my view, one response would be to say that where we think the probability of realization of something is zero, we should not want it or should at least want it to the lowest degree and less than we want anything realizable. Another response, which I prefer, is that in this case we can only wish it would occur, not want it to.

We should, then, educate not only our intellects, but also our sensibilities. We can then appreciate the best things we can achieve and enjoy a wide range of experiences and activities. Educating our desires should go hand in hand with educating our sensibilities. This multi-faceted quest will not only help us achieve the best ends we can, it will also add to the sense of reward in realizing them. The satisfaction of desire, though not itself an intrinsic good, is commonly attended by both a welcome, often pleasant, sense of relief and a sense of fulfillment that,

17 There is at least one exception: at the last moment at which one is enjoying something one need not want to continue it. I have discussed this point and the relation between pleasure and desire in some detail in Ch. 4 of *The Architecture of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

even if it is not precisely enjoyable, can be rewarding and in that general sense good.

V. Human Relationships

There is an element in life that I have not so far brought into the picture, but it is indicated by one of the four contributory elements listed in Section I. Its role can be discerned in a poetic passage from Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" in which the poet may be seen as contrasting meaningful with meaningless lives:

> Ah, love, let us be true
> To one another! For the world, which seems
> To lie before us like a land of dreams,
> So various, so beautiful, so new,
> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help from pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.[18]

Here love between individuals seems the only refuge in a hostile world—indeed a word in which, in darkness, confusion, and ignorance, there is little or no meaning in the lives of its denizens.

I am not making the vague romantic suggestion that love is the meaning of life. But loving and being loved are (very often) sources of unique and great rewards and, usually, of diverse pleasures. Love is, then, among the things that make life good. Insofar as loving and being loved are experiences, they can indeed be intrinsically good; but love, as an emotion or something like an emotional attitude, can, at least for a large proportion of the time it exists, be non-occurrent ("dispositional") and utterly unexperienced. Even then, it is inherently

18 Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," in A.J.M. Smith (ed.), *Seven Centuries of Verse* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), p. 476. One might wonder how the speaker can address someone as "love" and still say the world contains no love; presumably there is a contrast between the personal relationship, in which the speaker finds meaning in an important sense—which includes their love—and the world at large.

good, hence good in itself and not just as a means to such ends as peaceful coexistence.

Even apart from being good in itself, love can be experienced in a way that makes life meaningful.[19] To love others entails wanting *their good* for its own sake and tends to help us realize that good. We do not have to think of what we want for them *as* good; but how their life goes in terms of, especially, pleasure and pain, must matter to us. It must, indeed, be *felt* as important even if one's intellectual commitments require taking it to be, in some cosmic sense, insignificant. It seems intuitively clear that if we see life as going well for those we love, we cannot rationally deny that there is some goodness in the world or reasonably hold that life is meaningless.

This point seems clearest where we love deeply and strongly, but it holds for love in general. Its plausibility may be supported in a number of ways, but let me simply connect love with meaningfulness by way of care. Loving implies caring in a particular way; caring about others in that way entails tending to take their well-being as significant in a sense very close to that of meaningfulness understood existentially. If life goes badly for them, and especially if life also goes badly for us, we can rationally hold that there is too *little* goodness in the world, or perhaps none. But even this does not commit one to taking life to be meaningless. On the contrary, if these are the reasons for our disappointment, we might instead say that life has or can have a meaning which, in our own existence, we have failed to realize. We can regard *a* human life as meaningless without regarding human life *itself* as meaningless.

In the last paragraph I have spoken not of meaningfulness *in* life but—as is common—of the meaningfulness *of* life. The latter notion invites us to

19 In "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life" Metz cites Harry Frankfurt as holding that "One's life is significant if one loves something" (p. 793 in Metz's paper). I am not implying this; one might love something quite without value, for instance. I doubt that loving is intrinsically or even inherently good; my point concerns the ability of some kinds of love to confer value or meaning or both on a life.

consider human life *as such* to have a meaning, say on the basis of fulfilling a divine purpose.[20] The former notion has been my focus. One reason for this focus is that I take meaningfulness to be conferred on a life largely (though not entirely) by elements, including activities of our own, that are up to us, at least indirectly. By contrast, the "meaning of life" sought by some is conferred either by God or by some cosmic or other force beyond our control. For some writers on this topic, it would be plausible to say that human life has meaning if, say, the guilty are duly punished or the human species is evolving toward a higher form.

It is not unnatural to call the kinds of cases I am describing instances of *metaphysical meaningfulness*. This has not been my topic, significant though it is. It may be that if any life is existentially meaningful, then there is some "metaphysical meaning" in the world. But the striking point is that apparently human life could have metaphysical meaning even if no *individual* life is existentially meaningful. This certainly applies to the case of our species evolving toward a higher level. As the clumsy drawings of a toddler can be a stage on the way to artistic excellence, a whole species could have terrible, meaningless lives on its route to a higher place for their descendants. It also seems possible that, without meaningful lives, there could be wrong-doing of a kind that could be met with cosmic justice. The meaning conferred on human life in the abstract in such cases is not of nearly as great philosophical interest as existential meaningfulness. By contrast, the theistic assumption I have introduced provides a route to metaphysical meaning which, owing to the conditions for an omniscient, omnibenevolent being's being pleased, does not allow the kind of disconnection between existential and metaphysical meaning that my cases portray.

Suppose I have been correct in characterizing meaningfulness in a life. We are then perhaps not far from being able to understand the

20 In "Religion Gives Meaning to Life," Lois Hope Walker says, "By 'meaning' in life I mean that life has a purpose. This is some intrinsic rationale or plan to it." See her (pseudonymous) contribution to Louis P. Pojman, ed., *Quest for Truth*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

notion of life as such having meaning—a kind of metaphysical meaning—at least in one of its major aspects. To say that human life has meaning may be to say that it *can* be meaningful in the way I have described. The kind of meaning human life might have entirely by virtue of a relation, such as pleasing God or being a culmination of a grand historical process, is not my main concern. But insofar as the notion is clear, the kind of meaning in question may be plausibly thought to be realizable at least in part on the basis of human life's fulfilling or having the potential to fulfill the sufficient conditions for existential meaningfulness described in this paper. An omniscient, omnibenevolent God, for instance, would tend to be pleased by creativity, by excellence, and by contributions to human well-being, and displeased by the frustration and suffering of the innocent.

To be sure, there are people, including some theists, who may think that life is meaningful only if it has a place in God's plan. There may be other special notions of meaningful life such that a life meaningful on my conception may lack meaning on those notions. My concern here is to do justice to the kinds of data indicated in Section I and to show how the general notion of the meaningfulness of life can be clarified by examining ways in which a given life can be meaningful. Even those who think that life is meaningful only given theism (or some alternative otherworldly metaphysical view) can grant that we have been exploring existential meaning in one important sense of that phrase.[21]

21 One standard of meaningfulness I have not considered in this connection is autonomy. Those who think that autonomy (or something similar, such as "authenticity") is crucial may, though they need not, take it to succeed in conferring meaningfulness only on the basis of implying the kinds of grounds of meaningfulness I have described. Mere self-government, say in the service of highly whimsical desires with trivial objects, would not significantly count toward meaningfulness. I have presented an account of autonomy and its relation to normative anchoring concepts that supports this conclusion in "Autonomy, Reason, and Desire," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72, 4 (1992, 247-71), reprinted in *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character*.

VI. Unity in Variety

We have seen some sufficient conditions for meaningfulness in life, at least in a certain measure: certain kinds and degrees of creativity or excellence, of contribution to the well-being of others, of interpersonal relations, and (at least hypothetically) of theologically defined success. I have left open that there may be other sufficient conditions; I suggest as a hypothesis that any other sufficient condition will imply at least a significant degree of partial satisfaction of at least one of these criteria. An "important" life, for instance, might be of necessity meaningful, but I doubt that a life could be important in the relevant sense (the sense rich enough to imply meaningfulness) without being, say, substantially contributory to human well-being or marked by significant creativity or excellence. Might we go so far, then, as to say that some of these criteria are, by themselves, necessary for a meaningful life?

This is not clear. Certainly no significant measure of creativity is necessary, desirable though that is. And could a solitary life not be meaningful? I think it could be, especially given sufficient creativity. If there were great creativity, moreover, but it did not lead to contributions to human well-being, would this not still be sufficient for meaningfulness? I think that it might be. Would we have to say, however, that it contributes to the well-being of the creator? That is likely, but not necessary. My creation could be fraught with pain in the making of it and deeply disappointing to me in the contemplation of it. I might then undervalue it. It is a good *in* my life, whether I see it as such or not. Still, that one good element in my life, even if important enough to make my life meaningful, does not entail a significant contribution to my well-being.

If there are no specific conditions that are necessary for existential meaningfulness, then the hope of arriving at a traditional analysis that provides a set of conditions individually necessary and jointly sufficient is unfulfillable. This need not be a great disappointment. Consider a major approach in ethics. W.D. Ross did not think there is any one characteristic in virtue of which right acts are right, but he did not

despair of understanding rightness (in the sense of obligatoriness). Instead, he presented and explicated a set of "*prima facie* duties."[22] The counterpart idea here is that a number of factors conduce to, and are in some cases sufficient for, meaningfulness, and others, such as persisting pain with no compensating effects, detract from it and in some cases may preclude it. Moreover, just as, when there are conflicts of duties, an act can be obligatory even when it breaks a promise, a life can be meaningful even when it is bereft of creativity or even persistently painful. The person might still contribute substantially to human well-being, love those helped, and find the effort perennially fulfilling. In both the ethical and the existential cases, there are multiple criteria and there can be tradeoffs among the positive and negative ones.

The analogy to the theory of obligation is useful in another way. If Rossian intuitionism succeeds in giving a plausible account of major aspects of the criteria for obligation, it still leaves some reflective people dissatisfied with the lack of a unifying framework. The same kind of reaction may be natural here. I have addressed the unity problem for intuitionism elsewhere, by appeal both to Kantian ethics and to the theory of value, [23] but I am not suggesting any close analogue of Kantian principles to bring into the picture (at least apart from theistic assumptions on which I do not here wish to rely). I have, however, suggested that a sufficiently clear and adequately rich conception of the good life is the best overall idea to bring to the understanding of existential meaningfulness, though I have noted that a sufficiently troubled, pained life might be meaningful yet not, in the overall sense, good. (An Aristotelian view of the good life is one plausible model here, but explicating it would require a paper in itself.) Even here, the notion of the good is still central; the point is that as important as it is in understanding meaningful life, the good realized therein—say, by

22 See W.D. Ross, *The Right and the* Good (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), Ch. 2. For extensive discussion of Ross's views and a defense of a moderate intuitionism in ethics, see my *The Good in the Right*, esp. Chs. 2 and 3.

23 This unity problem for intuitionism is dealt with in Chs. 3 and 4 of *The Good in the Right*.

helping others—may be accompanied by so much that is bad, for instance pain and frustration, that the life in question is not good on the whole.

There is, however, a normative notion somewhat less theoretical than that of the good which can be used both to unify some of what we have seen about the meaningful life and to evoke plausible hypotheses that extend it. The notion is that of the rewarding. Consider the idea that a meaningful life is a rewarding life—one rewarding for the person living it.[24] There is a kind of inconsistency in calling a life rewarding but meaningless. Might a life, however, be meaningful but not (in any way) rewarding?

Recall the case of a person who is perennially creative but frustrated and pained, or consider a person who is a substantial contributor to the well-being of others but deeply unhappy and without friends. Such lives can be meaningful on any plausible view, but are they rewarding? We can say so only if we take objective "successes" to be rewarding even when not felt as such. I think that sometimes we may. Reward is not desire satisfaction, not even felt desire satisfaction. Moreover, one surely need not *feel* rewarded by a meaningful life or believe such a life to be meaningful. Still, *is* a life rewarding when the person suffers in the ways in question? We may, to be sure, describe some people as unaware of the rewards of their occupation or inappreciative of the rewards of their hard work. But it is not clear that we should describe the kind of painful, frustrated existence I have in mind as a rewarding life even when it is graced with the positive elements I am imagining in relation to vocational achievements.

It may be, however, that we can still say that such a mixed life *contains* rewards and that these are central for its meaningfulness. The pains and frustrations are a misfortune, but not an insurmountable

24 It should be noted that rewardingness *for* a person is not doxastic, like rewardingness *to* a person (in one main use); it is perspectival. We could have a life meaningful for us even if we believed it was not. I do not speak of meaningfulness for a person, but the same distinction will apply if we use that locution.

barrier to either the existence of major rewards *in* the lives in question or to the overall meaningfulness of those lives. Perhaps the most we can say by way of summary here is this: the rewardingness of a life is sufficient for its meaningfulness, but rewardingness is necessary for meaningfulness only in application to some important subset of the kinds of good things in a life that, like creativity and rich human relationships, contribute to its meaningfulness. Given how much remains to be said about the rewarding, even this summary does not constitute the core of a traditional analysis. But the notion of the rewarding is clarified by what is said in this paper; it invites many further ideas that help in understanding existential meaningfulness; and it is intuitively useful in discerning the important elements in that concept.

The view of meaningful life I have outlined is not naturalistic, but it is compatible with naturalism. It is also not itself theistic, but is compatible with theism. A theistic perspective, particularly one in which love is central, may add to the grounds for taking many lives—or even human life in general—to be meaningful (and may bring with it a dimension of meaningfulness I have not considered here), but its absence need not subtract anything from the position I have presented. There is a route to meaningful life, and to understanding the concept thereof, available to naturalists. Unlike most theists, they must take life to end with bodily death. But that just limits value and meaning to finitude. Finite values can still be great.

There is, moreover, a kind of immortality of things of value that even non-theists can countenance. Institutions such as universities, practices such as cooperative intellectual inquiry, and love as a unifying fabric in human life, can survive indefinitely. One can found institutions, endow them with programs, and give them ideals; all of these can carry one's memory forward. Intellectual inquiry can go on forever, and the contributions made to it by creative thinkers may take a place among its permanent elements. As long as there are persons, there can be ideas

and ideals, joy as well as suffering, excellence in action, and love among people.

These possibilities imply no personal immortality, but they do show one way in which we can try to make a permanently enduring contribution to things we love. They provide, moreover, a naturalistic interpretation for a line from Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" that is perhaps as close as we can come to a kind of naturalist's prayer:

> Gather me into the artifice of eternity.

For those to whom beauty is an anchor of meaning in life, a different kind of reassurance might be felt in Emily Dickinson's poetic credo,

> Estranged from Beauty—none can be—
> For Beauty is Infinity—
> And power to be finite ceased
> Before identity was leased. (c. 1879).

Here is the indomitable faith that we are bound up with the beauty of nature as a condition of our very identity as persons.

For some people, eternity is a possibility for their personal futures. But for anyone, the future need not be finally closed, and the quest to fulfill one's desires, even if short, can be meaningful. Philosophical reflection reveals a plurality of goods to be pursued and a multitude of evils to be avoided. It helps us to see what is worth wanting and to compare the various good and bad things life presents. It does not by itself motivate love, but it can vivify the good things we should want for those we love and it can clarify the evils we should seek to eliminate from their lives. And for some, philosophical reflection itself, like the pursuit of the arts and sciences, is among the things that make life meaningful.[25]

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25 For helpful responses to earlier versions of this paper I am grateful to Scott LaBarge, Ward Jones, and, especially, Thaddeus Metz.