

# **DOES ANYTHING MATTER?**

by

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# DOES ANYTHING MATTER?

## ABSTRACT

I defend the claim that some things *genuinely* matter to human beings. This involves overcoming a series of arguments which suggest that the things that matter to us are arbitrary. These arguments arise out of Nagel's claim (in Mortal Questions) that life is absurd.

The thesis also discusses different senses in which life can be said to have meaning. I put religious accounts of the meaning of life to one side. Instead, I focus on outlining how someone can experience their own life (and the world) as meaningful.

My main aim is to show that some things genuinely matter. I argue that some things genuinely matter from the perspective of the individual in virtue of the fact that they can become conscious of *their own* needs. So, there are facts about human nature (we are self-consciousness and have needs) that, taken together, show that some things genuinely matter to us (non-arbitrarily). These include our vital needs, our happiness and positive relationships with others.

I argue that these things matter to us not simply in virtue of the fact that we happen to think that they matter (although this is certainly true). Rather, they genuinely matter to us given our nature.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an attempt to discover whether anything genuinely matters. Quite early on in this thesis, it becomes clear that human beings think some things matter. For example, there are many things that I think matter. I care about this PhD. I care about my family and friends. I care about my health. I care about Tai Chi and playing the guitar. I care about my work. There are then many different things that matter to me. But, it also quickly becomes clear that, just because I happen to think these things matter, this doesn't ensure that they genuinely do.

For example, there may be reasons to think that none of the things I care about genuinely matter, because nothing *could* genuinely matter. Perhaps we might worry that if we just die, nothing could really matter. We might worry that, because we are such an insignificant portion of the universe, nothing related to human life could really matter. We might worry that science, with its objective view of the world, teaches us that nothing really matters.

Or, we might feel unable to say whether life has a meaning. We might be worried that, unless life has a meaning, the things we care about couldn't genuinely matter. If we are unable to prove there is a God, we might worry that, because we don't have a true religious account of the meaning of life, nothing could be genuinely meaningful.

Even if it turns out that some things genuinely matter, we might still worry that we are choosing the wrong things to care about. As I said, I think a number of things matter, but perhaps I am focusing on the wrong kinds of things to care about. Maybe some of the things I think matter don't really matter.

This thesis is an attempt to get clear about all these issues. I will be arguing that there are some things that can be shown to genuinely matter. I make two assumptions. Firstly, I assume that death is the end of our existence. Secondly, I assume that religious beliefs cannot help us decide what genuinely matters. It should be clear that these assumptions don't make the attempt to find things that genuinely matter easier. In fact, in each case, by making these assumptions, I will have to face arguments that attempt to show that it is precisely these facts that show that life couldn't have a meaning.

I will attempt to show that some things genuinely matter without making reference to any religious beliefs or spiritual traditions. I try to set out a way of looking at the issues that is neither scientific, nor religious. But, the position I adopt is also not anti-scientific, or anti-religious. In order to avoid disappointment, I want to make clear in advance that there is nothing particularly 'profound' about the answers I reach. I argue that, given the nature of human existence, our vital needs, our happiness and our relationships with others all genuinely matter to us. As should be clear from this list, my intention is not to produce 'surprising' counter-intuitive conclusions. Rather, I hope the answers I reach would generally be accepted by everyone. In a way, the purpose of this thesis is to remove the potential reservations that people may have to the thought that these everyday things genuinely matter. I do so by paying careful attention to the nature of human existence.

This thesis also provides an opportunity to think about what it takes for a life to be experienced as meaningful. I hope that this will provide an opportunity to think about the things we care most about. I will argue that, when we care about the right kinds of things, we can find a way to experience our life (and the world we live in) as meaningful. We can feel that our life hangs together in a satisfying way. We can feel as

though we make a difference to something we feel is valuable. I will be pointing out a number of potential mistakes we can make concerning the things that matter most to us, and I will set out what we need to do to avoid these potential errors.

As I said, the central focus of this thesis is the attempt to discover whether, and in what way, things matter. I will be arguing that we are right to think that some things matter to us (and this means more than saying that things matter in virtue of the fact that we think they matter). My argument is based on claiming that some things (our needs, our happiness and the quality of our relationships) genuinely matter from our own perspective. In Chapter VIII, I argue that it is a mistake to think that human beings are fundamentally isolated (we are social beings). Nevertheless, the perspective of the individual ends up being the most convenient place to start in examining whether anything genuinely matters (and, as it happens, in Chapter VIII, I argue that, if we are starting from the perspective of the individual, it still turns out that other people genuinely matter). I will be arguing that our needs, our happiness and positive relationships with other people genuinely matter to us, given the nature of our existence. As a matter of fact, these things do (in general) matter to people. I will be defending the idea that people are *right* to think that these things matter.

While I do initially draw on the thoughts of other philosophers (Nagel in particular in the first two chapters) my central interest is not with assessing the philosophical system of particular thinkers. I am not attempting to assess whether a particular philosopher's overall system is correct, or internally coherent (except insofar as it relates to the issues). Where I do discuss the arguments of particular philosophers my interest is in trying to discover the key questions and issues relevant to an investigation into whether anything genuinely matters (and to provide some resources that will help answer these questions). My central concern is always with the issues.

### *Chapter I*

In the first chapter, I discuss whether our own death (our mortality) matters to us. Most people would assume that the fact that we are going to die is a bad thing for us. I discuss three arguments from the Greek philosophers Epicurus and Lucretius, each of which attempts to prove that our own death needn't concern us. They argue that there is no need to worry about the fact that we are mortal. Nagel presents a view he sets in opposition to the Greek's view. Nagel argues that death can in fact be described as bad for us, as it brings to an end something of value; namely the state of being alive. Nagel then takes it that he needs to undermine the Greek philosopher's three arguments (as only one of their arguments needs to be justified to prove that our own death couldn't be bad for us). I will be arguing that Nagel's attempts to undermine Epicurus' and Lucretius' arguments are forceful (but perhaps not conclusive). As it is, Both Nagel and the Greek philosophers both seem to agree on two points: Firstly, that the state of being dead is not a bad one. Secondly, that the state of being alive is a (potentially) valuable one. In the end, I accept Nagel's hypothetical conclusion; *if* our life is valuable, *then* our death will be a bad thing for us. This seems to imply that death is only bad if life itself is valuable. Whether life is valuable or matters, is then the key question I explore for the rest of the thesis.

### *Chapter II*

In chapter II, I discuss Nagel's claim that life is absurd. Nagel claims that, while all human beings think some things matter (the unavoidability of seriousness) we are

unable to provide any reasons for thinking that anything actually matters (the inescapability of doubt). Because there is a tension between these two claims, Nagel describes human existence as absurd.

Nagel claims that people are unavoidably serious. Human beings by their very nature think some things do matter. I will argue that we have good reasons to accept the claim that human existence is unavoidably serious.

Nagel also claims that doubts about whether anything genuinely matters are inescapable (the inescapability of doubt). This is an important argument. If Nagel is right that we can never know whether anything genuinely matters, and I would have to admit that my central question will be unanswerable. Nagel has two arguments for the inescapability of doubt. Firstly, the special experience argument raises doubts about whether anything matters by reference to the fact that we are capable of adopting a ‘distanced perspective’ on our lives. When we adopt a totally detached view on our life and the world, we find that everything that normally looks important to us no longer looks important from this distanced perspective. Nagel suggests that this may raise genuine doubts about whether anything really matters. In chapter II, I argue that Nagel’s arguments are weak. But a stronger version of the special experience argument gets discussed at length in Chapter IV (the argument from non-objectivity).

Nagel’s other argument for the inescapability of doubt is the epistemological argument. Nagel sets out what he takes to be a real difficulty in justifying any claim that something genuinely matters to us. I describe this argument through thinking of a ‘curious friend’ intent on making me defend the claim that something in particular matters. My curious friend wants me to defend the claim that something (e.g. writing my PhD) really matters. He asks me ‘why does this matter?’ I might answer that it will help me get teaching work. Whatever answer I give, my curious friend can simply ask me ‘why does *this* matter?’ If I answer this further question, my curious friend can just pose the same question again for this answer. It seems that, in answering my curious friend’s questions, we are faced with two choices (neither of which seem particularly appealing). If we carry on answering my curious friend’s questions forever, we don’t seem to ever provide a definitive answer to my curious friend’s question. On the other hand, if we stop at a particular answer, we seem to be claiming that something matters, even though we provide my curious friend with no reason to think it does matter. In chapter II, I will argue that the key issue is not whether our justifications for whether something matters stop, but whether they stop anywhere good (or reasonable). So, I argue that the epistemological argument is not particularly convincing. Still, my curious friend’s questions play a key role in the rest of the thesis. I attempt to discover what it would take for an answer to my curious friend’s questions to stop somewhere good (and to find out what *makes it the case* that a particular answer to my curious friend is a good one.)

### *Chapter III*

In Chapter III, I assess a number of different kinds of activities. I attempt to see if I can give a cast iron justification for the claim that certain kinds of activities *genuinely* matter to us, by attempting to provide satisfying answers to my curious friend. I suggest that there are certain activities that seem to avoid the difficult questions posed by my curious friend. Discussing these activities (skilful, creative activities) gives me the opportunity to introduce a number of issues that I return to later in the thesis. In the end, this discussion just forces us back to some unresolved issues. In particular,

there seem to be a number of reasons that people might give for thinking that nothing about human life *could* genuinely matter.

#### *Chapter IV*

So, in chapter IV, I examine a number of arguments which attempt to show that all answers to my curious friend's questions must be equally bad (as the arguments attempt to prove that *nothing* could genuinely matter). The first argument (the argument from non-objectivity) is a variation on the special experience argument (one which seems to supply something missing from the original special experience argument). If we take up an objective view of the world (a view of the world independent of any form of awareness) we find that, from this perspective, nothing is revealed as mattering. This might suggest that, because nothing objectively matters, we must accept that nothing *genuinely* matters (it only seems to matter to us). Through discussing what it is to matter (to be significant) it becomes clear why nothing could objectively matter. In the end, I argue that we can accept that nothing could matter objectively, without having to accept that nothing could genuinely matter.

I then discuss three arguments that attempt to show that nothing could genuinely matter to us because of facts about the nature of our existence (our size, the duration of our existence, the fact that we are mortal) or facts about the nature of our activities. I argue that none of the arguments discussed in this chapter give us any conclusive reasons for thinking that nothing could genuinely matter. In other words, they give us no reason to think that all answers to my curious friend must be equally bad.

#### *Chapter V*

In chapter V, I attempt to face head on the claim that unless things matter 'in the scheme of things' they cannot genuinely matter. This involves exploring whether life only has a meaning if there is a true religious account of the universe. Religious accounts of the creation or functioning of the universe provide a 'story' of the universe through which the significance of things can be revealed. So, religious beliefs seem to be one possible way of grounding the claim that some things genuinely matter.

I compare the religious view of the universe with the scientific view. It is often thought that science has shown that there is no true religious account of the universe. I try to show that this is not in fact that case. But I also argue (although, in the end it is more of an assumption) that philosophy is not an arena in which religious accounts of the universe can be rationally assessed. So, I assume that we cannot prove that there is a religious account of the universe that is true.

This seems to rule out using religious accounts of the universe to ground the things that genuinely matter (as I will not be able to provide my curious friend with a satisfactory answer to why I believe my religious views are true). Having said this, there may remain a worry that without religious belief, nothing could genuinely matter. I look at a number of arguments which attempt to show that, without something that only God, or religious belief could provide, nothing could genuinely matter. None of these arguments provides us with conclusive reasons to think that this is true, but this discussion does bring forward a number of challenges that any non-religious account of meaning needs to meet.

The rest of the thesis is an attempt to set out what genuinely matters. It is not a strictly scientific account. Neither is it a religious account. But, my claims are based on

facts about human existence which seem to be true even if we have strong religious beliefs, or even if we think that the scientific account of the world is a true one.

I argue that some things genuinely matter in virtue of certain facts about human existence. At the end of Chapter V, I turn to the perspective of the individual human being – in order to see whether this perspective might allow us to show that some things genuinely matter. It becomes clear that the perspective of the individual is the kind of perspective that can be a source of meaning.

It was clear (in chapter II) that people think some things matter (the unavoidability of seriousness). Adopting the perspective of the individual seems to bring up a new worry. If things genuinely matter to people *simply* in virtue of the fact that people think (or act as though) they matter to them, we seem faced with the threat that the things that matter to us are arbitrary. If this is the case, it looks as though there is no way to distinguish different claims we might make about things mattering. All claims that something matters would be equally good (as no answers could be better than any others). It can start to look like it doesn't matter what we choose to think matters, as our claims about what matters are arbitrary. I want to argue that our claims about what matters are not arbitrary. In order to do this, I will need more than the mere fact that people think things matter. I will also need to distinguish between things that genuinely matter, and things that don't. And I will need to say what makes it the case that some things genuinely matter. This will be done in Chapters VII and VIII.

### *Chapter VI*

Before turning to my examples of things that genuinely matter, I first discuss the question of the meaning of life (from the perspective of the individual). In Chapter VI, I explore what is involved in experiencing our own lives as meaningful (independent of religious beliefs). This involves introducing the idea of our 'ultimate concerns' – the things that matter most to us.

I assess whether we can justify the claim that our ultimate concerns genuinely matter. In the end, I argue that, simply because something is the thing we care most about, that alone doesn't ensure that our ultimate concerns genuinely matter. But, I do argue that our ultimate concerns are not arbitrary. I attempt to show that there are ways in which we can make mistakes about the things we care most about. (In other words, some ultimate concerns *are* worse than others). I argue that some ultimate concerns are more (or more likely to be) effective for us in delivering a sense that our life is meaningful. This is important, as in Chapter VII Part 2 I will argue that whether or not our ultimate concerns are effective is something that genuinely matters to us.

### *Chapter VII & VIII*

In the final two chapters, I will claim that three things in particular genuinely matter to us. These are our vital needs and our happiness (in chapter VII) and relationships with other people (in chapter VIII). I argue that these things matter to all people, not because they have made an arbitrary choice to think they matter. Rather people are right to think that they genuinely matter to them in virtue of the nature of human existence.

In particular, I argue that some things genuinely matter to human beings because human beings are self-conscious. Our self-consciousness means that we are capable of experiencing the facts about our existence *from our own perspective*. When we do this, some things are revealed as *genuinely* mattering to us.

I will argue that our own vital needs genuinely matters to us. This is not some arbitrary choice we make. It is a fact about our existence. Just about everyone thinks that their own needs matter. I will be arguing that this is not a mistake.

In chapter VII, I also argue that there are strong links between a happy and a meaningful life. So the argument that our own happiness genuinely matters also implies that experiencing our own life as meaningful genuinely matters to us. This means that it matters to us whether our ultimate concerns are effective in delivering the sense that our lives are meaningful.

Chapter VIII is also an opportunity to qualify the individualistic nature of the conclusions of chapters VI and VII. In adopting the perspective of the individual, we have found that a person's own needs and happiness genuinely matters to them. This might suggest that people would be right to be selfish. In chapter VIII, I argue that human beings are not inherently selfish. I also argue that being selfish is not the most reasonable way to achieve the things that matter most to us. I argue that the quality of our relationships genuinely matters to us. Even if we are talking instrumentally, I argue that positive relationships with other people are necessary if we are to have our needs met (in the early years of our lives). I also set out ways in which our happiness depends on positive relationships with others.

### *Conclusion*

The title of each chapter poses a particular question. Many of the chapters will end with a qualified or tentative conclusion. Once the thesis can be seen as a whole, I will be in a position to provide much more detailed answers to each of these questions. I will be showing that, despite all the challenges that can be posed against the thought that some things genuinely matter, not only do human beings act as though some things matter, in many cases they are right to think that certain things really do matter.

# CHAPTER I

## IS OUR OWN DEATH BAD FOR US?

### 1. Introduction

In this chapter, I want to assess what attitude it is most reasonable to have towards our own death. The issue of death is not particularly central to my thesis, although the fact that we die is often cited as one of the reasons why nothing matters (this is explored in Chapter IV.4). I start with this discussion because this allows me to raise a number of themes that are central to my thesis. This discussion allows me to start examining what makes something valuable for us and what the relationship between our experiences and something being valuable to us is. Importantly, it also allows me to set out aspects of the relationship between death and the value of life. (An account which is developed in Chapter VII. Part 1).

In this chapter, I will be outlining three arguments presented by Epicurus and Lucretius<sup>1</sup>. Each of the arguments aims to prove that our own death cannot be a problem for us. The discussion is entirely focused on the correct attitude to have to our *own* death. I am not going to be concerned with how our own death may affect others, or how other people's death might affect us.

I will be outlining, then assessing each argument in turn. My assessment of the arguments is to a large extent based on Nagel's attempts to disprove all three of the arguments. In the chapter 'Death'<sup>2</sup> in Mortal Questions, Nagel argues that our own death is bad for us in virtue of the fact that life is something of value. So, because death robs us of something valuable, we can say that our own death is bad for us. In order to defend this conclusion, Nagel first needs to show what is wrong with Epicurus' and Lucretius' arguments. The onus is on Nagel, as only one of the Greeks' arguments needs to be sound to provide us with *proof* that our own death cannot be a problem for us.

### 2. Is death the end of our existence?

Each of the Greeks' arguments relies on the claim that death is the end of our existence; and so death involves a state of non-existence, where we no longer experience anything. My original intention was to provide a lengthy defence of this claim. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to do this. This means that the claim that death is the end of our existence will be an assumption in my discussion. Having said that, in this section I want to provide reasons for thinking that it is not an unreasonable assumption.

If human beings are simply physical things, then we would have good reason to think that death is the end of our existence. The claim that death is the end of our existence only seems contentious if it is thought that our spirit continues to exist after our death. So, for the sake of argument, let's assume that, on death, our spirit separates

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<sup>1</sup> The arguments are taken from Epicurus and Lucretius in A. Long and D. Sedley (ed.) (1987) The Hellenistic Philosophers Vol 1. Cambridge University Press: London pp. 149-3

<sup>2</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) Mortal Questions. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge pp.1-10



from our body, and carries on having an existence after our death. Even if this is accepted, we might wonder if it is right to identify the spirit of someone who dies with the person who has died (In other words, even if some part of a person does survive their own death, we might still think that the person they were while alive *no longer exists*).

It seems as though there can be genuine doubts about whether the fact that (e.g.) David Beckham's spirit survives David's death gives us good reasons for thinking that *David Beckham* has survived his own death. There may be reasons for thinking that David's identity is entwined with his physical form, and his physical capabilities. Given the fact that many of the things that David cares most about (playing football, having a fashionable hairstyle etc.) are to do with his physical form, there may be genuine doubts about whether the mere continued existence of a spirit should lead us to say that whatever continues to exist after his death is properly described as *him*.

So (even if some part of a person survives their own death) we might still have good reasons to say that the person who has died no longer exists. The claim that death is the end of our existence is one that is assumed in all the arguments we are looking at (and is similarly assumed by Nagel in his attempts to refute the arguments.) As I say, these comments do not amount to conclusive reasons for accepting this claim, but I will be assuming that this claim is true in the rest of this chapter. The discussion then is based on this hypothetical claim: *If death is the end of our existence, would our own death in those circumstances be a bad thing for us?*

### 3. Argument 1: Does all good and bad lie in sensation?

Death is nothing to us. For all good and bad lie in sensation, whereas death is the absence of sensation.<sup>3</sup>

#### *i. How should we understand 'sensations'?*

Before assessing this argument, I want to start by clarify the meaning of the term 'sensation' in this quote. In my view, the term 'sensation' is not a particularly helpful in expressing Epicurus' argument. The term 'sensation' may suggest things like 'tickles', 'pains', shivers' etc. I take it that the point Epicurus is trying to make would be better made in the following way:

It is our *experiences* (our awareness) that give life its quality (good and bad). Or, in a weaker sense, we might say that the possibility of having good and bad things happen to you is dependent on your ability to experience. We can equate experience with 'the way things feel', as long as this is taken in the broadest possible sense. (I will give examples of what this might involve below). In my view, this reading of the claim provides us with a fair representation of Epicurus' argument. But, even if this is not what Epicurus means, it still makes for a better argument, and it also fits in with Nagel's attempts to undermine this argument. So, I will be taking Epicurus' claim to be that all good and bad 'lie in' experience and awareness. (There are probably even greater problems concerning how exactly 'lie in' should be interpreted. Hopefully, this issue will become clearer through the analysis of the truth of Epicurus' premises).

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<sup>3</sup> Epicurus. From A. Long and D. Sedley (ed.) (1987) *The Hellenistic Philosophers Vol 1*. Cambridge University Press: London p. 149

As I said, I want to take experience and awareness in their broadest sense. So, I want to count the following as experiences: sense-experiences, emotions, feelings, bodily awareness, pleasures, pains, memories and thoughts. Most clearly, sense-experience is one kind of experience that we have. Tasting a great cake, seeing a sunset, tasting some wine, listening to music, the feel of a hug and smelling a flower are all forms of sense-experience. But sense-experience is not the only form of experience or awareness we have. We also experience our own emotions and feelings. We can feel excited, nervous, tired, lonely, happy etc. These are all ways in which we might describe our experiences. Feelings of pleasure and pain play an important role in many of the discussions in this thesis. So, we might experience the pain of being punched in the face, or the pleasure of a great kiss. I don't want to restrict emotions to just feelings of pleasure and pain, though certainly these are two things we can be aware of. In most cases, the emotions we feel will be quite complex, and won't just involve having discrete events of feeling pleasure or pain. We might say that, if my partner leaves me, this is bad because of the way it makes me feel. But we mean much more than that it causes me a discrete emotion of pain. I might have feelings of regret, feelings of low self-esteem, feelings of betrayal etc. In other words, there may be any number of more or less persistent aspects to my feelings and emotions.

So, sense-experiences and emotions are clear cases of things that we can experience. But they are not the only things we can experience, or be aware of. There is a sense in which having a thought is also an experience (is something we are aware of). Similarly, having a memory is also an experience.

We also have experiences related to touch. For example, the feeling of a kiss, or a hug are things that we experience. We might think of these as forms of bodily sensations. So, in analysing Epicurus' argument, I will be taking experiences to mean all sense-experience, all emotions, feelings and sensations, all thoughts all memories and all bodily awareness.

This is then quite a broad reading of Epicurus' claim. Reading Epicurus in this way is justified by the fact that, even with this broad reading of 'sensations' the argument remains valid. If we are assuming that death is the end of our existence and involves the state of non-existence, even on this broad reading of 'sensations' death will involve the complete loss of all of these forms of experience.

Having got some grip on the claims Epicurus is making, here is the argument we are left with:

Premise 1 : All good and bad (for us) lie in experiences.

Premise 2 : Death is the absence of experience (for us)

Conclusion: (Our own) death is nothing to us.

This argument is valid. Therefore, in order to find out if the conclusion is true, we need to assess the truth of the premises. As I have said, I will be assuming that death is the end of our existence. If this is assumed, then premise 2 seems to follow. If you no longer exist, then you are no longer capable of experiencing anything. (As I said in section 2, I am not denying that your spirit, if there is such a thing, may carry on experiencing things after your death. The claim is that you – the person you are before your death – no longer exists, and so death is rightly thought of as involving the absence of experience for the person who has died).

This then leaves us with premise 1. If this premise is true, then we will have the best possible reason for thinking that our own death is not a problem for us. Is it true

then that everything that is either good for us, or bad for us, is so in virtue of our experiences?

ii. *Central cases*

To assess this claim, I want to start by looking at some central cases. For many cases, it seems true that good and bad lie in experience. For example, food poisoning is usually considered a bad thing. It seems reasonable to think that what is bad about food poisoning is related to how unpleasant it feels to suffer from it. For example, you might suffer feelings of exhaustion and discomfort as well as occasional feelings of pain. So, food poisoning is thought to be bad in virtue of the fact that it involves all these negative experiences.

Similarly, think of the experience of seeing a sunset. We might describe the experience itself as an aesthetically pleasing one. Not only this, the ‘sense-experience’ of seeing the sunset might be accompanied by other feelings. I might have a sense of peace or well-being, or feel stimulated in some sense. We might say that the possibility of having these ‘glorious feelings’ when seeing a sunset is dependent on our ability to have the sense-experience of the sunset. I can have this particular experience of peace only if I can see the sunset. So, someone who is blind will not be capable of having the sense-experience of seeing the sunset, and so cannot have the associated feelings about what they see. (Still, they will be capable of having plenty of positive experiences derived from the senses and experiences that they can have.)

So, having a sense-experience is dependent on being open to the world. There are also associated experiences, like the feeling of peace at seeing a sunset, or the feeling of pain at being punched that (while not being sense-experiences themselves) also seem to be dependent on the ability to have sense-experiences. It looks then like there is some truth in Epicurus’ claim that valuing the world in one way rather than another is dependent on the ability to be aware (of oneself and the world.)

iii. *Is being good identical to being an experience that feels good?*

As we saw with the clear-cut examples above, some things are thought to be good things simply *in virtue* of the fact that they feel good (for example, eating a cake, seeing a beautiful sunset etc.) This suggests what I will call the strong reading of premise 1: that only that which is pleasant is intrinsically good (similarly, only that which is unpleasant is intrinsically bad). In places, Nagel tends to equate Epicurus’ claim that all good and bad lie in experience with the strong claim that being good is simply being a positive immediate experience (and being bad is equivalent to being an immediate negative experience). Nagel does accept that, in many clear-cut cases, there is this strong relationship between being good and feeling good; “There certainly are goods and evils of a simple kind (including some pleasures and pains) which a person possesses at a given time simply in virtue of his condition at that time.”<sup>4</sup> But, Nagel argues that this strong relationship doesn’t always hold.

In fact, the claim that there is this strong relationship between being good and feeling good is implausible, and so Nagel is right that, if Epicurus’ argument relies on this strong reading, then we would have good reasons to dismiss it. That this strong

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<sup>4</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge p. 4/5

reading is implausible is clear from the ease with which we can come up with counter-examples. For example, think of having a massage. You might value the massage for the positive feelings that follow from the massage. But, the massage itself may involve feeling quite a bit of pain. Still we might value this pain, but only insofar as it is the way to achieve more long term positive experiences in the future. What is clear from this example is that, if we want to know whether something bad is happening to someone, it is not enough to simply look at whether their *immediate* experiences are ‘pleasing’ ones.

In some cases, things may look more complicated. For example, imagine someone who, at the moment they win the marathon at the Olympics feels absolutely terrible; she has cramp, fatigue, blisters, strained muscles etc. Of course, she will also feel great about having won an Olympic gold. After all, if she has worked for ten years to achieve the goal of winning an Olympic gold medal, she might (rightly) think that this is the most valuable moment of her life, regardless of the fact that she is currently undergoing a number of negative physical experiences. So, in this case, we do not want to say that winning the marathon is good simply because it makes her feel good (after all, she is suffering a number of negative experiences). It seems much better to say that she feels good because she *thinks something good has happened to her*. We might say that winning the marathon is the good thing that has happened to her, and her resulting pleasure is simply a rational response to the fact that she perceives winning the marathon as a good thing. In this way, the strong reading of Epicurus’ claim appears (in cases such as this) to get the relationship between being a being good thing and being pleasurable the wrong way round. In many cases, we do not simply take the fact that it feels good as a reason for saying that something good must be happening to us. Rather, in many cases it is the thought that something good is happening to us that leads us to feel good.

So, it is clear that there isn’t a direct relationship between simple states of pleasure and the assessment of whether something good has happened to someone. These are not identical. Being good and bad isn’t simply feeling good and bad. (I will return to this issue in Chapter VII Part 2)

iv. *Counter-examples: Can what you don’t know hurt you?*

In the examples above, of winning the marathon and having a painful massage, we have seen that it is too simplistic to assess whether something good is happening to someone by looking at their immediate experiences. But, it still seems possible to argue that, whether something good is happening to someone is related in some weaker sense to our experiences. So, for example, we might judge that the painful massage is a good thing by looking at the positive experiences of improved health that follow (which is itself a pleasant experience). So, while it is clear that the strong reading cannot be justified, perhaps there is a weaker reading of the claim that all good and bad ‘lie in’ experience that could be justified.

Let’s turn to a more forceful argument from Nagel, one that seems to apply even to weaker readings of premise 1. Nagel attempts to test the claim that all good and bad are good and bad in virtue (in the fullness of time) of one’s experiences by trying to find counter-examples to this claim. Nagel attempts to refute the first premise by providing examples where he claims we can say that something good or bad is happening to someone even though they have *no* experience of it.

It might be thought (even without adopting a strong reading) that one of the implications of Epicurus’ claim is that nothing can be good or bad for us unless we are,

in some sense *aware* of it. If Epicurus is right, an event we are unaware of (and so are having no experiences of) cannot be good or bad for us. This seems to imply that ‘what we don’t know can’t hurt us.’

Here then are a few examples where it might be thought that what you don’t know *can* hurt you. Imagine your partner is sleeping with your best friend in secret. It might be thought that, despite the fact that you are unaware of what is happening, it is clearly still the case that something bad is happening to you. Similarly, imagine all the people you think are your ‘friends’ actually dislike you. Whenever you are not there, they mock you behind your back. Or, imagine you are away from your house, and your house burns down. In all of these cases, we would want to say that something bad is happening to you – and that it is a bad thing despite the fact that you do not have *any* experience of it.

In cases such as these, if we think something bad has happened to us, it cannot be because of the ‘badness’ of our experience (as in such cases there is a complete absence of any kind of bad experience). Perhaps things will become clearer if we can say exactly what it is that is bad for the people in these examples. I want to start by focusing on the example of being cheated on. There are a number of reasons why we might think that something bad is happening to someone being cheated on, even if they have no experience of it. Imagine the person being cheated on is committed to their partner and their relationship. As such, he has put the relationship with this partner at the centre of his life (in the belief that there is mutual trust and respect between them.) He structures his life and his future around being with his partner. He cares deeply about his partner and his relationship, and believe that his partner feels the same about him.

In being cheated on, he is now deceived in believing that there is mutual trust and respect between them. In this sense, we might say that (even if one person in the relationship has no knowledge of what is happening) the relationship itself is being damaged. Given the fact that the (cuckolded) person clearly values the relationship (they have after all put it at the centre of their life) the relationship being damaged is a bad thing for them. We might think that, if he knew all the relevant facts, he would not wish to devote any time or energy to his partner, and to the relationship. In this sense, something is happening to him that he would never wish for. So, part of the damage is *caused* by the fact that the cuckolded person is unaware of what is actually happening. Because they are unaware of the true situation, they are making their decisions on the basis of faulty view of their relationships. After all, he will be devoting his life to a relationship that (were they to know the truth) he would not wish to devote his life to. In this sense, it seems that, because he lacks information relevant to his decisions, he is unable to make a truly free choice.

v. *Nagel’s positive account*

I think this discussion can help us understand what Nagel means when he says “it is arbitrary to restrict the goods and evils that can befall a man to nonrelational properties ascribable to him at a particular time.”<sup>5</sup> One of the points Nagel is making here is that it is wrong to think that being good is simply being a positive immediate experience. (In other words, the strong reading of Epicurus’ claim is unjustified.)

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid p. 6

Nagel appears to be implying that we should take more than just the state someone is in that particular instance into account if we want to know if something bad is happening to them. Nagel's view is that "most good and ill fortune has as its subject a person identified by his history and possibilities, rather than merely by his categorical state of mind."<sup>6</sup> In other words, we decide whether something bad has happened to someone, in part, by relating what is happening now to what has happened in the past, and to their imagined future (their aims, hopes and dreams – and fears and worries etc.)

If we return to the example of the person whose partner cheats on him behind his back, Nagel's view should become clearer. In that example, we saw that we could say that something bad has happened to this person because something of value to them has been damaged. We can describe why and how this relationship is of value (why their relationship is something that really matters to them) by looking at the cuckolded person's history and possibilities. Their relationship with their partner is something they have put time and effort into, something they have committed to. We have reason then to think that serious damage to the relationship is something that matters to them in virtue of the time, effort and commitment they have invested in it in the past.

Similarly, we can understand how important the relationship is by thinking of the cuckolded person's 'imagined future'. Most people (see the section on 'the unavoidability of seriousness' II.3) have aims in their life. They have projects they are committed to, different futures they may see for themselves. So, another way in which we can assess whether something bad has happened to someone is by comparing what is actually happening to their aims, their hopes for the future, the things they are working for and the future they see for themselves. We can assess whether something good or bad is happening to someone by comparing it to 'what they had hoped for'. So, with the man whose partner is cheating on him, if he has often told me that trust is the most important thing for him in a relationship, and he hopes to have a lasting relationship based on trust with his partner, I can know that something bad is happening to him if he is cheated on. The fact that he doesn't know about the secret relationship is part of what makes the adultery bad. I can compare what is happening to what he would like to happen, or hope for. For example, I might think that, if his partner was cheating on him, he would rather know. I know that, in comparison with what he would want *were he to know*, something bad is happening to him.

So, whether a bad thing is happening to someone can be decided by looking at the values of the person, and seeing how what has happened relates to their values, their hopes, their commitments. If they value their relationships (or their home, job, TV etc.) then any damage to these things can be thought a bad thing for them (even when they are not aware of it.) This seems to justify a claim Nagel makes that Epicurus' claim gets things the wrong way round.

For the natural view is that the discovery of betrayal makes us unhappy because it is bad to be betrayed – not that betrayal is bad because its discovery makes us unhappy.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid p. 5

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p. 5

vi. *Have experiences been dispensed with?*

Let us accept that Nagel is correct in thinking that, part of the way in which we assess whether something bad has happened to someone is by looking at their past, and their aims and projects. Is there any way to defend premise 1 from Nagel's counter-examples?

Imagine a friend falls into a coma that lasts ten years. While she is in the coma, her husband leaves her, and marries another woman. When this happens I think 'what a terrible thing to have happened. She will be devastated if she regains consciousness'. What actually happens is that, once recovering from her coma, she is delighted that her husband has left her. She says that she realised that her husband didn't mean that much to her. In such circumstances, it seems right to say that, when her husband left her, nothing bad did actually happen to her. In other words, the 'goodness' or 'badness' of an event for someone must, at some stage, make reference to that person's feelings on the matter *were they* to have some experience of it. (This may simply be another way of saying that what we are interested in is the relationship the event has to their values, projects etc.)

This suggests that there may be a weaker reading of 'lie in' which would mean that in some sense, something being good or bad for us must be rooted in some experiential quality. I want to discuss one final example which attempts to decisively break this link.

vii. *Missing out on experiences*

It seems reasonable for someone to say that missing an experience (i.e. the absence of an experience) was a bad thing for them. Imagine all my friends go to a concert that I can't afford to go to. I might think that the experiences I had that night were not bad (maybe I spent the night playing the guitar, enjoying myself). When they come back and tell me it was the best concert they had ever seen and that I would have loved it if I had gone, what I regret is my *lack* of this experience. If it is true that the lack of an experience can be bad for us, then this seems to provide the clearest possible counter-example to Epicurus' claim. More than that, this example seems directly related to the wider issue. If we accept that missing out on an experience can be a bad thing for someone, we can see why our own death might be bad for us – as it may well involve us missing out on experiences that (given our plans, projects and values) we would have highly valued.

It might be said that missing the experience is bad because it causes feelings of regret. So, could I still say that missing a concert I would have loved is a bad thing for me, even if I had no knowledge of its existence? I am a huge music fan, and so it is probable that there have been countless numbers of concerts (by bands I've never even heard of) that I would have enjoyed greatly had I been there. (This is perhaps the closest we can come to saying something bad has happened *entirely* independent of someone's experiences.) Even though I accept that this is probably true, this thought does not particularly concern me. Now that I have worked out that this must be true (in some abstract sense) I don't now spend time regretting this fact, and I don't have any real sense that my life has been harmed. But then, this fact doesn't impact on my life in the way that (for example) betrayal does. Perhaps the important thing is not whether you

happen to regret something, but rather how directly the event impacts on the things that you value, and the aims and projects that you have.

At the very least, if you miss out on experiences that you could have had, which (given your history, possibilities and values) you would have valued, it seems right to think that something bad has happened you. This is probably enough to decisively undermine premise 1 of Epicurus' argument.

*viii. Thinnest sense in which premise 1 is true*

Perhaps there is an even weaker sense in which good and bad might 'lie in' experience. I will be arguing in later chapters that, something can only matter (or be significant) for something which has awareness. (I defend this claim in IV.2.ii & iii). I will argue that being open to the world is a necessary condition of there being things that could count as good or bad *for me*.

Think of the fact that nothing could be significant for a stone. A stone might matter to us (it might for example have a financial value) but it is not at all clear that anything can matter *to the stone*. For a start, the stone has (let us assume!) no awareness of the world. In these circumstances, it seems unclear how anything could be thought to be significant *for the stone*. On the face of it then, it seems that things are only significant to those things that have awareness. I have no wish to claim that things can only matter to human beings. For example, we might argue that, given their awareness of the world, things can matter to animals.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, if they exist, there is no reason to think that things can't be significant for deities, angels, alien life forms etc.<sup>9</sup>

As it happens, even in this weak sense it is not absolutely clear that premise 1 necessarily follows. Even if something can only be significant for something that has awareness, someone may want to argue that this is compatible with the thought that things can be significant for things that *have been* aware (even if they no longer exist). This is not something I want to discuss. Rather, I just want to suggest that the argument in this section does not, as it stands, conclusively prove premise 1.

*ix. Conclusion: Argument 1*

Given my assumption about death being the end of our existence, the truth of Epicurus' argument centred on the truth of premise 1. There are many clear-cut examples, which seem to support Epicurus' claim that there is strong relationship between something being good for us, and the fact that it feels good.

I attempted to assess the truth of premise 1 by looking for counter-examples. Through this discussion it became clear that our assessment of whether something good or bad is happening to someone is not just based on how they happen to feel at that particular moment. Rather, in order to assess whether something good (or bad) is happening to them, we need to look at what is happening in their lives in relation to their plans, projects and aims.

It is not absolutely clear that all these examples do conclusively show that there is no relationship at all between good and bad happening to us, and our awareness. But

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<sup>8</sup> I will be suggesting that there are specific reasons for thinking there is something different about the way things matter to human beings (see VII.2 and VIII.2.iii).

<sup>9</sup> The relationship between significance and awareness will be explored again in the next chapter (see II.5.i). But the issue will only be properly thrashed out in Chapter IV (see IV.2.ii)



there was one example that seems conclusive – missing an experience. If missing out on an experience can be bad for us, then all good and bad cannot lie in experience (however ‘lie in’ is interpreted.) So, my view is that Epicurus’ argument does not prove that our own death is neither good nor bad for us. If missing out on an experience can be bad for us, we can understand why our own death may be bad for us (given the fact that it will involve missing out on any number of experiences.)

#### 4. Argument 2: Can something be bad for anything that doesn’t exist?

If there is going to be unhappiness and suffering, the person must himself exist at the same time, for the evil to be able to befall him.<sup>10</sup>

Premise 1 : When we die, we no longer exist.

Premise 2 : Nothing can be bad for something that no longer exists

Conclusion: Death cannot be bad for us.

It might seem that there is a real difficulty in saying that death is bad for the person who has died, if it is accepted that (once they are dead) they no longer exist. How can we claim that someone has suffered a misfortune when there is no one to be the *subject* of the misfortune? As Nagel says, “there seems to be no time when death, if it is a misfortune, can be ascribed to its unfortunate subject.”<sup>11</sup>

As with argument 1, argument 2 is valid. I am once again assuming the truth of premise 1 (for the reasons discussed in section 2). In order to assess this argument then, we need to decide whether premise 2 is true. There is undoubtedly something to the claim that nothing can be bad for something that no longer exists. For example, it seems that, while the current period of global warming could be bad for Polar Bears, it clearly cannot be a problem for dinosaurs or dodos. So, even if it is accepted that global warming is a bad thing (because dinosaurs no longer exist) the current period of global warming cannot have any kind of impact on them. In these circumstances, it’s difficult to see how it could be thought bad for them.

This seems true for many, if not most examples. Think of how many things we might think of as (currently) bad that couldn’t possibly be said to be bad for dinosaurs. (Rising house prices, the invasion of Iraq etc.) Unfortunately, there is one potentially bad thing that is particularly relevant in the context of this argument. Whereas most things clearly cannot be bad for something that doesn’t exist, the answer to the question ‘was the extinction of the dinosaurs bad for the dinosaurs?’ is not so clear. More than this, this question seems the most relevant to the issues we are examining – whether our own death can be bad for us, despite the fact that we no longer exist.

Nagel attempts to refute premise 2. He gives an example of how something can be bad for a person who (in a sense) no longer exists. So, imagine a philosophy professor who, through a car accident, is reduced to the mental state of a one year old child.<sup>12</sup> Nagel argues that this example can provide us with a counter-example to premise 2.

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<sup>10</sup> Lucretius. From A. Long and D. Sedley (ed.) (1987) *The Hellenistic Philosophers Vol 1*. Cambridge University Press: London p. 151

<sup>11</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge p. 4

<sup>12</sup> This example is actually used by Nagel in relation to argument 1 as well (it is an example of something bad happening to someone who is not aware of it). I have used it here because it is the most forceful argument Nagel has against argument 2.

Suppose [a philosophy professor] receives a brain injury that reduces him to the mental condition of a contented infant, and that such desires as remain to him can be satisfied by a custodian, so that he is free from care. Such a development would be widely regarded as a severe misfortune, not only for his friends and relations, or for society, but also, and primarily, for the person himself. This does not mean that a contented infant is unfortunate. The intelligent adult who has been *reduced* to this condition is the subject of the misfortune.<sup>13</sup>

Imagine that the incapacitated professor was just about to finish a book which he felt was the culmination of his life's work, or he was keenly anticipating the birth of first grandchild. Nagel's claim is that we can then understand how something bad has happened to the professor by contrasting his previous life with the state that they are now in.

If, instead of concentrating exclusively on the oversized baby before us, we consider the person he was, and the person he could be now, then his reduction to this state and the cancellation of his natural adult development constitute a perfectly intelligible catastrophe.<sup>14</sup>

There is though something a bit problematic about Nagel's example. We could after all run exactly the same example, but imagine instead that the professor dies. In other words, we have a clear parallel to the example of death (so what we say about the case of the incapacitated professor will be relevant to what we say about death). But, we might almost say that it is too close an analogy. This seems clear as Lucretius' arguments against death being bad apply just as well to the example of the incapacitated professor:

'No more for you the welcome of a joyful home and a good wife. No more will your children run to snatch a first kiss, and move your heart with unspoken delight ... Unhappy man', they say ... What they fail to add is: 'Nor does any yearning for those things remain in you'.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, as in cases of death, Lucretius will argue that, in ascribing a misfortune to the professor, you are ascribing a misfortune to someone who no longer exists. Nagel seems happy to accept this; "there is some doubt, in fact, whether [the philosophy professor] can be said to exist any longer."<sup>16</sup> In a way, Nagel has simply set out an example that poses exactly the same problems as our original question. If we accept that something bad has happened to the incapacitated professor, we will also accept that the event of death is a bad thing for someone. But, by the same token, if we can say that because something bad cannot happen to someone who doesn't exist, then this event is not bad for the incapacitated professor. There is nothing in Nagel's discussion to help resolve this. At best, we might think that, if we find it plausible to say that the incapacitated professor has been harmed, we should similarly find it plausible to talk of people who have died being harmed.

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<sup>13</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge p. 5

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p. 6

<sup>15</sup> Lucretius. From A. Long and D. Sedley (ed.) (1987) *The Hellenistic Philosophers Vol 1*. Cambridge University Press: London p. 152

<sup>16</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge p. 6

So, we do not seem to have found any conclusive reasons for accepting premise 2. Rather, we seem to have reached a standoff, where both sides argue that the other side misses something important. Nagel argues that Lucretius ignores the fact that the person prior to the injury has obviously lost out (something bad has happened to them.) On the other hand, Lucretius argues that Nagel is not taking into account the fact that the injured (or dead) person before us does not miss anything. The discussion in this section has not shown any reason for thinking that one of these perspectives must be accepted over the other. In these circumstances, there is enough doubt over premise 2 for us to say that the second argument has not been proved.

### **5. Argument 3: Is the time before we are born the same as the time after we die?**

Just as in the past we had no sensation of discomfort when the Carthaginians were converging to attack ... so too, when we no longer exist following the severing of the soul and body ... you can take it that nothing at all will be able to affect us.<sup>17</sup>

Premise 1: We are not concerned about our non-existence before we were born.

Premise 2: The time before we were born is the same state as the time after we die.

Conclusion: We should not be concerned about our own death.

This argument suggests that, if we accept that the time before our birth and the time after our death are identical states, we have some kind of rational obligation to have the same attitude to both. I like this argument, but not because I think it's true. Rather (if the assumption in section 2 is accepted) this argument provides a concrete sense of what the state of non-existence is like. The state of death is just like the kind of existence I had when the First World War was being fought, just like when Cleopatra ruled Egypt etc. This thought can help prevent something that can happen when people attempt to think about what non-existence would be like after their death. In attempting to understand the experience of not experiencing, they can suffer a kind of 'vertigo', where they imagine death as the *experience* of non-existence.

Instead of completely stripping himself of life, he is unconsciously making some bit of him survive.<sup>18</sup>

Still, we need to assess whether the argument is a good one. Let us start by assessing premise 1. There can certainly be events that happened before my birth that I am 'concerned about'. For example, the birth of my mum might be thought of as event that concerns me. Pink Floyd recorded their first album before I was born. But this is still something I am interested in and value. This though is not what the first premise relates to. The first premise wants to point up the fact that people rarely spend time 'regretting' the fact of their non-existence prior to their birth. Is this true? For example,

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<sup>17</sup> Lucretius. From A. Long and D. Sedley (ed.) (1987) The Hellenistic Philosophers Vol 1. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge p. 151

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p. 151

as a fan of early Pink Floyd, I might regret the fact that I will never see them live at the time when I would have enjoyed them most. Even with this example though, it is not at all clear that we have refuted the first premise. The reasons for this will become clear when I discuss premise 2. Let us leave premise 1 to one side. For the sake of the argument, I will assume it is true.

Nagel attempts to refute premise 2. He argues that there is in fact an asymmetry between the time before you were born and the time after you die.

the time after his death is time of which his death deprives him. It is time in which, had he not died then, he would be alive.<sup>19</sup>

Nagel argues that, in contrast to this, being born at the time we are does not deny us time we could have lived *as the person we are*. After all, when my parents had a child at a different time, my sister was born (it wasn't me again). As we could not have been the person we are now if we had been born earlier there is no sense in which we can say that I (the person I am now) have been deprived of anything by being born when I was. By contrast, there is a sense in which the time after a person's death could be thought of as time they are deprived of as the person they were when alive. For example, perhaps if they had lived another couple of years, they could have (say) seen the birth of their grandchild as the person they were when alive. This means that while the time before birth and the time after death might be thought of as identical states, we are right to have a different attitude to them.<sup>20</sup>

Argument 3 assumes that we have some kind of rational obligation to have the same attitude to states that are identical. But there are plenty of other examples to show that this is not the case. Think for example of the pleasure of a kiss. It seems perfectly reasonable to have very different attitudes to events which are in fact (superficially) similar states. If a kiss leads to me cementing my relationship with someone I go on to spend the rest of my life with, I will rightly have a different attitude to this than a kiss which leads my partner to leave me (even though they might be described superficially as the same kind of state). So, we can be right to have different attitudes to the same states if they occur in different *contexts*. So, even if we accept that premise 2 is true (that the state before birth is identical to the state after death) this doesn't justify the conclusion that our own death cannot be bad for us.

## 6. Conclusion

Throughout my discussion of the Greeks' arguments, there are two intuitions that seem to pull us in opposite directions. On the one hand, once we die (given my assumption in section 2) we are no longer in a position to experience anything, so it is not clear how anything bad could happen to you. On the other hand, the fact that we no longer experience anything might itself be thought bad for us.

We can sum up this conclusion in the following way. It may be true that death is a neutral state, but life isn't a neutral state. Because of this, death involves the loss of (or missing out on) something of value. So, the fact that we no longer experience and

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<sup>19</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge p. 7

<sup>20</sup> It is possible to come up with bizarre examples that may show that it is conceivable that you could be the person you are, but be born earlier. (C.f. Robert Nozick's proposal discussed in a footnote by Nagel. Ibid. p. 8) But, it is not at all clear what conclusions we should draw from the mere possibility of such wildly implausible scenarios.

the fact that we no longer exist, far from proving that death is not a problem for us actually helps us see what is bad about death. The fact that the state of death is identical to the state before birth (which we do not particularly think of as a bad thing) doesn't undermine this conclusion.

I've said as much as I can about the Greeks' arguments. In the rest of this thesis, I will in part be concerned with assessing the positive part of Nagel's claim. Let us accept for the moment that *if* life really is valuable, *then* missing out on life (i.e. death) can be seen as a bad thing for us. This means that, only by assessing whether life is valuable (and perhaps setting out why life is valuable) can we properly assess Nagel's claim that our own death can be bad for us. (I will do this in Chapter VII Part 2). In a sense, the rest of this thesis is concerned with whether there really are things about life that are genuinely valuable, that genuinely matter. I will be using Nagel again in order to start exploring whether there are things that are genuinely valuable about human existence.

The chapter that follows 'Death' in Mortal Questions is called 'The Absurd'.<sup>21</sup> There, Nagel attempts to show that, while people (unavoidably) think that some things matter, we can never conclusively know whether anything does actually matter. This thesis is primarily interested in the issue of whether anything actually matters. If Nagel is right, we can never know if anything actually matters. So, Nagel's arguments are genuinely threatening to my project. So, in the next chapter, I will be assessing Nagel's arguments.

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<sup>21</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) Mortal Questions. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge pp. 11-23

## CHAPTER II

### IS LIFE ABSURD?

#### 1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I argued that *if* death is bad, it is because it brings to an end a potentially valuable life. In this chapter, I want to look at another argument from Nagel which attempts to justify the claim that life is absurd. One aspect of Nagel's claim (the inescapability of doubt) is that we simply cannot know if (or why) life is meaningful or valuable. So, according to Nagel, any claims we make about an aspect of our life mattering, being valuable or being meaningful are fundamentally unjustifiable. This claim appears to be in tension with Nagel's claim that our own death is bad for us because it brings to an end something of value – life. If Nagel is right about the inescapability of doubt, it seems that we are not entitled to make any claims about life being valuable. In saying death is bad because life is valuable, Nagel will be going beyond what he himself believes he can justifiably say.

My thesis is an attempt to assess whether anything genuinely matters. I wish to argue that there are some things that genuinely matter to us. If Nagel's arguments in 'The Absurd' are right, we will have to accept that (while there are things that we *think* matter) we are unable to justify any beliefs about things mattering. I wish to resist this conclusion. In order to do this, I will be assessing Nagel's arguments. I hope to show that there is nothing in Nagel's arguments to lead us to think that the search for things that genuinely matter is futile.

So, in this chapter, I will be outlining Nagel's claim that life is absurd. I will quickly set out the structure of Nagel's argument. This is given in the next section. I will then outline and assess the two claims that make up Nagel's argument for the claim that life is absurd. Having assessed these claims, I will be in a better position to assess whether Nagel is right in saying that it is impossible to be justified in claiming that something genuinely matters.

#### 2. Nagel's argument for the absurdity of life

Nagel defines absurdity as the clash between pretension and reality.<sup>22</sup> Nagel argues that there is a universal sense in which human life is absurd – indeed is by its very nature absurd. He describes a clash between two opposed viewpoints human beings (can) adopt. He labels these two viewpoints 'the unavoidability of seriousness' (our pretensions) and 'the inescapability of doubt' (reality). He claims that it is the clash between these two viewpoints that leads to a kind of universal absurdity.

In terms of my overall thesis, the unavoidability of seriousness (if true) would show that human beings always think some things matter (are valuable). But the inescapability of doubt, if true, would show that we could never *know* that anything really does matter. This leaves us in a seemingly contradictory position when it comes to the question 'does anything matter?' It is because of this contradiction that Nagel describes human life as necessarily absurd.

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<sup>22</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) Mortal Questions Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. p. 13

Nagel's claim that life is absurd relies on these two claims about human existence both being true. So, I will outline and assessing Nagel's arguments for the unavoidability of seriousness and the inescapability of doubt. In order to properly assess these claims, I have attempted to present the claims in as strong a form as possible before beginning my assessment. This has involved including much material of my own. My aim is to draw out as clearly as possible what is true in Nagel's account before attempting my assessment.

### 3. *The unavoidability of seriousness*

Nagel wants to claim that human beings necessarily think some things matter. The unavoidability of seriousness is not just a claim about how things happen to be. Nagel takes it that he is describing an *unavoidable* part of human existence – namely that human beings *cannot help but* think that (at least some of) their choices matter.

As I discussed in the last chapter (I.3.v) most human lives are full of plans, projects and aims. Some of these aims are long term ones. In my case, these might be things like writing this PhD, improving my Tai Chi, being a good friend and eating more healthily. Some of the aims I might pursue are more short term ones, things like paying the gas bill, buying tickets for a gig, preparing for a seminar, buying some food, mixing a great drum & bass set and entertaining my niece.

So, the world appears to me (except in exceptional circumstances) as full of 'live possibilities'. I am faced with a world in which there are a number of options open to me - there are any number of things I could choose to do at this particular moment. The choices we are faced with concern not only what aims to pursue (e.g. writing my PhD) but also concern what means we should use to achieve them (e.g. which chapter of my thesis should I work on now?)

We might say that there is a sense in which many sentient creatures are faced with choices. With very basic forms of life (e.g. an ant) this might not be clear. We might think that a purely instinctive creature is never faced with 'choices'. (For more on this, see VIII.2.iii) With more complex creatures, it seems easier to think of them being faced with a choice. A cat might enter a room full of familiar people, and be faced with the choice of which lap to sit on. Perhaps though, while there is a sense in which a cat can be faced with choices, there is something distinctive about the process by which human beings make choices. For a start, humans are able to *reflect* on the choices facing them. We can weigh (possible) consequences and ask whether what we are doing is worthwhile, whether it matters. While some of our decisions can be made impulsively, not all decisions are impulsive. (There may of course be examples of people who do always act impulsively. I will be examining this issue below). Nagel is right that people in general do take time to think about their choices, contemplate their options, think about the possible consequences of their actions etc.

Nagel links this to the fact that we are self-consciousness. (As we will see, he also links the inescapability of doubt to the fact that we are self-consciousness). Because we are self-conscious, we can take our own (present and future) actions and choices as the object of contemplation. Because of this (in a way that might be said to be distinctively human) we can (and usually do) devote large amounts of our time and energy reflecting on the choices that we are faced with.

To spend time and energy on the process of making choices only makes sense if we think that in some sense it *matters* which choice we make. This comes out most clearly when someone is faced with a dilemma. Imagine I am in a position where I am

forced to make a choice between a job I love and the needs of my family. Perhaps circumstances have reached a stage where it becomes necessary to give one of these things priority over the other. In making the choice, I might spend hours thinking about which future I would most value, what kind of life I would find most satisfying etc. The reason why this dilemma is pressing for me is that I am forced to choose between two things that both matter to me. We might say, only if some things do matter to me will it make sense to spend time deciding which aspect of my life matters *most* to me.

It is true then that we devote much of our time and energy to making choices, and working to achieve the aims and plans we set ourselves. We also spend an enormous amount of time and energy thinking about ourselves and the choices open to us regarding our health, our sex-lives, our self-knowledge, our relationships, our status, our wealth etc. As Nagel says: “Leading a human life is a full-time occupation, to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern.”<sup>23</sup> It seems right to say that the amount of energy we give to our choices is directly related to how much we think they matter.

Nagel’s claim that humans are unavoidably serious (that we think our choices and our lives matter) is not supposed to be a description of an intellectual state we are in. Nagel’s claim is not that, if you ask people they would say that they *believe* that their lives matter. Rather, if we look at the way in which people make their choices (and the amount of time and energy they devote to them) it reveals a practical attitude towards their choices and their lives. Humans show that their lives and choices matter to them by how they *act*. This is why seriousness is unavoidable.

#### 4. Is seriousness *unavoidable*?

So, it seems that we are serious to the extent that we put effort into considering and making choices, and to the extent that we put effort into pursuing the aims that we have chosen. In order to test Nagel’s claim that this kind of seriousness is unavoidable, I will see if we can make sense of a human being failing to have this kind of seriousness. I’m going to outline a number of possible scenarios of ways in which people could live so as to avoid seriousness. It quickly becomes clear that the first three scenarios – making all choices by tossing a coin, seeing the self as ‘illusory’ and acting compulsively – are not ways of living that avoid seriousness. The final two scenarios – living as a slave and suffering extreme depression – do seem to be ways in which we could avoid seriousness. Discussing these scenarios will help us see whether seriousness is avoidable, and whether we have any reason to want to avoid being serious.

Imagine that I decide that from now on, whenever I am faced by a choice, I will toss a coin (Heads, I’ll write my PhD, tails I’ll get a well paid job). I do this for all my choices. In these circumstances, have I avoided seriousness? At the very least, I will have to make an effort to decide which choices are going to be decided by the coin toss. I am going to go through the effort of tossing the coin, and will take it seriously enough to follow whatever the coin decides. So, it is not clear that I have avoided seriousness in Nagel’s sense. We may perhaps be tempted to say that, if I act in this way, I am failing to treat my decisions with sufficient (or appropriate) levity. This perhaps illustrates how ‘thin’ Nagel’s claim that humans are unavoidably serious is.

There are a number of spiritual traditions that focus on finding ways of seeing the world as illusion. It is thought that, through training, we can reach a position where we take neither ourselves, nor the world ‘seriously’. It is usually thought that practices

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid p. 15



like meditation can help you stop thinking of the self (and what it ‘wants’) as of any particular importance and allows you to experience the world as though it doesn’t matter (it’s all illusion). It might then look as though these kinds of practices and philosophies are precisely aimed at avoiding the seriousness that Nagel claims is unavoidable. Having said that, attaining this ‘enlightened’ position requires both strenuous effort and sustained discipline. It is difficult to see how anyone who spends twenty years attempting to attain this form of enlightenment, who devotes their life to such disciplined training, could honestly claim to have avoided seriousness.

Perhaps someone suffering from a compulsive disorder could be thought to avoid seriousness. In fact, anyone who acts totally compulsively might perhaps be thought to be avoiding seriousness – as they are not ‘reflecting’ on their choices. In fact, the majority, if not all compulsive disorders don’t ‘avoid seriousness’. People who have a compulsive need to (say) wash their hands twenty times if they touch a door handle seem to attach great *importance* to performing these actions. They might say that they have to wash their hands because of the vast number of germs contained on a door handle. Or, perhaps they are unable to explain why doing these actions matters. ‘If these table mats aren’t at right angles to the table, it just bugs me.’ Still, the actions are felt as necessary, even vital (not doing them causes them great upset and stress). Once again then, these are not the actions of someone who thinks that nothing matters.

Now I want discuss two examples that seem more promising ways in which people could avoid seriousness. I have accepted that we are serious to the extent that we put effort into considering and making choices, and to the extent that we put effort into pursuing the aims that we have chosen. On this basis, it may look as though someone who is turned into a slave might fail to be serious. In such cases, it is not clear that they are making any choices. (At least, they are not choosing *for themselves*). More importantly, they don’t get to put effort into pursuing aims that they have chosen. Rather, they put their energy into pursuing the choices of their master. Even if they spend time choosing what to do, their choice is made on the basis of what their master wants (or thinks is important) rather than what they think is important. A slave might be concerned with doing what their master thinks matters (insofar as it is important to them to not be punished). But this alone doesn’t show that they think what their master thinks matters really does matter.

Still, there are ways in which a slave might still be serious. They may spend much of their time thinking about what they would do if they were free, thinking about whether it is worth trying to escape etc. (We might say that the amount of time they spend contemplating these things is an indication of the fact that the slave thinks they matter). Also, they might be serious in pursuing their master’s wishes (insofar as they believe that pursuing their master’s wishes is in their own interest). What we can say is that (if they do not try to escape) they will never show, through their *efforts* in pursuing their own chosen goals, that they really do matter to them. So, there are certain kinds of seriousness that a slave does ‘avoid’. Perhaps the best way for a slave to avoid seriousness is to have no thoughts about what they want, and to have no thoughts about trying to escape. It would also help if they were able to obey their master not out of their own self-interest, but unquestioningly, or uncritically. It seems possible in such circumstances to say that a slave can avoid seriousness. (Although, even here we might wonder if their absolute obedience to their master is itself a form of seriousness.)

My final example, someone suffering extreme depression, is perhaps the clearest example I can come up with of someone who doesn’t (practically) take their lives seriously. When suffering depression, someone may come to believe that their life no longer matters. Perhaps they consider suicide as a real option. (Although contemplating

suicide may itself be an indication of seriousness.) In terms of Nagel's argument, the important question is not whether they think their actions matter (they clearly don't) but is rather 'do they *act* as though none of their choices matter?'

We might say in this case that we do have good reasons for saying that they don't act as though their choices matter. We can say that their *lack* of action shows that they do not practically reveal the fact that there are things that matter to them. Perhaps they wake up every morning, but can't see the point of getting up. 'Why bother?' It might be thought that, by not getting up they must be showing that they think it matters. But, this doesn't seem to be the case in this example. The condition of extreme depression seems to involve the paralysing of one's motivation to make choices. It could be described as the inability to experience anything as mattering.

There is still a sense in which such people may be thought serious. We might have good reasons for saying that the fact that they are depressed is something that does matter to them (it is not experienced as a neutral state). For example, insofar as they contemplate suicide, or are willing to embark on the arduous process of therapy, we should say that they are serious with respect to their depression.

As we have seen, there are certainly aspects of extreme depression and certain forms of slavery which suggest that people in such circumstances avoid seriousness in certain respects. But, we might say that such examples are (hopefully) rare. We can also say that, at least on the surface, these kinds of existence are not ones most of us would seek. In fact, we might think that neither slavery nor depression can be *freely chosen*. In this respect, we might say that we have reasons for wanting to be unavoidably serious, and (except in the most extreme cases) we are. I will be accepting Nagel's claim that humans are unavoidably serious. The level of attention that we devote to our choices (and the time and energy we put into pursuing these choices) is an indication of the fact that we think some things matter.

## 5. *Inescapability of doubt*

The unavoidability of seriousness is the claim that people necessarily think that some things matter. The fact that everyone thinks at least some things matter is not a surprising conclusion. Still, it is still an open question whether people are right to think that the particular things that matter to them *really* matter. The inescapability of doubt is Nagel's claim that we can never conclusively prove that we are right to think any particular thing does matter. Just to make this clear, given the fact that seriousness is unavoidable, we cannot help but live as though some things really do matter. But, if doubt is inescapable, we can never *know* that anything really does matter. This contradictory attitude to whether anything matters is what leads Nagel to describe our situation as absurd.

Nagel has (broadly speaking) two arguments for the inescapability of doubt. (The distinction I have made between these two arguments is not one Nagel makes). The first argument is based on a particular kind of experience we are capable of having (what I will call the special experience argument). The second argument is based on a claim about the limits on what we can know (what I will call his epistemological argument). I have divided Nagel's argument in this way, because, while Nagel's

arguments are not particularly convincing, we will come across more convincing forms of these arguments later in this thesis.<sup>24</sup>

*i. The special experience argument*

Nagel introduces the ‘special experience’ argument in the following way:

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.<sup>25</sup>

According to Nagel, we are all capable of stepping back and viewing our lives and our concerns ‘from a larger perspective’, from outside. Perhaps I am absorbed in making a choice. I am trying to work out which T-shirt to wear today. Suddenly, I ‘rethink’ my situation. I see myself ‘from outside’ and suddenly see how, in the scheme of things, I am struggling over something ‘pathetic’. As Nagel says, from our new perspective, “the view is at once sobering and comic.”<sup>26</sup>

Again, as with the unavoidability of seriousness, Nagel links this special kind of experience with self-consciousness<sup>27</sup>. When describing the unavoidability of seriousness, Nagel’s argued that it is because we are self-conscious that we have the capacity to take our own actions and experiences as the objects of thought. (And it is this that leads to our seriousness). So, we are capable of stepping back and assessing, or contemplating our actions. But this ability to step back (that comes with self-consciousness) also brings with it the capacity to step back even further. It brings with it the ability to adopt a ‘wholly distanced’ perspective (to have the special experience). It gives us the ability to see things from a perspective outside of all possible concerns.

So, the special experience that Nagel is interested in is one where we take a wholly distanced (what Nagel calls a *sub specie aeternitatis*) perspective on ourselves and the world. Nagel says that when we adopt this perspective, we can see our lives as though they didn’t matter, as though our current concerns are “sobering and comic.”<sup>28</sup> Because of this, he argues, doubts about whether anything really matters are inescapable.

*ii. Does the special experience argument justify the inescapability of doubt?*

In this section, I will be arguing that the special experience argument doesn’t provide us with good reasons for thinking that doubt is inescapable. Experiencing our life from ‘outside’ – from a perspective where things don’t matter - is a rare experience for most people. There may even be some people who never have this kind of experience. So there seems to be little reason to think that all human beings must (necessarily) take this kind of perspective on their lives.

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<sup>24</sup> For a stronger version of the special experience argument, based on the fact that nothing could objectively matter, see IV.2. For a more convincing version of the epistemological argument, see V.4.i.

<sup>25</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) *Mortal Questions* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. p. 15

<sup>26</sup> Ibid p. 15

<sup>27</sup> I also argue that there is a relationship between the things that genuinely matter and the fact that we are self-conscious. My reasons are different from Nagel’s. I discuss this relationship in VII.2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid p. 15

On the other hand, it is certainly true that self-consciousness is an inescapable part of human existence. So, perhaps Nagel's thought is that self-consciousness, by its very nature, always brings with it the possibility of stepping back far enough to see our lives or our concerns as potentially meaningless.

Because human beings are unavoidably serious, we experience aspects of the world as mattering. Yet, after adopting the distanced perspective, I am looking at the same world as the one that I thought mattered, except now this same world doesn't seem to have anything in it that matters. Perhaps this might lead us to doubt whether the world really does contain anything that matters.

By itself, this is not enough to motivate serious doubts about whether anything matters. In order to see this, imagine I am very poor, but like to pretend that I am incredibly rich (but I'm living my life as though I was barely getting by financially). Even though I really am poor, I can consistently describe the same facts of my life on the one hand, as though I am rich (but pretending to be poor) and on the other hand, as though I really am poor. The fact that I can consistently view the facts about my life in both ways doesn't yet show that there is a real doubt as to whether I am really rich or poor. Unless we have some reason to think that the alternative description of the facts has some real significance (describes reality correctly) it is not clear that we have to take this possible perspective seriously. In Chapter IV, I will explore a stronger version of Nagel's special experience argument. This argument does at least provide us with some reason to take the special experience seriously (see IV.2). As it stands though, Nagel's discussion of the special experience has not given us any reason to think that doubts about what genuinely matters are inescapable.

To sum up, self-consciousness is a necessary feature of a fully human life. Self-consciousness brings with it the *potential* to have experiences where you step back and view your actions from a perspective where they don't matter. Still, there are two things to be said about this. Firstly, I don't know how common this experience is, but I wouldn't say that it was inescapable. (Perhaps some people are more prone to it than others). Secondly, there is (so far) no argument from Nagel why we should think this detached perspective has any kind of priority when it comes to showing how much meaning there is in the world. So, I want to turn to a more central argument Nagel outlines to show that doubt is inescapable. I call this the epistemological argument.

### *iii. The epistemological argument*

Nagel's second argument for the claim that doubt is inescapable centres on a problem he identifies with any attempt to *justify* why any particular thing matters. Just to be clear, the epistemological argument is not an argument that attempts to show that the world and human life really has no meaning. By calling it the epistemological argument, I have tried to highlight the way in which the argument is supposed to show the unjustifiable nature of the *claims* we might attempt to make about what matters. So, it is an argument that attempts to show the limits of what we can know about what matters. The argument does not make any claim about whether anything genuinely matters.

According to Nagel<sup>29</sup>, if we try to justify why some particular thing we believe matters we seem to be faced with a dilemma if anyone challenges us. Imagine I say to a friend that my PhD matters (to me). My friend asks me to justify this claim. They ask

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid p. 15

me ‘*why* does this matter?’ I give them an answer. I say that getting my PhD might help me get work teaching philosophy. Nagel says that at this stage, my friend is just as entitled to ask the same question about the answer I have given. So, they can ask *why* does getting work teaching philosophy matter?

Nagel says that at this stage I am faced with a dilemma. I have two choices when it comes to my ‘curious friend’. On the one hand, I could keep answering his questions as to why the previous answers I have given matter. The problem with this is that it seems my friend’s line of questioning could carry on infinitely. On the other hand, I could decide to stop at a particular answer, and say – this answer *just does* matter. Nagel claims that if we take the first route, we never get to a final end answer to why something matters; we just keep answering questions forever (at no point do I seem to give my friend a definitive answer.) If we take the second route, we seem to be saying that we believe that something matters, but that we are unwilling or incapable of saying why it matters – we simply stop somewhere *arbitrary* and say that this just does matter, but we don’t provide any reason for thinking it really does matter.

We step back to find that the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere to even after they are called into question.<sup>30</sup>

Let’s go back to my attempts to say why my PhD matters. My curious friend asks me why it matters. I might answer that I am doing it to gain the qualification (though this is only part of the answer). My friend then asks, why does getting a PhD qualification matter? I could answer this by saying that getting a PhD will help me get work teaching philosophy. My friend then asks why does teaching philosophy matter? I respond by saying that through teaching philosophy, I can help people develop and improve their ability to think critically. My friend then asks why does it matter whether people develop their critical thinking? My answer is that this skill will help improve their lives. My friend asks why does it matter if they improve their lives? I say that improving their lives may help them be happier. My curious friend asks why does it matter if they are happier? ... It seems that this kind of questioning could go on indefinitely. In the end, I will end up having to stop at one particular answer. If I try to justify why that particular answer matters, my curious friend will be able to start up his line of questioning again. So, it seems that, in the end, I will be forced to say of one particular answer ‘It just does matter’, but without providing any reason for thinking that it really does matter.

Even if someone wished to supply a further justification for pursuing all the things in life that are commonly regarded as self-justifying, that justification would have to end somewhere too. If *nothing* can justify unless it is justified in terms of something outside itself, which is also justified, then an infinite regress results, and no chain of justification can be complete.<sup>31</sup>

Nagel says that reflection on the epistemological argument forces us to realise that we have no justifiable reason for valuing the things we value. Either, our attempts

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid p. 15

<sup>31</sup> Ibid p. 12

to justify valuing something go on forever (and so we never give any definitive answer to why it is valuable). Or, we find that we are choosing to accept the value of certain things without being able to give any good reason for making this choice.

It might be argued that we are having problems satisfying my 'curious friend' because the examples discussed so far are too small scale, too petty. For example, perhaps if I am involved in some 'grand' scheme, I might think that such projects would be immune from the epistemological argument. Perhaps if I am part of a larger group, with a larger more grand purpose, I might think that I am part of something that provides a reasonable answer to my curious friend. Imagine I think of myself as a part of God's plan. Or I might think my actions matter because of the part they play in bringing about a workers' revolution. I might be working in Africa with Aids patients. It might be thought in these cases that my actions just do matter in virtue of their relationship with this 'grand' scheme.

As Nagel says<sup>32</sup>, it is difficult to see how this response avoids the basic problem posed by the epistemological argument. Even if we are a part of something much larger, this larger enterprise is always going to be open to questioning in exactly the same way. If I say that being part of God's plan means that my life really does matter, my curious friend can ask why does God's plan matter? I might say that this matters because I am a part of a universe that is a drama with a happy ending. Again, my curious friend will ask why this matters? I might say this matters because then, any act of mine becomes a contribution to the perfect development of the universe. So, my curious friend asks why this matters? Once again, it seems that we will reach a stage where we are forced into saying 'It just does matter, but I can't say why.'

iv. *Does the epistemological argument justify the inescapability of doubt?*

I want to start with the biggest problem I have with the epistemological argument. I will be arguing that the implications of the epistemological argument are far too strong. If we accept the epistemological argument, we have to accept that there can be no such thing as a reasonable justification for *anything at all*.

As will become clear, the problems with justifying claims that Nagel identifies are not problems specifically to do with claims about values or claims about what matters. Nagel presents his arguments as though they were special difficulties with judgements related to values<sup>33</sup>. But, the problem Nagel brings up is one that relates to *all* forms of justification. In trying to give reasons why particular activities are valuable, Nagel argues that we must either keep giving reasons to infinity (and as such, never give an answer) or simply stop somewhere (without being able to give a proper reason why the place where you stop should be thought of as valuable.) But this account of giving a good reason seems to rule out the possibility of ever being able to give a reasonable justification for *anything*. After all, there is no alternative to either stopping at a particular reason, or carrying on forever with any possible attempt to justify anything. But, if stopping at a particular reason could never be reasonable, then there could be no such thing as ever giving a good reason for anything – not only with claims concerning what matters, but every conceivable claim we make. So, this is how strong

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid p. 15

<sup>33</sup> In this respect, Nagel's argument has parallels to Moore's open question argument (Cf. Moore, G.E. (1903) *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge University Press: London).

the epistemological argument is. If we accept it, we must accept that nothing would or could ever be a reasonable justification.

In order to illustrate this, just think of the number of different forms of justification that are also prey to the epistemological argument. For example, my curious friend could do the same thing with someone trying to give a mathematical justification, or someone trying to justify some fact about the world, or someone justifying a case in court or indeed someone trying to justify a philosophical position.

I want to look at one example in detail. Imagine I am interested in whether the atom exists. I might ask a scientist, why should I believe in the existence of the atom? She might tell me that there are thousands of experiments that prove the existence of atoms. I might then ask why should I take these experiments as good evidence for the existence of atoms? She might reply that the experiments were carried out in a scientific manner. I might then ask why being carried out in a scientific manner justifies their truth? ... and so on. It seems that the scientist is forced to either carry on answering my questions forever (and so never give me an answer) or to just stop somewhere (without saying why this particular answer justifies their claims).

Even though the claim that atoms exist is prey to the epistemological argument, we would be reluctant to say that the claim that atoms exist is wholly unjustified. If Nagel accepts the claim that atoms exist is justified (even though any attempt to justify it will be prey to the epistemological argument) it seems that it will remain an open question as to whether we can be a good justification for claiming that some things matter. Perhaps though, Nagel might 'bite the bullet', and accept that any claim that is prey to the epistemological argument is actually unjustified (and so the claim that atoms exist isn't actually justified).

This just causes deeper problems for Nagel. For, it seems that the epistemological argument leads to a *reductio ad absurdum*. Imagine we ask Nagel to justify the epistemological argument itself to my curious friend. When Nagel attempts to do this, he is surely going to find that his justifications for his claim will have to end somewhere (or Nagel's justifications will have to keep going to infinity – and he will never give us a definitive answer).

Think of how Nagel might attempt to answer my curious friend's question 'why are we justified in accepting the epistemological argument?' Nagel might say that our judgements that anything matters are faced by the dilemma (stop or carry on forever). My curious friend might ask Nagel 'why does the fact that we are faced with a dilemma when we try to justify the claim that something matters mean that there can be no such thing as a good justification for these kinds of claims?' Nagel's answer might be that stopping somewhere and carrying on forever are both unsatisfactory as far as a justification goes. Imagine my curious friend is particularly interested in why stopping at a particular answer is always unsatisfactory. (This is the claim I think we should be interested in, given the fact that no-one does carry on giving justifications forever). So, my curious friend asks Nagel why stopping at a particular answer can never be reasonable? Nagel's answer is that, because we just stop somewhere, we do provide any justification for thinking that this is a reasonable place to stop – and so the place where we stop are arbitrary and contingent. I hope it is clear that there is no reason why my curious friend can't carry on with this questioning indefinitely. It seems clear that if my curious friend keeps pressing Nagel about the epistemological argument, he will either have to just stop somewhere (without justifying the place where he stops) or he can keep answering my curious friend's questions (and so fail to provide any definitive justification). It looks as though, if we accept that the epistemological argument is true, then we would also have to accept that the epistemological argument itself is wholly

unjustified. In other words, the epistemological argument leads to a clear *reductio ad absurdum*.

This (obviously) suggests that there must be something wrong with the epistemological argument. In particular (given the thought that, as a matter of fact, people don't try to give justifications forever) if there are possible ways of justifying claims, there must be occasions where stopping at a particular answer is reasonable. Nagel's claim is that if we refuse to answer one of my 'curious friend's' further questions, we must be choosing to believe something without having any grounds for our belief. In other words, my view that something matters is arbitrary.

A large part of this thesis is concerned with exploring whether the things that matter to us are arbitrary. Let us assume that we are going to have to stop somewhere in our attempts to defend why something matters. Given the fact that we never do continue giving answers to infinity, this seems a reasonable assumption. If we return to the example of the scientist attempting to prove the existence of the atom, we might think that many of the answers they gave to my curious friend were perfectly good justifications. The scientist surely has *better* justifications for her view than, say someone who believes that atoms don't exist because he's never seen one. If we think that there is a difference between a reasonable, rather than unreasonable justification, the distinction cannot be *solely* based on whether the justification stops somewhere. The question we need to be asking is whether our justifications end anywhere good.

As it is, my curious friend's questioning method doesn't seem to be a particularly good way of exploring why we think something genuinely matters. I used the example earlier of my curious friend asking me to justify my claim that my PhD matters. I left the questioning at a point where my last answer to my curious friend was that developing my student's critical skills could help make my students happy. This makes it seem as though, in order to justify why my PhD matters I need to prove that my student's happiness matters. The strange thing is that my student's happiness really isn't any part of my motivation for writing my PhD. In a similar way, the scientist's claim about the existence of the atom was not a claim about the reliability of scientific method.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that my curious friend's questioning will miss something if each of my curious friend's questions has a number of answers. For example, when my curious friend asked me why my PhD mattered, I said that it would help me get a qualification. But this is only part of the answer. I am also doing it in order to develop my own skills. There is also a sense in which I am doing it for its own sake. My curious friend's questioning method will be unable accommodate all these different answers to a single question.

Another reason why continuing to answer my curious friend's questions seems to take us away from our real justifications is that we have often given our actual justification to the first question. The scientist believes in the existence of the atom because they have seen the experiments that prove it. That is the genuine justification for their belief. So, in providing a good justification, what is important is not that we are able to keep answering my curious friend. In many cases (e.g. my daughter's life support machine) I might feel that my first answer is the real answer.

So, think for example of someone faced with a very serious dilemma. Imagine I am faced with a decision as to whether I should turn off my daughter's life support machine. My curious friend asks me why this matters. I say that my choice involves the life of my own daughter. If my curious friend then asks me why this matters, I might feel at a loss as to what to say to them. But, at the same time, I don't feel that this is because my view that it matters is arbitrary. Rather, I might think that someone who



doesn't understand why my daughter's life would matter to me must be missing something. Nagel says something pretty similar himself.

What seems to us to confer meaning, justification, significance does so in virtue of the fact that we *need* no more reasons after a certain point.<sup>34</sup> [my italics]

There is in fact a hidden assumption in Nagel's argument. This assumption is that all reasonable justifications need to be other claims (in language). Yet, in a way, the inescapability of doubt should make it clear (if there can be such a thing as reasonable justifications for things – in maths, science, philosophy etc.) that justifications cannot be purely grounded in linguistic claims.

Nagel does perhaps provide us with a way of getting out of all this. The unavoidability of seriousness made clear that people show that things matter to them, not principally through what claims they make (what their stated beliefs happen to be) but through their actions. As Nagel himself says:

What sustains us, in belief as in action, is not reason or justification, but something more basic than these – for we go on in the same way even after we are convinced that the reasons have given out.<sup>35</sup>

So, I think we have good reasons for thinking that we show what matters to us not only through the claims we make, or the answers we can give to questions about such claims. We back up our choices and our aims with much more than words. We back up our belief that something matters with actions. (This is explored in more depth in chapter VI.8.iii. At this stage, this is just a suggestion.) At the very least, we must believe that if there is ever to be such a thing as a good justification in any field, there must be some way to ground justifications other than merely another claim to be questioned.

It should be clear then that our concern should be not whether we can keep answering my curious friend, but whether the answers we give him are *good* answers. There is still a live question here (a question that will remain with us until Chapter VII). We can accept that people do think things matter (the unavoidability of seriousness). But it remains a live question whether they are *right* in thinking such things matter.

As will become clear, the fact that someone thinks something matters does not guarantee that it really does matter. After all, people sometimes reach a point where they revise their views, and come to believe that something they thought mattered doesn't really matter. (E.g. 'I thought my job was all that mattered to me until I realised the effect of being a workaholic had on my family...') At the very least then, we need to find a way of distinguish things that actually matter from things that we mistakenly believe matter. Having said that, there is nothing in the argument for the inescapability of doubt to make us think that there couldn't be a good justification for thinking that something genuinely matters.

Nagel's account of giving a good reason seems to rule out the possibility of ever being able to give a reasonable justification for anything. In all cases, there is no alternative to either stopping at a particular reason, or carrying on forever. If stopping at a particular reason could never count as giving a good reason, then there could be no such thing as ever giving a good reason for anything – not only with questions

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid p. 17

<sup>35</sup> Ibid p. 20

concerning the meaning of life, but every conceivable reason. In other words, everything would be unreasonable. What the discussion of the epistemological argument has suggested is that the question we ought to be asking is not; do our reasons come to an end? After all, we can assume that they must. Instead, our question should be; do our reasons for undertaking activities end anywhere *good*?

## 6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that we should accept Nagel's claim that seriousness is unavoidable. But, I have argued that neither the special experience argument nor the epistemological argument (as they stand) justifies the claim that we cannot know whether anything genuinely matters.

My intention is to discover whether anything genuinely matters. Perhaps it might be thought that the unavoidability of seriousness *alone* might show that some things genuinely matter (after all, they matter to us). By itself, the fact that everyone thinks that some things do matter doesn't prove that anything *genuinely* matters. It might even lead you to think that Nagel is right that our claims about what matters are arbitrary. If something matters *simply* in virtue of the fact that someone thinks it matters (if all answers to my curious friend's questions are as good as each other) then it looks like there is no (rational) way to choose between different claims about what matters.

I will be arguing (in chapters VI-VIII) that we have reasons for thinking that some things in particular genuinely matter (e.g. our needs, our happiness and our relationships with other people). In saying this, I will be saying that these things matter more than some other things (e.g. pleasure, power and status, for their own sakes). In order to show this, we need more than just the unavoidability of seriousness.

In Chapter IV, I will look at arguments that attempt to prove that *nothing* genuinely matters (in which case all answers to my curious friend's questions will be equally bad). If this turns out to be true, we would also have good reasons to think that our claims about what matters are arbitrary. After all, if nothing genuinely matters, then it seems irrelevant what we choose to value. They will all be mistakes.

If we assume for a moment that our claims about what matters are not arbitrary (if some claims about what matters are more justified than others) it seems that we will still be required to give some kind of answer to some of my curious friend's questions. After all, if there is a distinction between those things that genuinely matter and those things we only happen to think matter, my curious friend seems entitled to ask me for my reasons for thinking that my claim that something matters is of the first kind (i.e. genuinely matters).

Before exploring these issues, in the next chapter I will attempt to provide a 'straight' answer to Nagel's inescapability of doubt. I will explore the way in which (at least in some contexts) there are cases which seem to be perfectly reasonable answers to my curious friend's questions. I will try to show that there are (or can be) reasonable ways in which we can assess different places to 'stop' in answering my 'curious friend'. My main aim is to show that some answers to my curious friend (on the face of it) are *better* than others. It is not clear that this attempt is totally successful (as it also highlights the fact that there are still some threats to the idea that anything genuinely matters that need to be dealt with.) But the discussion does help bring forward the value (or lack of value) of different kinds of activities, which become important later in the thesis (see Chapters VI - VIII).

## CHAPTER III

### IS WORK MEANINGLESS?

#### 1. Introduction

Nagel's account of the epistemological argument set out a potential problem with our attempts to justify why anything matters: In trying to give reasons why particular activities matter, Nagel argues that we must either keep giving reasons to infinity (and as such, never give an answer) or simply stop somewhere (without giving any proper reason why the place where you stop actually matters.) In the last chapter, I argued that, if we accept that stopping at a particular reason could never count as giving a good reason, then there could be no such thing as ever giving a good reason for anything – not only with questions concerning the meaning of life, but every conceivable reason. In other words, nothing could be reasonable.

One implication of the inescapability of doubt is that all answers to the question 'why does this matter' are as good as any other (it is arbitrary where we stop). The thought is that all answers to the question are in a similar position. At some point, the attempt to defend them will have to end in an unjustified 'opinion', where we dogmatically assert as fact that something *just does* matter, despite not giving any reason for our view.

In this chapter, I want to explore a number of different examples of different kinds of activities. I hope this will illustrate the fact that all attempts to justify why something matters are not equally arbitrary. I will attempt to show (at least in some contexts) that there are rational considerations that apply to our claims that something matters.

In order to do this, I want to discuss a paper called 'On the Meaning of Life'<sup>36</sup> by Moritz Schlick. In this paper, Schlick discusses the concepts of work and play (which he defines in very specific ways). Schlick's discussion of work seems to show that we can have good reasons for thinking that certain kinds of activities really don't matter. The discussion of play also shows that there seem to be answers to why something matters that provide my curious friend with no opportunity for further questioning. (In such cases, we might think that stopping at a particular answer appears to be perfectly reasonable).

So, I will be using Schlick's arguments to examine whether we do in fact have 'reasonable' ways of assessing the reasons people have for engaging in activities. It then becomes possible for us (at least in extreme cases) to show that some activities can fail to provide any meaning, while other activities can be shown to be meaningful. If this is right, then Nagel is wrong to say that we simply cannot know whether any of the reasons we have for engaging in activities are good ones. At the very least, this will show that attempts to justify why something matters can (in extreme cases) actually be 'reasonably' assessed. (In other words, Nagel is wrong to say that our decision that something matters is purely arbitrary).

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<sup>36</sup> Schlick, M. (1987) 'On the Meaning of Life'. From Hanfling (ed.) Life and Meaning. Blackwell:Oxford

## 2. Work and play

In order to outline and assess Schlick's claims, we need to have a clear understanding of how he defines work and play. Schlick defines **work** as any activity undertaken *solely* in order to realise some purpose (distinct from the activity).<sup>37</sup> The first thing to say about this definition is that by 'work', Schlick does not specifically mean economic work. So, we do not judge whether an activity is work by looking at whether an activity leads to financial gain. Any activity undertaken *solely* for financial gain would be an example of work. But, an activity that is not solely undertaken for financial gain, but which does in fact lead to financial gain wouldn't be work in Schlick's sense.

Work for financial gain (what I will call economic work) is something I am interested in. After all, a large amount of the time and energy of people in our society is spent on economic work. (In part, I hope this chapter will eventually provide a way of assessing the relative costs and benefits of different kinds of economic work. This will be done in the Conclusion.4)

Under Schlick's definition, if I view an activity as work, I believe that the activity itself has absolutely no intrinsic value – the activity only has an instrumental value. Because the expected outcome is the sole reason for me engaging in the activity, I would have no reason for engaging in an activity I view as work if it were not for the expected outcome.

As I said, by Schlick's definition, the result that work aims for need not be purely financial. There are other instrumental reasons that might lead us to engage in activities that we view as having no intrinsic value as activities. For example, I might spend my time inoculating children in Africa, even though I might find this activity ('in itself') repetitive and boring. Or, I might spend my time filling envelopes; sending out information on a political cause I believe has value. In each case, the activity as such isn't valued by me, but I engage in these activities because I value the results. I inoculate the children because it can save their lives; I fill the envelopes because I am committed to the cause etc. Of course, I can also work for selfish reasons. I might do something I believe has no intrinsic value in order to gain things like money, fame or status.

By contrast, Schlick defines **play** as activities that are performed *purely* for their own sake<sup>38</sup>. So, for example, I love playing the guitar. I have no wish to become famous from doing this. I'm not looking to impress other people. I've never earned money from it (in fact it has consistently cost me money). I just do it *for its own sake*. I take pleasure in the activity itself. I would say that, playing the guitar is its own reward.

By Schlick's definition, work and play are perhaps two extremes. It would seem that most activities would not fall under either work or play, but rather are undertaken for a mixture of motives. I will return to this thought below.

## 3. Examples of work and play

I want now to set out a few concrete examples of work and play. As Schlick defines it, work is any activity that is wholly unsatisfying in itself (which is only done

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid p. 62

<sup>38</sup> Ibid p. 63

for some resulting goal). So, for example, cleaning my toilet would count as work. In my case, this is an activity I do for purely instrumental reasons (having a clean toilet that doesn't smell). It is not an activity that I find enjoyable 'for its own sake'. Another example of work would be mechanical, repetitive factory work. I once worked in a coat hanger factory, where my job was to wait for the machine to produce a box worth of coat hangers. When there were enough coat hangers, I packed them in a box. There was nothing valuable about the activity itself. (I certainly found nothing valuable about the activity). I only engaged in the activity for the sake of *the wage*.

Another example of work might be unpleasant activities performed for some altruistic end – for example, I might spend my time digging wells in order to help supply African villages with water. Digging is an activity that I do not think of as having any intrinsic value. I dig in order to help those without water. I wouldn't be interested in digging if I didn't think it would make some difference to people's lives.

Now I want to set out a few examples of play – activities undertaken solely for their own sake. I used the example above of playing a musical instrument. You can play the guitar in order to become rich and famous. But if you play an instrument purely for the sheer pleasure of playing, then this is an example of play. Personally, I love playing a game called hackysack. (A game where a group of people try to stop a beanbag hitting the floor using anything but their hands.) This is a game I get great pleasure from playing (it is physical, co-operative, social, spontaneous etc.) I play hackysack for the love of playing hackysack.

Schlick's discussion of play tends to focus on artistic creative activities. "The brightest example [of play] is to be seen in the creation of the artist."<sup>39</sup> If you go out to beautiful scenic spots in order to simply enjoy painting, then this is an example of play. Schlick also talks about craftsmanship. For example, making a table by hand, if undertaken for the sake of the activity itself, can count as play.

There are some further examples that may look like they count as play. We certainly don't do crosswords, play patience or play computer games in order to achieve some further goal. These seem to be activities that are usually done for their own sake. Schlick makes no mention of these kinds of activities. Later in this chapter, I will argue that Schlick has good reasons for not focusing on these forms of play. While these activities are done for their own sake, the solitary, unproductive nature of these kinds of activities may cause problems if someone makes them the centre of their life (see Section 8).

A key point to bear in mind is that the difference between work and play is not decided by looking carefully at the activity (although, some activities will be more capable of being done in the spirit of play). What makes something work rather than play is the *motivation* behind the activity. If we want to see whether people are engaging in work or play, we need to understand why they are doing the activity. So, the same activity can be work or play, depending on the motivation. If I write my PhD solely for the qualification, then this would be work. If I simply write my PhD for its own sake, just because I find it an enjoyable thing to do (even if I didn't receive the qualification I would still think it was a valuable way of spending my time) then this would be play. As it happens, perhaps my motivation is actually a mix of the two motivations, and so is neither work nor play (as defined by Schlick).

In many (if not most) cases, the distinction between the activity as such and the results of the activity are not so simply separated. For example, I am passionate about teaching philosophy, and would say that I find the activity satisfying in itself. But, I

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid p. 64

know I would not find it as satisfying if certain results – i.e. helping people develop skills – didn't follow from it. Similarly, I love hackysack (for its own sake). But part of what I enjoy is the co-operative relationships it develops. If I played hackysack with a group of people, but no-one enjoyed it or there was no sense of a 'shared enterprise', this would diminish my interest. If no-one ever enjoyed it, I'm not sure I'd still love it. Similarly, part of a painter's intention when painting might be to communicate something to others. Part of their enjoyment of painting comes from this ability to communicate to others through this medium.

It can start to look as though (if these examples can't be play because they are in some way concerned with their being some kind of outcome) play, as defined by Schlick, must be something wholly self-indulgent and unproductive. In fact, there is no contradiction between loving an activity for its own sake, and being concerned with possible or likely outcomes. Focusing on the fact that the distinction between work and play is concerned with *motivation* should illustrate this.

When an activity (such as teaching philosophy) is done well (with skill) the outcome of developing people's abilities is an *inherent* part of the activity. (It is something that is an inherent part of doing the activity well). So, I am motivated to teach purely out of my enjoyment of the activity. But, part of what makes an activity, such as teaching, enjoyable 'in itself' is the way it can help develop other people's skills. So long as I am *motivated* by my pure love of the activity, the activity will be play, even if part of what makes the activity satisfying is the fact that it has certain outcomes for other people.

In a similar way, because the distinction between work and play is based on *motivation*, there is no problem with thinking that activities that you do for their own sake might lead to instrumental goods. I might paint purely for the pleasure of it. The fact that I might sell a painting done in the spirit of play for a vast sum of money doesn't prevent the activity being play.

Perhaps in other (possibly most) cases, our motivations for engaging in an activity are a mixture of work and play. When it comes to teaching, there are many aspects of the job that I find satisfying (e.g. contact with the students). At the same time though, I find large parts of the job boring and repetitive (e.g. paperwork, marking essays etc.) So, some parts of my job are done for their own sake, while others are done for money, or because they are things I have to do in order to allow me to do something I find satisfying. So, as Schlick defines them, it is clear that work and play are two extremes of motivation for engaging in activities. As long as this is kept in mind, I think we can still learn something from looking at these extremes. Firstly, I want to look at the way in which a life devoted entirely to work has the potential to be a meaningless existence. I will then go on to look at how activities done in the spirit of play may provide a reasonable answer to my curious friend, and so help us escape Nagel's inescapability of doubt.

#### **4. Limits on the 'meaning' of work**

At its most extreme, we can say that an absurdity or circularity seems to follow for anyone who undertakes work *simply* in order to maintain their life. As I said in the last section, work activities can only receive their value from their goals. They are activities in which we see no intrinsic value. So, if we take away the instrumental good, the activity we are left with is one which we accept has no value. (If it does, it isn't work as defined.) If I work simply in order to maintain a life of work, it appears difficult

to see how such a life could have any value (by my own lights). To illustrate this, think of how a discussion between such a worker and my curious friend would go. My curious friend asks the worker ‘Why do you work?’ The worker can reply ‘I work in order to maintain my life’. So, my curious friend will then ask ‘What is valuable about your life?’ Given the fact that the life of the worker consists of activities that they do not value (they are, after all, only doing it for the sake of the money) the worker looks like they are in a difficult position. It is not clear how they could point to any positive content of their lives. After all, they themselves cannot see *any* value in their life.

Of course, people who work at jobs that provide no intrinsic satisfaction rarely work simply in order to maintain their own life. They might work in order to support the life of their family, or they might work in order to support a lifestyle that they value. Still, at some point, a person who works will need to be able to point to *some* positive content that their life has. Even if the worker is working to support another life (e.g. a child) if they know that they are just raising their child in order for them to have a life of valueless activities merely in order to survive, then my curious friend’s questions will again be extremely uncomfortable.

Working just in order to survive is a very extreme case. No one (although, perhaps people in slavery may be one example) spends their whole life *just* working. Still, my curious friend’s questions seem pressing for anyone who devotes a large amount of time to activities with no intrinsic value in order to achieve some other goal. In order to provide my curious friend with a reasonable answer, a person who spends their life working firstly needs to *achieve* the goal that motivated them to engage in the activity. (Given the fact that you are only doing the activity in order to get paid, if your employer refuses to pay you, again by your own lights, the activity will have been worthless). Secondly, the goals that motivate the worker to devote large amounts of their time to worthless activities need to be valuable goals. After all, something valuable will be needed to justify the time spent on the ‘worthless’ activity. I will be examining how we might begin to assess what ends might themselves be valuable after discussing play. What we can say at this stage is that engaging in worthless activities solely in order to maintain a life full of worthless activities would be a life that fails to have any meaning. There seem good reasons to talk of the absurdity of such a life.

So, in order to justify time spent on work (activities that have no intrinsic value) someone would need to provide a satisfactory answer to two further questions; did I (or was I likely to) achieve the result that motivated me to engage in the activity? And, is the result aimed at by this activity *itself* valuable? These questions need to have a satisfactory answer, as the activity itself (by their own estimation) isn’t valuable. In order to make this clearer I will now contrast it with the situation of someone doing activities in the spirit of play.

## **5. Play and the epistemological argument**

Schlick defines play as activities performed for their own sake. They are engaged in because the activity itself (or engaging in that activity) is considered to be valuable. (The sole motivation for engaging in the activity is that the activity is seen as ‘good in-itself’). My own examples would be doing tai chi, dancing, mixing drum & bass on my decks, playing hackysack, playing guitar, and spending time with others. Unlike examples of work, I do not view these activities as being valuable because they help me achieve some goal or purpose. They are activities that I think of as good in-themselves.

Imagine two people who spend large amounts of their time playing the guitar. One (let's call him Anil) devotes lots of time to playing the guitar because they want to be famous. The other (let's call him Dave) plays the guitar purely for the sheer pleasure of playing the guitar.

As we saw in the last section, we can say that Anil may or may not be right that his activity is worthwhile. If my curious friend asks Anil why playing the guitar matters, Anil will reply that it matters because it will help him become famous. Anil's response to my curious friend would be reasonable only if two conditions are met. Only if Anil actually becomes famous (or has a reasonable expectation of becoming famous) due to his practice, will his activity have been worthwhile. Also, only if becoming famous is itself actually something of value will his activity be seen as worthwhile. In other words, my curious friend's further question 'why is becoming famous worthwhile?' will be pressing for Anil.

What kind of position is Dave in? If he plays the guitar for its own sake, then nothing else needs to follow in order to say that, by his own lights, his activity was worthwhile. If my curious friend were to ask him why playing the guitar was a valuable activity, he seems entitled to say 'it just is.' Any further questions my curious friend might come up with just don't seem pressing. We might say that the value of the activity is contained within itself. And so to respond to the question 'why is playing the guitar valuable?' by saying 'It just is' seems, in this case, perfectly reasonable.

All this is perhaps a little bit too neat. I wonder if my curious friend might be able to come up with a further question that stands in need of justification when it comes to Dave. My 'curious friend' might ask why does Dave thinking it is a worthwhile way to spend his time prove that it *really is* worthwhile? As I mentioned in the last chapter, just because someone thinks something matters to them, this doesn't yet prove that it really does matter. There may also be concerns that being truly valuable (meaningful) requires something more 'profound' than these everyday examples. It might be thought that in order to show that something matters, we need to show that it matters 'in the scheme of things'. (I will return to this at the end of this chapter, but this issue will not be properly thrashed out until Chapters IV, V and VI.)

Before turning to that, I want to look at the kinds of activities that lend themselves to play, and ask what is it that makes these kinds of activities satisfying 'in themselves', and look at what instrumental goods might tend to follow from such activities. This will involve attempting to justify Schlick's focus on certain kinds of play – namely creative activities. At the same time I will be attempting to moderate some of Schlick's more excessive claims about the centrality of play in our lives.

## **6. Play as artistic creative activity**

In this section, I want to take a closer look at the types of activities Schlick focuses on when he discusses play. In doing this, I hope to say something about the kinds of activities that lend themselves to play. I also want to explore what benefits might follow from the kinds of activities most suited to play. (This discussion will become relevant in Chapters VI, VII and VIII). As I discussed above, there is no problem in thinking that activities engaged in for their own sake might lead to positive outcomes. Something might be produced, or some benefits for the person doing the activity might follow. I want to explore what these might be.

When Schlick discusses examples of play, he tends to focus on creative activities. "The brightest example [of play] ... is to be seen in the creation of the



artist.”<sup>40</sup> There are three activities that Schlick specifically discusses when talking of activities done in the spirit of play; artistic activity (e.g. painting), craftsmanship (e.g. making furniture) and thinking (e.g. scientific investigation).

Schlick describes how each of the activities can be ‘intrinsically’ pleasurable. “[The artist’s] activity ... is itself pleasure.”<sup>41</sup> “Every true craftsman can experience ... the joy in sheer creation.”<sup>42</sup> “*Knowing*, too, is a pure play of the spirit ... he rejoices to measure his powers against the riddles which reality propounds to him.”<sup>43</sup> The fact that engaging in these kinds of activity is a pleasure is part of what makes the activity valuable in itself (play).

Not only are the activities Schlick focuses on are also ones which are pleasurable to do, they also produce something concrete. In the examples Schlick discusses, we can say that a painting, a table, or a new theory are produced. More than this, Schlick suggests that things produced in the spirit of play are themselves things of real value. In the case of a painter, “[his] activity, his shaping of his work by inspiration, is itself pleasure, and it is half by accident that *enduring values arise from it*.”<sup>44</sup> [my italics] In the case of a craftsman, producing objects in the spirit of play “makes the product into a work of art.”<sup>45</sup> In the case of the scientist, they can produce theories, and “benefits ... accrue from this.”<sup>46</sup>

The creative activities Schlick discusses have other things in common. One of the central things is that these activities require a great deal of skill to do well. (They are activities we could describe loosely as ‘arts’. There is an art to doing them well). This is surely part of the source of the pleasure of these kinds of activities. Humans seem to take great pleasure from employing a skill well. Doing something highly technical skilfully is something that gives people satisfaction. For example, in the past I have gained a great deal of satisfaction from explaining (e.g.) Sartre’s account of consciousness clearly to students. It takes a great deal of skill, knowledge and ability etc. to do this well, and I get a great deal of satisfaction out of communicating such complex ideas clearly. (In the next section, I will be contrasting activities that involve deploying skills with the kinds of mind numbingly, boring and repetitive activities that can only be done as work – see next section).

So, the kind of activities Schlick focuses on are ones that involve the deployment of skills. One of the facts about skilful activities of this kind is that, if you spend any sustained period of time doing these activities, you will tend to improve your ability to do the activity skilfully. A sustained period of playing the guitar will tend to improve one’s ability to play the guitar. The same is true with painting, craftsmanship, and scientific enquiry. So, it seems that creative activities involve not only the deployment of skills, but also (simply by engaging in these kinds of activities) the development and improvement of these same skills.

By gaining and improving ‘creative’ skills, we thereby improve our ability to create things. The things we produce improve in quality as our skills improve. In this sense, play can help us develop the skills necessary to look after ourselves – to meet our needs, improve our health etc. (see the next section). In particular, children seem to use

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid p.64

<sup>41</sup> Ibid p. 64

<sup>42</sup> Ibid p. 65

<sup>43</sup> Ibid p. 64/5

<sup>44</sup> Ibid p. 64

<sup>45</sup> Ibid p. 65

<sup>46</sup> Ibid p. 64/5

play as the primary way of developing the skills that will enable them to eventually become self-sufficient. (This will be discussed in detail in VIII.2.iii).

Developing creative skills doesn't just improve our ability to take care of ourselves. It also helps us to express ourselves. Creative skills are (at least in part) skills through which we can express ourselves. So, through engaging in creative activities, we can improve our ability to express ourselves musically (guitar) or improve our ability to express our thoughts (philosophy) or improve our ability to express ourselves creatively (painter). So, doing these kinds of activities involves developing one's ability to express your *self*. This also provides you with the opportunity to improve your self-awareness. By making yourself present in the world, by creating something concrete, you open yourself up to the insights of others, and to yourself. (The importance of developing our self-awareness will be discussed in VI.8 and VIII.6).

Also, when we engage in creative activities, we actively relate to and affect the world. We become an active part of the world. We affect the world and make a difference to it. We have an impact on the world, and develop an active relationship to the world. (The importance of our activities having an impact on the world will be particularly important in VI.3 and VII. Part 2).

We might say that creative play respects the uniqueness of human beings. It is not compulsive, mechanical behaviour. Engaging in play is the *free* activity of the self. Because each individual has different potentialities and life experiences, this means that human selves are as varied in (creative) potential as they are physically. Creative activities allow human beings to express themselves, it allows individuality to be present. The creative activities that Schlick discusses are highly skilled, and this allows a structure within which free expression is possible (almost inevitable). No two PhD's are identical (unless they are plagiarised). No two paintings are identical. The fact that an activity involves the application of skills implies that the activity allows for a certain level of flexibility in how they are done (allows for creativity). The painter has many choices to make - the subject to be painted, the selection of tools, the choice of which techniques to use on which occasion, the paints to be used, the impression aimed at etc. Similarly, the craftsman may have the choice between different designs, or making their own designs, as well as the choice of tools and materials. The scientist, if she is to make any real breakthroughs, will have to design new experiments and attempt to find new solutions to particular problems.

Compare creative skills with the kinds of skills required to work on an assembly line in a factory<sup>47</sup>. If I spend my time at work repeatedly filling boxes with coat hangers, there is no real sophisticated, stimulating use of skills. I certainly don't develop (transferable) skills that might increase my abilities (including my ability to communicate or express myself, or to look after myself). The machine that produces the coat hangers goes at a mechanical pace, and so in this job, I am forced to go at a similarly mechanical pace. My work is defined by the rhythm of the machine. So, this kind of work doesn't allow much (if any) room for spontaneity and creativity.

Think of how different the activities of a craftsman making a table are from a factory worker working on an assembly line that produces tables. The activities of the second have a mechanical character that the first does not. The first allows for creativity, relating with care and attention to the world (in many cases, demands it). The

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<sup>47</sup> Working on an assembly line is not the only form of mechanical work. There is a different form of mechanised work in e.g. call centre work. There is a set level of 'enthusiasm' you need to display. (One might almost say a mechanisation of the emotions.) Apart from that, all you need are the skills required to read a script out.

second does not tend to rely on employing sophisticated skills. In the case of the craftsman, they will be producing something unique. In the case of the worker on an assembly line, their ability to affect the quality and nature of what they produce is extremely limited. In other words, unlike the assembly line worker, the craftsman is able to express themselves in their activity.

All of this suggests that, not only are certain kinds of skilful creative activities more enjoyable and pleasurable to do, they also have important instrumental consequences that mechanical, repetitive activities don't have. So, it might look as though activities of play are in a win-win situation. Not only are they thought valuable in themselves. They also seem to have valuable consequences. This leads Schlick to make some very strong claims for the centrality play ought to have in human life.

## 7. Bringing some balance to Schlick's claims

In a number of places, Schlick suggests that play is the *only* possible way in which activities can be said to have meaning. "What is not worth doing for its own sake, don't do for anything else's sake!"<sup>48</sup> If this is true, there could never be any good reason for engaging in an activity other than the fact that you find it valuable in itself. As we have seen, there is some truth to the idea that a person who works simply in order to sustain their life of work is in danger, by his own standards, of having nothing of meaning or value in their lives. But, this alone doesn't come close to justifying the claim that the only good reason we can have for engaging in activities is that they are thought valuable 'in themselves'.

I want to look at a defence Schlick gives for his view that only play can be meaningful. He says, "If life has a meaning, it must lie in the present, for only the present is real."<sup>49</sup> So, by focusing on results, on achieving goals, "man misses the only satisfaction that can give him real happiness – the experience of the activity of the present moment."<sup>50</sup>

There may be much in favour of valuing "the experience of the activity of the present moment."<sup>51</sup> But, Schlick's argument doesn't justify aiming to make all our activities play. For a start, even if we accept Schlick's view that only the present is real, this doesn't rule out the possibility that real meaning (significance or value) might come in some future present – not the present present. Schlick is right that there must be *some* present at which the meaning is 'delivered'. But, this needn't lead to the view that our actions ought *only* to be focused on maximising the value of the experience of the activity of present moment. Still, you might think that the results of your work need to be valuable enough to justify the sacrifice of the time (all those 'present' moments) spent on work. You have, after all devoted time to unsatisfying activities for the sake of the future result aimed at. Having said all this, Schlick's argument doesn't prove that *nothing* could outweigh the sacrifice of time to unsatisfying activities.

There are other reasons for thinking that there are things other than 'satisfying moments' that are truly valuable to us. For example (as I will argue in Chapter VII. Part 1) we might think that meeting our own needs is something that genuinely matters to us. After all, if you fail to meet your vital needs, you will die. We might think, especially if your life contains many inherently valuable moments, you will have good reasons for

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid p. 67

<sup>49</sup> Ibid p. 69

<sup>50</sup> Fromm, E. (2001) *The Fear of Freedom*. Routledge: London. P. 226

<sup>51</sup> Ibid p. 226

wanting to sustain your life. In these circumstances, if we have to choose between play and meeting our vital needs, we ought to choose to meet our needs. This seems to be true, even if it involves engaging in activities we do not see as inherently valuable (i.e. work). So, working (on occasion) in order to meet your needs looks entirely reasonable. Sometimes, it will be better to do something for something else's sake (in order to meet your needs) rather than do something for its own sake.

## 8. Play and self-sufficiency

It seems that, in order to be able to have a life full of creative play (and so full of this kind of valuable content) you need to meet your basic needs. You need food, water, clothes, shelter etc. In these circumstances there will be occasions when you have to do things not for their own sake, but for the sake of meeting your needs.

It is possible have our needs met without meeting them ourselves. Other people can meet our needs. We might think that the best life we could aim for is a life full of play, where other people meet all our needs. For example, Schlick expresses his admiration for life in Ancient Greece, because “the Greeks ... released those perpetually happy beings from the fetters of every aim, every duty, every care.”<sup>52</sup> And so, “all their activities are turned into joyous play, all their working days become holidays.”<sup>53</sup> Of course, the Greeks had certain ‘advantages’ in achieving a life of play. They were in part able to achieve a life of play because they were able to take advantage of institutional slavery.

You can have your needs met without resorting to enslaving people. Perhaps you might have another person who willingly takes care of your needs (say a relative or a partner). In both cases, there seems to be a cost. If you enslave others, you rob them of their life, freedom and happiness (and on the face of it, it seems wrong to damage other people simply so we can play more). But even if people freely take care of all your needs then there is a sense in which you are not free, but are dependent. Again, if it is thought that your own freedom, or avoiding enslaving other people matters, then some work (or even drudgery) may be unavoidable.<sup>54</sup>

When it comes to achieving self-sufficiency, some forms of play are in a better position than others. As I said, Schlick tends to stress creative activities as examples of play. If self-sufficiency is important, then Schlick is right to have this focus. In section 6, I discussed the way in which creative activities could lead to a number of positive outcomes. One of these is that such activities are productive (something is created).

Because of this, there need be no necessary opposition between certain kinds of play, and gaining self-sufficiency. As Schlick says, there is “no irreconcilable opposition between play in the philosophical sense and work in the economic sense.”<sup>55</sup> If this is true, then perhaps we can have a life full of playful activities, while also meeting all of our vital needs.

Still, it might be thought that there are some examples of play that are irreconcilable with meeting your vital needs. Schlick defined play as any activity

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid p. 63

<sup>53</sup> Ibid p. 63

<sup>54</sup> I have not had the time or space to put together an argument to the effect that our own freedom genuinely matters to us. With the issue of slavery, my hope is that most people would see enslaving other people as an unappealing option, especially if it is thought that the quality of our relationships with other people genuinely matters (as I argue in Chapter VIII).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid p. 64

engaged in for its own sake. There are *non-creative* activities that would count as play on this definition. Activities such as playing patience, doing crosswords or watching television look like they (usually) count as play. People enjoy doing these things, and are not usually doing so in order to achieve some further goal. But, if these kinds of ‘solitary’ and unproductive activities dominate someone’s life, it is difficult to see how such a life could be self-sufficient. In cases like this, there may be an irreconcilable opposition between non-creative play and work in the economic sense.

If self-sufficiency is important, then spending a large amount of your time engaged in non-creative play (which has no positive consequences) looks potentially problematic. After all, the activity doesn’t produce anything, it doesn’t improve your health or your ability to care for yourself. Nor does it help build any kind of relationships. It is difficult to see how you might justify playing patience for its own sake when you are starving to death. In such circumstances, it is surely better to prepare some food to eat (even if you find this unsatisfying). Even if playing patience is valuable, if you don’t eat, you will die, and you will no longer be able to play patience anyway.

There may be some benefits that follow even from non-creative play. Such activities may be relaxing or absorbing. Or they may help develop some skills (crosswords; might improve your vocabulary, or ‘exercise’ your lateral thinking etc.) Still it looks like a life that is too devoted to these kinds of activities may have trouble being sustainable.

It is not just sustainability that will be a problem. There may be good reasons for thinking that it is important that our activities have *some* point, or some further consequences beyond our own ‘mere’ pleasure. In Chapter VI, I argue<sup>56</sup> that it matters to us that our actions have an effect on the world (they make some kind of significant difference). In this context, solitary, unproductive activities look problematic.

In Chapter VI and VII, I also argue that part of what makes a life meaningful and satisfying is that it hangs together in some sense. There I will argue that, while the presence of play (inherently valuable moments) in our lives is important, on its own, it is not enough to guarantee a satisfying life.

There is another issue that Schlick does not discuss. It might be thought that on occasions we are motivated to engage in work because we think the outcomes of the activity is itself valuable. After all, play is not in fact the only thing that people are interested in, or value. In the next section, I will be outlining a few of the things that might motivate people to work (other than mere survival). On the face of it, it looks as though people can have good reasons for engaging in certain kinds of work. At this stage, it is not my aim to provide definitive conclusions regarding whether any of these things really do matter – I simply want to set out what the possible options are, and perhaps suggest that it is not obvious that there couldn’t be good motivations for working.

## 9. Work with worthwhile goals

As we saw in section 5, when attempting to answer my curious friend’s questions, it seems easier to justify the value of activities undertaken in the spirit of play than those done in the spirit of work. Still, Schlick has not really given us any reason to

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<sup>56</sup> In fact, I argue in Chapter VI that making a difference to the world and the people around us is part of what we mean in talking of a life being experienced as meaningful. I actually justify the claim that experiencing our life as meaningful *genuinely matters* in Chapter VII.

think that engaging in inherently satisfactory activities can be the *only* way in which activities can be valuable.

As I said in section 5, my curious friend's 'further questions' will be pressing for someone who engages in work (in the philosophical sense). Remember, given the fact that the activity is valueless, to justify the view that their work activity matters, they will need to achieve (or have a reasonable expectation of achieving) their goals, and have goals that are themselves worthwhile. But, this doesn't rule out the possibility that people might pursue goals that are themselves worthwhile.

In particular, I am interested in the kinds of activities why involve consequences which you care about a great deal. In Chapter VI, I introduce the idea of our 'ultimate concerns', the things that matter most to us. When we are motivated by (one of our) ultimate concerns, we might engage in activities, not for its own sake (play) but because it leads to results that we value. (For much more about ultimate concerns see Chapters VI and VII).

There are any number of things that may lead people to value work. We might engage in work because we care about other people, our own status or our own creative satisfaction. There are plenty of examples of work activities that people engage in (at least in part) because of their commitment to the health (or needs) of other people. Think, for example, of a surgeon. Perhaps they are employed to do large amounts of routine surgery – which involves little challenge or stimulation in itself. (In other words, they do not see such activity as play). Such a person may value their work enormously, not only because it pays the bills, but also because improving the health and happiness of other people is something that they care about. Of course, if they are trying to satisfy my curious friend, they need to show, firstly, that they have a reasonable expectation of improving the health and happiness of their patients through their activity. Secondly (we might think) they need to show that the health and happiness of other people matters. We haven't yet seen any reason from Schlick for thinking this *couldn't* be valuable – though there is much more that needs to be said before I can do this.

We might include a surgeon as an example of work directed at meeting the *needs* of other people. Another example would be someone helping the sufferers of Aids in Africa. Other kinds of work seem aimed at the *development* of other people. For example, someone may find teaching stimulating and rewarding in virtue of their commitment to helping children develop their abilities.

Also, people may be motivated by the concrete results of their work. They might work because of their commitment to what they produce. We have seen that a craftsman may take pleasure in the quality of what he produces. Similarly, someone may value working in a factory if the factory makes vaccines, or produces helpful inventions (things that improve people's lives).

Examples such as this suggest that, even if activities are work in Schlick's sense, they can be thought valuable to the people who engage in them. There is nothing in Schlick's discussion of play to suggest that the outcomes of our working activities couldn't themselves be valuable. (I will return to this issue in Chapter VI, where I discuss whether our ultimate concerns are arbitrary).

## 10. Conclusion

This chapter has revealed two ways in which activities might be thought valuable. Firstly, we can value an activity for its own sake – we just love doing the

activity. Or, we may value the activity because of the results of the activities. In many cases, there can be activities which we think of as valuable for both reasons.

I suggested that the fact that we find an activity inherently valuable might provide an adequate response to my curious friend's question. At the very least, this discussion seems to imply that engaging in play really is valuable for the person who plays (and they couldn't be mistaken about this).

But, it doesn't look as though we have shown that play genuinely matters. Activities that count as play are valued for their own sake. So, we can know that the person themselves thinks that the activity is valuable. But (my curious friend might ask) why does the fact that the person thinks the activity is a worthwhile one prove that it *really is* worthwhile? It is not clear that we have managed to produce any reason for thinking that this really matters (beyond the obvious fact that it will matter to them). I think the same can be said of those activities that we value because of the positive results that they produce. It is perfectly understandable that you would think it matters that you are able to contribute towards something you value. But, as I said in the last chapter, the fact that you think it is valuable does not guarantee that it really is valuable.

Also, the discussion in this chapter has tended to focus on quite everyday examples. This kind of discussion seems far from what some people are asking when they ask 'does anything matter?' They might say that they are asking whether anything ultimately matters, whether there is a meaning to life etc. (For more on this, see chapters V and VI). In this context, the thought that they happen to find something inherently valuable may look beside the point. It might be said that, surely 'in the scheme of things', someone's personal satisfaction in an activity doesn't look that important.

In the next chapter, I will examine whether there are good reasons for thinking that nothing could genuinely matter. (In other words, assess whether all answers to my curious friend's questions are equally bad or groundless). We would be in an even more absurd position than the one Nagel described if it were true that, while people think things matter (the unavoidability of seriousness) nothing could actually matter (life is meaningless). This leads on to a discussion (in chapters V and VI) of whether life has a meaning. Only after having resolved this question will I begin giving concrete defences of the view that some things genuinely matter.

## CHAPTER IV

### DOES NOTHING MATTER?

#### 1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I argued that activities carried out in the spirit of play are activities that are (by our own estimation) inherently valuable. Even so, this doesn't seem enough to show that such activities genuinely matter. For example, it seems that my curious friend is entitled to ask; how can you justify the claim that your belief that the activity is valuable makes the activity *really* valuable? Nothing that has been said so far would allow us to justify the claim that it really matters whether (or not) an activity is inherently valuable to you. We might say that we can see why it would matter to a particular person that their activities are inherently valuable ones. But this takes us back to a point I have made repeatedly. Just because something matters to a particular person (the unavoidability of serious) it doesn't guarantee that it really matters. In fact, if it *only* matters in virtue of the fact that we think it matters, our claims about what matters will be arbitrary (as there will be nothing to choose between them).

In Chapter II, I argued that Nagel's claims about the inescapability of doubt are unconvincing. I don't want to give up the attempt to give a justification for the view that some things really do matter to human beings. And the fact is that Nagel hasn't given us any reason to think that an attempt to justify the claim that some things matter is in any worse a position than any other form of justification. In this chapter, I will be exploring a new threat to the idea that some things genuinely matter. I will be assessing arguments which attempt to show that no claim that something matters could *ever* be justified. If this were true, then *all* answers to my curious friend would be a mistake (despite the fact that we think some things matter.) The arguments are based on facts about the world (section 2) facts about our existence (sections 3 and 4) and facts about our activities (section 5). If any of these arguments are justified, then we will have to accept that nothing could genuinely matter (matter in a genuine, non-arbitrary way). I will be arguing that none of the arguments gives us any reason to think that nothing could genuinely matter.

As will become clear in later chapters, even if it is accepted that there are no good reasons for thinking that *nothing could* genuinely matter, there still remain other possible threats to claims that there are things that genuinely matter. (In particular, threats concerning science and religion. I will be attempting to overcome these further worries in the next chapter).

Each argument I discuss in this chapter attempts to show that nothing could genuinely matter. Most of the discussions concern whether anything could be said to be genuinely significant or meaningful. The relationship between things mattering to us, and being significant (or meaningful) to us will be explored in detail in later chapters. For now, it seems clear that, when we say that something matters, we mean that it is significant in some way (and to say that something is significant means that it must matter in some sense.)

The first argument I deal with in this chapter, the argument from non-objectivity, also provides an opportunity to start exploring what exactly we mean when we talk of something mattering, or being significant or meaningful. This account will be explored and developed in later chapters.



## 2. The argument from non-objectivity

### i. Objectivity and the 'sub specie aeternitatis' perspective

I want to examine an argument which attempts to show that any claim that something matters must be false (as nothing really matters, or is significant). When talking of the special experience argument in Chapter II, I discussed Nagel's discussion of the '*sub specie aeternitatis*' perspective (see II.5.i and ii). This is a view of the world in which we experience the world from 'outside of all possible awareness'. In Chapter II, I argued that, unless we had reasons for taking the '*sub specie aeternitatis*' perspective seriously, there was no reason to think that it was a threat to the possibility of things genuinely mattering. In this section, I want to outline an argument that attempts to give us good reasons for taking the '*sub specie aeternitatis*' perspective seriously.

The '*sub specie aeternitatis*' perspective can be thought of as an objective view of the world – a description of the world, independent of *any kind* of awareness. The term 'objective' actually has a number of senses. In this discussion, when I talk about a property being 'objective', I mean that it is a property that is a real feature of the world, regardless of whether anything is aware of the world. So, to ask if significance is (or can be) an objective property of the world is to ask whether significance is a feature of the world independently of any form of awareness of the world.

When discussing the special experience argument (see II.5.ii) I suggested that *nothing* could be significant from the '*sub specie aeternitatis*' perspective. This implies that there can be no such thing as objective significance. This alone might seem a good enough reason to say that significance and meaning are not *real* (genuine) features of the world.

Examples of objective features of the world are easy to find. We might say that there are many features of a rock (its size, its mass etc.) that are true of the rock, whether or not there is anyone there to perceive it. An event, such as a meteor hitting a house is also something that we think really happens regardless of the existence or non-existence of anything to perceive it.

An example of something we might think *isn't* objective would be things like the taste of food. I happen to think that cucumbers taste disgusting. My friend Ronnie thinks they complement a sandwich perfectly (as long as they are cut thinly enough). The mere fact that there is disagreement between Ronnie and myself is not enough to show that 'the way foods taste' isn't objective. There can after all be disagreements about objective matters (e.g. there may be disagreements about e.g. how heavy a particular rock is).

When Ronnie says that cucumbers taste pleasant to him, I do not (usually) think that he has made a mistake. I accept the fact that he experiences the taste of cucumbers differently to me. I do not try to convince him that I am right and he is wrong, even though I strongly disagree with him. When Ronnie claims that cucumbers taste nice, I do not think he is making some factual error. This implies that we do not think that there is some 'truth' about taste that exists independently of our awareness of the world. In other words, we do not treat taste as an objective feature of the world.

I want to mention another example. My main purpose in doing this is to show that there may be significant differences between different kinds of non-objective property. (In other words, the fact that a property is not objective leaves open the

question of whether it is simply a question of personal taste, or is in fact factual in some sense).

It might be said that colour is not an objectively real feature of the world. (While the world does contain objects that reflect light waves of certain frequencies, the world itself does not contain e.g. the colour yellow). We might say that colour is just something about how we (or other creatures) happen to experience the world. In this sense then, it is not at all clear that colours are a feature of the world that would be present in the world if there were nothing to be aware of the world.

Unlike the question of personal taste, while (perhaps) colours are not a real feature of the world, much talk of colours might still be thought to be factual in nature. You can make mistakes about the colour of things, even though there are no colours 'in the world' from an objective perspective. Certainly, while talk of colour may not describe an objective feature of the world, it would be difficult to argue that one's claims about the colours of things are therefore entirely arbitrary. (That it is simply up to us to decide or choose what colour a particular object is). As I said, I'm not mentioning this example in order to draw any strong parallel between the belief that things matter, and the belief that something is a particular colour (although others have<sup>57</sup>). Rather, I am simply interested in illustrating the fact that, just because a property is non-objective, this doesn't imply that there couldn't be any rational constraints on the application of these properties to the world.

In order to get clearer about the status of significance (given the fact that nothing can be objectively significant) in the next section, I want to set out the relationship between significance and awareness.

## ii. *How does significance arise?*

In this section, I will be arguing that meaning requires a perspective or a context. I will also argue that *awareness* is necessary if there are to be things of significance. But, in order to justify this I will have to assess a number of plausible counter-examples. After all, it seems perfectly reasonable to talk about the significance of an asteroid in the formation of a solar system. Or, we can talk of the significance of a winning game of cricket to a nation. This seems to be the case, even though neither a solar system nor a nation is an individual awareness.

I want to set out one particular event that many people seemed to find significant. On July 1<sup>st</sup> 2006, Cristiano Ronaldo scored a penalty for Portugal against England. The fact that Ronaldo scored his penalty was seen as extremely significant and important (but not valuable) by many of the people I know. But what was it that made this penalty kick so significant for so many people? After all, if I go down the park with a friend, and score a penalty kick against him, only my friend and I think this has any significance (and neither of us thinks it is particularly important). Why is it that two such (superficially) similar events can have such different levels of significance?

England's quarter final with Portugal in the world cup ended (after extra time) in a nil-nil draw. This meant that the winner would be decided by a penalty kick competition. Cristiano Ronaldo's penalty kick was the decisive one in deciding the winner of the game. As a result of Ronaldo's penalty, it was Portugal and not England who went into the World Cup semi-final. So, we might say that what makes Ronaldo's

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<sup>57</sup> C.f. McDowell 'Values and Secondary Qualities' in Honderich, T. (ed.) (1985) Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J.L. Mackie pp. 110-129

penalty significant (as opposed to my penalty kick against my friend) is the *context* in which the penalty took place.

We could spell out the context further, by asking why the England team winning, or failing to win a quarter final in the world cup is thought to be so important? The progress of the English team in the world cup is something that seems to have a profound importance for many English people. To understand why will require setting out a new context – the role of football in English life. We might need to describe what it means to support a football team - to identify with the team, to care about its progress etc. We might also describe the way in which people associate the success or failure of the national team with the status of the nation (and themselves insofar as they define themselves in terms of their nationality). To understand the full significance of all this, we might have to set out the history of football, and England's role in it. For example, the rules of football were created in England. This has led to a persistent view that the English have some kind of 'divine right' to be the best nation at football. In this context, events such as Hungary's win at Wembley in 1953 and England winning the 1966 World Cup are extremely significant ones.

It is because of all this history that a particular penalty kick acquires profound importance and significance for so many people. We can understand why this event is deemed so significant by so many people by placing the event in the context of the 'background story' (the history and other narratives) people tell about themselves and their nation. (Of course, there is a story to be told about me and my friend down the park and our penalty kick. But this story doesn't reveal the event as a particularly significant one.)

The same seems true of other examples. I might describe Black Wednesday as a significant event in the history of the stock exchange. As with the penalty kick example, by saying that these events are significant, we mean that these events can be seen as key part of some broader narrative. In talking of Black Wednesday being significant in the context of the British economy, we might talk about the way the event had an important impact on the economic situation. We might say that it is a vital part of understanding why things are the way they are (for our economy).

In many of the examples I have been discussing - even though we are talking about a (more or less) abstract entity ('the English nation', 'the economy') - it appears right to think that what makes something (e.g. a penalty kick, a fall in the value of the stock market) significant is related to the fact that it is seen (experienced) as significant by a large number of (English) people. After all, if an event held no significance for English people, it is difficult to see how it could be said to be significant for the English nation. So, in these cases at least, we might still retain the idea that to be significant is always to be significant for someone or something with awareness. (I will return to this thought in Chapter V.5, but it will become most important in Chapter VII.2).

At the start of this discussion, I mentioned the fact that a collision between two planets could be said to be a significant event in the formation of a distant solar system. In this case, it seems natural to say this, even though neither the solar system, nor the planets involved in the collision, could be said to be conscious or aware in any sense. But, unlike the 'English nation', it looks like we are unable to reduce this talk of significance to the perspective of particular individuals. It looks as though this is a case that shows that no kind of awareness at all is necessary for this event to be significant.

We might still retain the idea that there is a relationship between this context (the history of the solar system) and the perspective of human beings. Certainly, the concept of a 'solar system' is a way of thinking about certain objects that has been devised by human beings. (Which isn't to say it is the only possible way to understand

them). At the very least, we can say that our understanding of the solar system (indeed the very idea of a solar system) is based on (and arises out of) a vast amount of human study and systematising.

So, there still seems to be some sense in which the fact that an event is significant is dependent on the way in which those with awareness relate all the different objects and events to each other. After all, without the perspective of the people attempting to understand the distant solar system, we are simply left with another event in the universe. Of course, this is not to say that the event involving the collision of the two planets only happens if we adopt a (in this case, human) perspective on the event. The fact that the collision of the planets had such and such an effect is independent of human involvement<sup>58</sup>. The event happening is an objective fact about the universe. Nevertheless, the fact that the event has a form of *significance* is something that is only revealed when something with awareness adopts a *perspective* on the events.

### iii. *Why nothing is significant from an objective perspective*

If (for the moment at least<sup>59</sup>) this account of significance is accepted, it becomes clear why the objective perspective reveals a world containing nothing of significance. The objective view of the world is one which systematically excludes all forms of awareness. As such, it excludes from the world anything that *could be* the source of significance.

There are two possible attitudes we can take to the fact that nothing is (or could be) objectively significant. First, we might say that it is senseless to ask whether there is any objective significance. (We might say that ‘objectively significant’ is an oxymoron. To demand that we must reveal meaning in the world from the ‘*sub specie aeternitatis*’ perspective is demanding something both impossible and senseless.) Alternatively, we might say that there it is a reasonable question to ask, and the answer is that there is (obviously) no objective meaning.

There is perhaps something to be said for both of these attitudes. But, if it is senseless to ask whether anything is objectively significant, there will be little reason to be threatened by the fact that we cannot provide a satisfactory answer. It is the second stance that may suggest that the fact that nothing is objectively significant is a threat to finding things that genuinely matter. As it is, there may be something to be said for the second stance. After all, the objective stance on the world or on particular events is one possible *perspective* that we (human beings) can adopt. Given the fact that we are talking about a perspective (even if it is one that excludes all forms of perspective) asking about whether anything is objectively significant need not be senseless. So, it seems better to say that it is obvious that there can be no such thing as an objective meaning - the objective perspective is one that could never reveal anything meaningful (but, we might continue, this should be no surprise, given the nature of the objective perspective – a perspective that explicitly excludes anything that could be the source of significance).

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<sup>58</sup> There is perhaps an ambiguity in the meaning of the word ‘significant’. By significant, we may mean something like ‘measurable effect’. So, in the case of the collision of the planets there may be a sense in which we might talk of an event having a large effect on what happened subsequently, without any implication of ‘deeper’ significance. I am primarily interested in this ‘deeper’ kind of significance.

<sup>59</sup> In Chapter V, I will examine another two challenges to this account of significance (see V.4.i and V.4.iv).

Still, if we accept that meaning is not objective, this may suggest that we must be making some kind of mistake if we think that anything *genuinely* matters. After all, there is a long tradition of arguing that objectively real means robustly (properly) real. In this context, the fact that there is no objective meaning might suggest that meaning cannot be *properly* real. It might be said that meaning and significance only have a ‘mere’ subjective reality, i.e. it seems to us that there are significant things in the world, but this view is ‘all in our mind’. If it is thought that the only possible meaning there may be would be subjective, we may have to accept that nothing really matters.

The key question I am interested in throughout this thesis is whether we are making some kind of mistake in thinking that things genuinely matter. In this context, the fact that no significance is revealed from an objective perspective doesn’t decide this issue. If it is an open question whether there is anything in the world that is genuinely significant, the fact that there is no significance from the objective perspective could not help us decide this question. Whether or not our world contains anything of genuine significance, the objective perspective will *necessarily* reveal a world without meaning (regardless of the facts).

More than this, there seem to be good reasons for thinking that the objective view of the world is *not* a complete view of reality. If there are creatures with awareness in the world, it is difficult to see how the *facts* about their awareness could be a part of the objective account of the world. Of course, there will be objective facts about the creatures with awareness. But, the way things are for them (which is after all a fact about them) cannot properly be accommodated in a view of the world independent of all awareness. If this is true, then an objective view of the world simply cannot be a complete account of reality.<sup>60</sup> This might seem especially true in the context of a discussion about the reality of significance, given the fact that significance is inextricably linked to awareness, to taking a perspective on things.

Given the fact that significance is a real feature of *our experience* (the unavoidability of seriousness seemed to show this – see Chapter II, sections 3 & 4) we might accept that significance does not have an objective reality, but still argue that it does have some form of reality. As I argued when I discussed examples of non-objective properties, the fact that a property is not objective leaves open many questions about the status of such properties. (Things are not either scientifically real, or simply a matter of taste – like whether you enjoy the taste of cucumbers).

So, there need be no contradiction between human beings, from their perspective, thinking things matter, and the fact that, from an objective perspective, nothing is revealed as mattering. The objective perspective is one we are capable of taking on the world. It is a perspective where we explicitly exclude all forms of awareness, and so exclude the possibility of any significance and meaning. It is for this reason that we will not find any significance in an objective view of the world. It is not because nothing could be significant. For these reasons, I take it that the fact that the objective perspective reveals a world without significance doesn’t imply that we must be making a mistake when we think things really matter. Having said that, I think we do have to accept that it is not open to us to say that things genuinely matter to us in virtue of the fact that the world objectively contains things of significance. (Although I will in fact argue that objective facts about us can play a *role* in deciding what genuinely matters. See VII.2).

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<sup>60</sup> This is close to a point Nagel himself makes in the last chapter of *Mortal Questions*. “So reality is not just objective reality, and the pursuit of objectivity is not an equally effective method of reaching the truth about everything.” (Nagel, T. (1979) *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge p. 213)

What seems clear from this section is that the mere fact that nothing is objectively significant need not lead us to think that nothing genuinely matters. But, perhaps there are other reasons for thinking that nothing could be genuinely significant for us. In the next two sections, I will look at whether there are any facts about our human existence which imply that nothing could genuinely matter to us.

### 3. The argument from scale

People will often justify the view that life must be meaningless (must lack any kind of significance) by making reference to the scale of human existence. It might be thought that, because our existence is so physically small, and so brief (in comparison with the universe as a whole) our actions, our choices and our life couldn't *really* matter. If we look at a single human existence in the context of the universe as a whole, we can see how insignificant a portion of the universe their physical form is. Similarly, if we look at the duration of a single human existence in the context of the amount of time the universe has existed we will see how insignificant the amount of time they live for. Even if we are looking at the human race as a whole, we can see how insignificant the amount of time the human race has existed is in relation to the universe. As Nagel himself says, "We are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe."<sup>61</sup>

Given the insignificant scale of human existence, we can see how difficult it is for our actions to have any kind of significant effect on things (on the universe). The world (the universe) has existed for billions of years before we were born, and will carry on existing for billions of years after our death. In these circumstances, it seems difficult to see how any of the actions we perform now could possibly have any kind of lasting effect on the universe. Similarly, given our size in relation to the universe it is difficult to see how we can make any kind of significant difference. So, when we see the scale of the universe, we cannot help but get some perspective on our relative 'importance'.

This might allow us to provide a reason for taking Nagel's special experience argument (see II.5.i) seriously. The argument from non-objectivity was an attempt to show why we should take Nagel's distanced perspective on events seriously. In the last section, I argued that the fact that significance is not objective doesn't imply that the belief that things matter is arbitrary. Perhaps the argument from scale might give us a better reason to take a distanced perspective on our lives seriously. It gives us reason to think that, when we step back from human life (and take up a universe-wide perspective) we are seeing things as they *really are*, and so realise our insignificance in relation to this.

Having said all this, it is not clear that there is *any* kind of relationship between something's size or (or the duration of its existence) and whether that thing matters<sup>62</sup>. In order to see this, imagine that our life just the way it is (i.e. when we are the size we are) is meaningless. (In other words, we would be making a mistake in thinking that anything in our life matters). If our life is meaningless when we are the size we are, it is not at all clear why or how being larger would improve the situation. There is no reason to think that going above a certain size would suddenly make our lives more meaningful.

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<sup>61</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) Mortal Questions. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge p. 11

<sup>62</sup> There may be some relationship (e.g. we may think – other things being equal – that writing a book is likely to matter more than writing an undergraduate essay). The argument is that size *alone* is not the determining factor.

Similarly, it is not clear how existing for longer will suddenly make something meaningful. For example, imagine a piece of rock that has survived from the first formation of rocks after the big bang. Of course, this rock might be significant for someone. They might use this rock to prove something about the big bang. But, in this case, it is this that is significant. The *mere* fact that the rock has existed for a very long time alone does not make it significant. The same is true for something's size. A remote planet might be many trillion times bigger than the flea that started the spread of the black plague. By itself, the fact that a planet is substantial in size doesn't play any role in telling us whether it matters or not. (I think we are back to the argument that in order for something to be significant, it has to be significant from a particular perspective).

In terms of the duration of our existence, this argument suggests that, unless we live longer, life would have to be meaningless. But, in this case, a life that existed for longer (or forever) would need to have some feature which makes it lead to a meaningful existence, which our current existence doesn't share. It is not clear what this feature could be beyond the mere fact that it will last a greater length of time. But as I've already said, whether our life is meaningful or meaningless seems entirely unrelated to how long that life lasts. As it is, lasting forever doesn't (in itself) make something 'significant'.

Perhaps it might be suggested that, because we live for such a short period of time, nothing we do can make a lasting impact. "It is often remarked that nothing we do now will matter in a million years."<sup>63</sup> It might be thought that, given this fact, we have to accept that we cannot have any truly lasting effect on the universe. In other words, nothing that we do *really* matters. But it is not clear though that an argument of this type proves that life is meaningless. This kind of argument just seems to beg the question against anything mattering. For a start, we may not want to concede that nothing we do now will matter in a million years. For example, if writing my PhD matters now, there doesn't seem any principled reason why it couldn't matter in a million years. (Though I grant it is incredibly unlikely). To justify this argument, we would first need to show that nothing we do now will matter in a million years. Then we need to show *why* the fact that nothing we do now will matter in a million years shows that nothing matters here and now. After all, it is not clear that we have any reason to think that in order for something to matter, it *must* still matter a million years from now.

In a similar way, because our size is tiny in comparison with 'all that exists' (the universe) it might be thought that our choices or activities couldn't possibly register from this bigger perspective. Taking up the perspective of 'all that exists' (perhaps something akin to Nagel's special experience) makes us realise that our activities couldn't possibly have any impact on the universe as a whole. Again though, there doesn't seem to be any reason for thinking that, in order for any of our actions to matter, they *must* matter from a universe-wide perspective. I will cover this issue in the next chapter, which is devoted to an issue related to this. There, I will be assessing whether, life has a 'universal' meaning. This will involve assessing whether (in order for something to be genuinely meaningful or significant) there has to be a story we can tell about the universe as a whole which reveals everything in the universe as meaningful. For now though, the argument from scale doesn't provide any good reasons for thinking that nothing could matter because of the short duration of our lives, or because of our size. In the next section, I want to examine an argument that is also based on the short duration of our lives. I will be examining whether the fact that we all eventually die, might have an impact on the possibility of life mattering.

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<sup>63</sup>Nagel, T. (1979) Mortal Questions. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge p. 11

#### 4. The argument from mortality

In the discussion of death in Chapter I, I assumed that death is the end of our existence (see I.2). Perhaps, if this is true, this gives us good reasons for thinking that our lives couldn't be meaningful. As Tolstoy said: "Sooner or later my affairs, whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and I shall not exist. Then why go on making any effort?"<sup>64</sup> There is an obvious link here with the last argument, the argument from scale. In this case, the problem identified is not that our life span is brief. The problem is that our life comes to an abrupt end.

It might be thought that all human efforts, plans, projects etc. are futile because we will eventually die; so all these plans just end in nothingness. In this sense, our life is like a story that abruptly ends half way through. Because the story just ends, we never get to find out the 'meaning' of the events described. The claim that all aims we have will eventually be cut off 'in mid air' has strong parallels to Nagel's epistemological argument (See II.5.iii) Given the fact that in the end we just die, this argument seems to provide us with good reasons for thinking that all chains of reasons really do come to an abrupt end.

But, as we saw when looking at the epistemological argument, the fact that a chain of justification comes to an end doesn't prevent it being a reasonable justification. Similarly, the fact that a plan comes to an end doesn't prevent it mattering. As Nagel himself says;

No further justification is needed to make it reasonable to take aspirin for a headache, attend an exhibition of the work of a painter one admires, or stop a child from putting his hand on a hot stove. No larger context or further purpose is needed to prevent these acts being pointless.<sup>65</sup>

So, just because my visit to an exhibition is now over, this doesn't necessarily mean that it wasn't a worthwhile thing to do. If it is possible for things that end to be meaningful, then the fact that I will one day die doesn't rule out the possibility that there are things that genuinely matter. Death may prematurely bring an end to certain aims and activities. But, it is not at all clear how this would undermine the aims that a person achieved in their life. Just because some aims and activities of a person may be cut off (and so there may be a problem with saying that *these* aims or activities mean something) death doesn't have this effect in the vast majority of cases.

This argument (as with the last argument) makes it seem like an eternal existence would bring something to life (would give it the possibility of being meaningful) that a mortal existence couldn't have. (In fact, Williams<sup>66</sup> provides interesting reasons for thinking that eventually all eternal lives *must* become meaningless.) If the afterlife is to be meaningful, it must have some meaningful content beyond the simple fact that it lasts forever. But, there doesn't seem to be any reason for

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<sup>64</sup> Cited in Edwards, P. (2000) 'The Meaning and Value of Life'. From Klembe (ed.) The Meaning of Life. Oxford University Press: Oxford p. 137. The discussions in sections 4 & 5 are in part based on Edward's arguments in this paper.

<sup>65</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) Mortal Questions. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge p. 12

<sup>66</sup> Williams, B. (1973) The Problems of the Self. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 'The Makropoulos Case'



thinking that there is some kind of ‘special’ content that our mortal lives couldn’t also have. As I have repeatedly said, there is no reason to think that were we to exist for a longer period this would somehow makes things (that currently don’t matter) suddenly matter. So, none of the arguments discussed in this section gives us any reason to think that nothing could genuinely matter simply because we are mortal.

## 5. The argument from Pessimism

In this chapter, the first argument (the argument from non-objectivity) was based on the claim that nothing could genuinely matter because of the nature of the world. The next two arguments (the argument from scale and the argument from mortality) were based on the claim that nothing could genuinely matter because of the nature of our existence. The final argument in this chapter claims that nothing could genuinely matter because of the nature of our goals, and the consequences of achieving our goals.

Schopenhauer sets out an extremely pessimistic account of life<sup>67</sup>. He argues that nothing in life could matter because human activities cannot have satisfactory ends. (As we shall see, this has obvious affinities with the epistemological argument). Schopenhauer claims that, when it comes to our aims:

People either fail to achieve the ends they are striving for or else they do achieve them only to find them grossly disappointing.<sup>68</sup>

Schopenhauer argues that, even if we do achieve our aims, we find the achievement of our aims grossly disappointing. He claims that this is the case because the achievement of our goals brings us no lasting satisfaction. Whenever we succeed with an aim we have been pursuing, this doesn’t represent any kind of end point. It simply leaves a hole that is filled by immediately setting off on the pursuit of a new goal. So, while there may be some fleeting enjoyment, we are ultimately disappointed, and realise that we need to find new goals. These new goals will be found to be ultimately disappointing for the same reasons.

The first issue to look at is whether Schopenhauer is right that, if our aims were of this kind, nothing could matter. It is difficult to see how (if Schopenhauer is right) we could have a life involving real satisfaction. If our aims could only have these ‘meagre’ consequences, it is difficult to see how our actions and our aims could genuinely matter. Let us assume for the moment then that, if the pursuit and achievement of our aims is the way Schopenhauer describes, we may have real concerns about whether anything genuinely matters.

Still, there seems to be a number of problems with Schopenhauer’s argument. Firstly, we have already seen reasons for doubting the claim that meaning can *only* come from the pursuit of goals. It was clear in the last chapter that not all activities are ‘goal’ driven (in particular, see III.5). Schlick’s discussion of play made clear that we often engage in activities (such as playing the guitar) for their own sake. When the

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<sup>67</sup> For a clear account, see Edwards, P. (2000) ‘The Meaning and Value of Life’. From Klembe (ed.) The Meaning of Life. Oxford University Press: Oxford, particularly pp. 134-6

<sup>68</sup> Edwards, P. (2000) ‘The Meaning and Value of Life’. From Klembe (ed.) The Meaning of Life. Oxford University Press: Oxford p. 135

meaning of an activity is contained within itself, Schopenhauer's dilemma concerning the futility of pursuing ends doesn't seem pressing.

Secondly, we might question whether the achievement of goals is always ultimately disappointing. One of the assumptions of Schopenhauer's argument is that all goals have a neat definitive ending. In the last chapter (see III.9) I discussed examples where people are committed to the results of their work. Now, if someone is devoted to (say) the health of others, there is no reason to think that this is a goal with a specific end point. It is not as if this person would be aiming for any kind of final date when this goal will be reached. Schopenhauer's account assumes that all activities aim to achieve a conclusive goal. In fact, when people are concerned with (e.g.) their family, or the health of others, they are rarely aiming some definitive moment when their aim (of caring for their family or for others) is conclusively achieved. So, Schopenhauer is wrong to say that whether our actions matter or not will be solely determined by the brief moments that follow the achievement of the goal.

Even when an activity *is* based solely on reaching some end point, it is not at all clear that the pleasure you feel at reaching a goal is always short lived. For example, in the early nineties, I recorded a CD with a band I was in. Finishing the recording was enjoyable, and it felt worthwhile. But the pleasure didn't end there. Any time I feel like it, I can listen to the CD, and (most times) get pleasure out of that. This suggests that there are cases where the positives I gain from achieving a goal are not confined to some brief pleasure at the moment of completion.

Similarly, if we think of someone who has the goal of meeting a partner and having a child, it seems a mistake to think such a person is only looking for a short lived positive feeling of success if they achieve this. They might say that the purpose of achieving this goal is to spend the rest of their life enjoying being with their family, and having strong relationships with them. In that sense, nothing is over when the goal is reached.

In the end then, Schopenhauer's account of human activity (as exclusively goal directed, with a short lived positive feeling that accompanies success) is just too simplistic. There is little in any of his arguments to make us think that human life must be meaningless. Having said that, there are certain kinds of activities that may find Schopenhauer's argument troubling.<sup>69</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

None of the arguments I have looked at give us conclusive reasons for thinking that life is meaningless. When discussing the argument from scale (section 3) I argued that something's size (or the duration of its existence) is irrelevant to whether something matters. The argument from mortality (section 4) presented an argument similar to the epistemological argument. I argued that there is no reason to think that only activities that carry on forever can really be meaningful. Just because life ends, it doesn't mean that nothing could be meaningful. And there is certainly no reason to think that there is some quality (beyond mere infinite existence) that makes immortal existence a candidate for being significant that mortal existence couldn't have.

Schopenhauer's pessimism (section 5) was found to be particularly unconvincing. His claims about the futility of seeking ends are extremely overstated.

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<sup>69</sup> For example, Schopenhauer's account of the significance of ends might actually apply to the actions of an addict, or someone who acts compulsively. (This will be explored in Chapter VI – particularly 10.ii).

We saw in the chapter III that not all activities are goal directed. I also argued that it is not at all clear that the only positive things we get out of achieving a goal are fleeting pleasure at the completion of the goal.

The most important argument I looked at was the first one. In section 2, I examined the thought that, because significance does not ‘show up’ from the objective perspective, we should accept that all talk of significance must be a mistake of some kind (there cannot really be anything that genuinely matters). I argued that the fact that we should accept that nothing objectively matters. (So, we have ruled out the possibility that things genuinely matter in virtue of objective features of the world). But, I argued that it is still an open question whether anything genuinely matters.

Even if the arguments in this chapter are accepted, we do not yet have any reason to think that anything *genuinely* matters. I have shown that there are no good reasons for thinking that nothing could be meaningful (that all answers to my curious friend’s questions must be equally bad). But it is still unclear whether there are any good answers to my curious friend (and what makes them good answers).

Before attempting to argue that some things genuinely matter (in chapters VII and VIII) I want to turn to questions related to the meaning of life. In the next chapter, I will outline two ways in which life could be said to have a meaning. I will discuss the way in which religious beliefs appear to provide us with a way of revealing the fact that the universe as a whole is genuinely meaningful. I call this universal meaning. This thought may suggest that, in order to show that life is meaningful (or to show that some things genuinely matter) we will need to make reference to religious accounts of the universe. I will be assessing whether this is true, and whether religious beliefs can help us show that some things genuinely matter.

## CHAPTER V

### DOES RELIGION PROVE WHAT MATTERS?

#### 1. *Introduction*

In this chapter, I want to start looking at issues related to the meaning of life. I start this chapter by distinguishing two different ways in which we might talk about life having a meaning. The first of these is *universal meaning*. This chapter is principally concerned with whether life has a universal meaning. Life has a universal meaning if there is a true story about the universe which reveals the fact that everything is meaningful. I will be examining the kinds of claims that can provide universal meaning (i.e. religious answers to the meaning of life). It seems that, if it could be shown that a religious account of the universe were true, this would provide us with good reasons for saying that some things genuinely matter.

It might be thought that the scientific account of the world has shown that all religious accounts of the universe are false (and so science has shown that there is no universal meaning). I examine whether this is true, and also whether it is possible to prove (to my curious friend's satisfaction) that a religious account of the universe is true. This discussion appears to lead to a deadlock. I end this discussion by arguing that there is no reason to think that science can prove that there is no universal meaning. But, I also argue that religion is not capable of proving that life *does* have a universal meaning. If this is accepted, then it seems that we cannot use claims about universal meaning as a way of answering my curious friend's questions. I am attempting to prove that some things genuinely matter. If we cannot prove the truth of religious claims about the universe, then it looks as if religious claims are not going to be able to help me provide satisfactory answers to my curious friend's questions.

My intention is to find a way to assess whether anything matters that is independent of issues to do with religion (and to explore whether life is meaningful independently of issues to do with universal meaning). Before doing this, there is another potential threat that religious views might cause to any attempt to prove that some things genuinely matter. I will explore three different arguments which attempt to show that, unless we make reference to a religious account of the meaning of life, nothing could genuinely matter. Each of these arguments present us with reasons to think that God (or religious belief systems) provide something that is *necessary* if anything is to be genuinely meaningful. None of these arguments gives us any reason to think that religious accounts of the universe are necessary if anything is to genuinely matter. Having said that, the discussion does bring up a number of challenges that will need to be met, if my project of outlining things that genuinely matter independent of religious belief is to be acceptable.

The last three chapters of this thesis constitute an attempt to set out what genuinely matters (independent of religious beliefs) keeping in mind the challenges that have been set in this chapter. I do this by switching my attention to the perspective of the individual human being. I end this chapter by providing reasons why this is a reasonable step to make. But, it also becomes clear that we do not find that things genuinely matter *simply* by switching to the perspective of the individual.

## 2. Universal and personal meaning

This chapter, and the next one is (in part) an attempt to assess whether life has a meaning. I will be arguing that, even if we dismiss the possibility of objective meaning, there are (at least) two other ways in which life can be said to have (or fail to have) a meaning. The two types of meaning I will discuss are:

Universal<sup>70</sup> meaning: To say that life has a universal meaning is to say that there is an answer to the meaning of life which reveals the fact that everything (or, at the very least all human life) is meaningful. I will describe attempts to show how religious accounts of the universe (if true) would explain the meaning and significance of everything, in virtue of life's relationship to a universe-wide 'narrative'.

Personal meaning: A person's life is personally meaningful if they experience their own life as being meaningful. What exactly this might involve will be the topic of the next chapter<sup>71</sup>.

Universal meaning, and particularly the way in which religious accounts of the universe can provide universal meaning will be the focus of this chapter. It certainly seems to be the case that, one of the things people may mean when asking whether life has a meaning is whether there is some story we can tell about the universe as a whole which makes everything (in the universe, or all human life) meaningful and significant. They might hope that there is some bigger story by reference to which we can gain a new understanding of the role and purpose of human existence, and our existence as an individual.

In Chapter IV, I argued that there were difficulties in making sense of the existence of meaning from an objective perspective (IV.2.iii). Religious accounts of the (universal) meaning of life do not face these same difficulties. Unlike the objective perspective, religious accounts of the universe provide us with the kind of context, or perspective, through which the meaning and significance of things can be explained (or revealed). In many cases, religious beliefs can provide the perspective of a particular awareness. For example, one could think of the perspective provided by the (omniscient) awareness God has of the world.

But, even if a religious creed makes no reference to something with awareness (Buddhism and Taoism may be examples) at the very least religious beliefs provide exactly the kind of broader story that would reveal the significance of things. They are narratives that explain the significance and meaning of everything.

As will become clear in the next chapter, religious beliefs can also be a source of personal meaning (can be part of the reason why someone experiences their own life as

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<sup>70</sup> Initially, my intention was to centre this chapter around Edwards' distinction between cosmic and terrestrial senses in which life could have a meaning (in Edwards, P. (2000) 'The Meaning and Value of Life'. From Klemke (ed.) The Meaning of Life. Oxford University Press: Oxford pp. 133-52). My distinction between universal and personal meaning is, in some respects, similar to Edwards' distinction. But I found Edwards' discussion unhelpful in drawing out what is involved in experiencing your own life as meaningful, so the structure and content of this chapter is largely my own.

<sup>71</sup> In the next chapter it will become clear that a number of caveats need to be added to this claim, but there is no need to discuss these here.

meaningful). In Chapter VI, one of my aims will be to show that there are other (non-religious) ways in which people can find their own life personally meaningful.

My main aim in this thesis is to try to discover whether anything genuinely matters. At the very least, we might think that if there is a universal meaning (in virtue of some religious account of the meaning of life) this would provide us with a very good reason for saying that some things genuinely matter. My discussion of religious accounts of the meaning of life will have two aspects. Firstly, I will try to discover whether we are able to prove the correctness of particular religious accounts of the meaning of life. (Only if we can do this will it be reasonable to use religious beliefs as a way of showing my curious friend that some things genuinely do matter). I will argue that it is not possible to prove any particular religious account of the meaning of life (at least, not in the kind of rigorous way that would satisfy my curious friend).

So, in the next section, I want to assess whether we can use religious accounts of the meaning of life as a way of answering my curious friend's questions. I want to assess whether it is possible to prove to my curious friend that there really is a true religious account of the universe. I will do this by assessing the relative merits of the scientific view of the world and the religious view of the universe. In this discussion, I make some claims about science (and religion) that may be slightly contentious. So, it is perhaps better to say that, my claim that neither science nor religion is able to provide proofs about the existence or non-existence of religious accounts of the universe is an assumption. (This discussion is intended to show that it is not an arbitrary assumption.)

### 3. *Science, religion and universal meaning*

Here is what many people would perhaps think was a totally satisfying answer to the meaning of life. Imagine the universe is a drama with a happy ending. Perhaps it is the playing out of the battle between good and evil, where good triumphs. In this context (from the perspective of someone who is aware of this story – see IV.2.ii) your life might have a tremendous amount of meaning and importance. Perhaps one of your actions leads to decisive victory for good. (Think of Luke Skywalker blowing up the Death Star in Star Wars.) In virtue of this larger context, it might be said that a person's actions and their life is thereby full of meaning. (So, for example, the meeting between Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi at the start of Star Wars is significant in the context of its consequences for the story).

So, there can be 'stories' (universe-wide narratives) that provide everything with meaning or significance (that provide universal meaning). Another example of such 'cosmic' accounts of the universe would be the thought that there is a benevolent force behind everything. By understanding everything's relationship to this force, we can understand the meaning of *absolutely everything*. Everything becomes meaningful or significant in virtue of its relationship to this force. Obviously, religious traditions are one example of an attempt to provide 'cosmic' answers to the (universal) meaning of life, a story about the universe as a whole that explains the meaning or significance of the universe.

#### *i. Has science proved there is no universal meaning?*

It might be thought that our current scientific understanding, because it is able to explain the existence and cause of everything, reveals to us that there is no ultimate

meaning to life (there is no true religious narrative that explains the significance of everything). Alternatively, it might be thought that science is now the only serious account of the universe, and it is an account that reveals a universe without any meaning in it. In either case, the findings of science show that life could not have any universal meaning.

The first thing to be said about this kind of argument is that the consequences of the findings of science tend to be overstated. In order to see why, try to imagine a scientific experiment that *proved* that all religious accounts of the universe are false. It is not clear what form such an experiment would have. This is because the claim that science has proved that there is no God is not itself a scientific claim. Rather, it is a claim about how the results of scientific inquiry should be understood. Perhaps though, it might be thought that particular scientific discoveries have disproved religious accounts of the world's creation. (E.g. Galileo's view that the earth is not the centre of the universe, the Darwinian view that humans evolved from other creatures etc.) It might look as though religious accounts are attempts to describe the causes of things, and that science now provides a more accurate, rigorous and rational way of describing the causes of things.

Even if it is accepted that science offers alternative explanations to the universe to those put forward e.g. by the world's major religions, it is not clear how much this really undermines religion's account of the *ultimate* cause of the universe. For a start, it is not at all clear that science is fundamentally a tool for revealing the ultimate cause of everything. Science isn't particularly interested in ultimate causes. If a scientist is asked to investigate the cause of (say) global warming, they may conclude that it is caused by an increased level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. They may then be asked to look at why there has been an increase in CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. They might make reference to the burning of fossil fuels, or the increase in deforestation. But, if you then want to know why people are using more fossil fuels, or why there is an increase in deforestation, scientific inquiry doesn't seem the best way to answer these questions. As it is, we certainly don't think that the scientist has to draw the causal links back to the ultimate cause of everything before he has answered any particular scientific question.

The closest science gets to this kind of questions about the ultimate causes of things is theories concerning the big bang. But, in this context, scientific inquiry may be prey to a version of the epistemological argument. In drawing back chains of causes we might wonder if we are going to reach a first (ultimate) cause. If science reaches an ultimate cause, we might think that the scientific question about the cause of *this cause* has been totally unexplained. The other alternative for science is to keep drawing back chains of causes forever, in which case the scientist doesn't seem to have given any explanation of why things are the way they are, or indeed why there is anything at all.

This needn't be a problem for science, as long as we recognise that science is fundamentally a tool for drawing out the active prior cause of an event. It is not particularly a tool for determining the ultimate cause of things. It is not, for example, a tool for describing why there is anything at all, rather than nothing, or something different.

It might be argued that science is the only way to reveal the true nature of things and that only things that can be uncovered in a scientific experiment are real. I don't think we should accept this view. Science is a way of investigating the world that has very specific parameters. It is only interested in certain aspects of the world. This 'abstracted' way of looking at the world has proved to be extremely useful in predicting future events in that abstracted way of looking at things. In particular, one of the things that is abstracted out of the scientific world view is awareness and so meaning. In so far

as science attempts to provide an objective account of the world, issues concerning meaning cannot be clarified by scientific investigation (see IV.2). For these reasons, science does not look like an appropriate tool to use to determine whether and in what way things are meaningful.

There is perhaps another related argument. Perhaps it might be thought that accounts of (e.g.) evolution show that human existence has come about as the result of “a purely accidental chain of essentially blind natural forces.”<sup>72</sup> Given the fact that the causes of our existence are meaningless forces, this may lead us to think that nature itself shows us that nothing could genuinely matter. I will be arguing below that we can accept that the causes of the world and human nature are blind forces without thinking that human existence couldn't be meaningful. To pre-empt this discussion, we might say that, even if the Darwinian account of evolution is accepted, it is nevertheless true that the ‘blind forces’ it describes have brought about human beings with a certain nature. If it is true that, given this nature some things genuinely matter to us, there is no reason to think that the fact that this nature arose as a result of ‘blind forces’ undermines this conclusion.

ii. *Can religion prove that there is a universal meaning?*

Religious beliefs certainly seem to present us with accounts of the ultimate causes of things, and provide explanations of why there is anything at all etc. The problem is that there seem to be insurmountable problems with attempting to provide rational *justifications* for religious beliefs. My own sense has been that proofs of God's existence tend to be very weak, falling well short of a convincing truth to the open-minded reader. Such attempts (even when sincere) seem more like post-rationalisations – more like the attempt to find the best possible rational justification for what someone already believe on other grounds.

If people believe in God, but are not able to base their beliefs on rigorous arguments, this might seem to imply that belief in God's existence is irrational. I would argue that this is too strong (as it assumes that rigorous proof is the only reasonable grounds for a belief). Having said that, if it is accepted that the arguments to ‘prove’ God's existence are weak, this may cause a problem for anyone who bases their belief in the existence of God on these weak arguments.

But, my experience is that people don't primarily base their religious beliefs on rational argument. (The incredibly low success rate of Jehovah's Witnesses seems to support the thought that people are not principally *argued into* religious beliefs.) People tend to either gain their religious beliefs through being brought up to see ‘God’ as part of the world, or they have ‘experiences’ which lead them to see God as part of the world and their life. These experiences can come in many forms. For example, people might have revelatory experiences (of being full of the love of our Lord) at a born-again rally. Or a Buddhist might have an experience of ‘enlightenment’ during meditation. A Christian might see the glory of God in nature as she walks home from church (her experience of the wonder of nature may reinforce her religious beliefs). We could even imagine a scientist who, through his scientific activity may find their religious beliefs *strengthened* by the harmony they find in the way the universe works (supporting their view that the universe has been ‘harmoniously’ created).

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<sup>72</sup> Cottingham, J. (2003) *On The Meaning of Life* Routledge: Oxon p. 47



In these cases, it seems that there is a sense in which someone with a belief in a religious account of the universe can have ‘reasonable’ grounds for their religious beliefs. After all, their beliefs help make sense of the world for them, they find their beliefs are wholly consistent with their experiences etc. But, this does not mean that they have a conclusive proof (meet the kind of standard I am looking for, or that will satisfy my curious friend) for their beliefs. As I said, this need not imply that religious beliefs are irrational, given the fact that most people do not hold their religious beliefs on the basis of intellectual proofs.

If we are looking for definitive proof of the ultimate causes of things, neither religious belief nor scientific method seems to be able to give satisfactory answers. Religious belief doesn’t seem susceptible to ‘intellectual proof’. Science does provide intellectual proofs for its claims about the causes of things, but it is not clear that it is a method that can be used to discover the ultimate cause of everything. It is (very rarely) focused on discovering the ultimate causes of things, and is a powerful, but abstracted account of the world seen from a particular perspective.<sup>73</sup>

In the rest of this thesis then, I will assume that we cannot provide conclusive proofs of religious accounts of the universal meaning of life. Because of this, I want to leave universal meaning to one side. After all, I want to be able to provide conclusive justifications for claims that some things genuinely matter (I want to find satisfying answers to my curious friend). Given the fact that I will be unable to justify claims about religious accounts of the universe, I want to turn somewhere more productive.

For the rest of the thesis, I want to turn my focus on the perspective of the individual human being. This will mean, in the context of questions about the meaning of life, focusing on personal meaning. It is not my intention to dismiss religious accounts out of hand. I wish to remain agnostic. I will in fact argue that, from the perspective of the individual, religious accounts of the meaning of life are capable of playing an important role in allowing someone to experience their own life as meaningful.

Still, I wish to leave issues around religious belief to one side, and explore whether it is possible to look for answers to what matters, and whether life is meaningful independently of religious issues. Before I can do this though, I am going to have to deal with a couple of threats to the project of exploring meaning and significance independently of religious issues.

#### **4. Is God necessary if anything is to genuinely matter?**

In this section, I want to assess a number of arguments which attempt to show that something universally mattering (by virtue of its relationship to a religious account of the meaning of life) is the *only* way in which things can genuinely matter. So, if there is no God (or no true religious narrative) life couldn’t *really* be said to be meaningful. In order to see whether there is anything in this claim, I will be looking at three arguments. Each argument presents reasons for thinking that only if God exists (or only if there is a religious narrative) can something genuinely matter. This is because only God (or the religious narrative) can provide something that is necessary if anything is to genuinely matter.

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<sup>73</sup> In particular, there is no reason to think, just because scientific investigation of the natural world hasn’t revealed anything super-natural, that there is nothing super-natural.

The first argument is set out by Nozick in The Examined Life.<sup>74</sup> There, he argues that, given the account of significance I have argued for (see IV.2) God is the only thing that can guarantee anything being genuinely meaningful. This argument sets out reasons for thinking that only God can provide the infinitude necessary to ground things genuinely mattering. I will deal with this argument quite quickly.

The other two arguments come from Cottingham's book On The Meaning of Life.<sup>75</sup> Cottingham has two arguments for his claim that without something that only religion can provide, life must be meaningless. His first argument is based on the claim that, because there is a strong relationship between external success and meaningfulness, only religious narratives could provide satisfying answers to the meaning of life. His second argument suggests that my account of meaning (in the context of questions around the meaning of life) is too 'thin'. The account of meaning I will be working with in the next chapter links experiencing our lives as meaningful to having a 'story' you can tell about your life which allows you to experience your life as a coherent whole. It is because you are able to see your life and your actions as meaningful in the light of these narratives that we experience our lives as meaningful. Cottingham argues 'mere' narrative is not enough to make life meaningful. He argues that we need to be able to distinguish between good and bad narratives, and only religious narratives could ground this distinction.

I will find problems with most of these arguments. Even so, after assessing them, it is clear that there are questions I will need to satisfactorily answer if my project of assessing meaning independently of religious accounts of the meaning of life is to succeed.

- i. If my account of meaning is right, do we need God?

The way in which I have described meaning (playing an important role in some larger context) may look like it is prey to a new version of the epistemological argument. Think of the example I used in introducing this idea. I argued that what made Ronaldo's penalty meaningful was the fact that it was decisive in deciding the quarter final of the world cup. Imagine someone who is unconvinced that this event really is meaningful. We might try to convince them by telling them say that the penalty was meaningful because the progress of the England football team in the world cup depended on it – and this is something that is itself meaningful. But, it seems that if someone is unconvinced that the progress of the England team matters, we will need to justify the claim that this matters. As we have seen with the epistemological argument, this kind of questioning can carry on indefinitely. Nozick argues that this consideration should lead us to accept that, in order for anything to be genuinely meaningful, there must be a God. He argues for this in the following way:

About any given thing, however wide, it seems we can stand back and ask what its meaning is. To find a meaning for it, then, we seem driven to find a link with yet another thing beyond its boundaries. And so a regress is launched. To stop this regress, we seem to need ... something which is unlimited, from which we cannot step back, even in imagination, to wonder what its meaning is.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Nozick, R. (1989) The Examined Life. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>75</sup> Cottingham, J. (2003) On The Meaning of Life Routledge: Oxon

<sup>76</sup> Nozick, R. (1989) The Examined Life. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 167

The parallels with the epistemological argument (see II.5.iii & iv) should be clear. In both cases, just stopping somewhere in attempting to justify why something is meaningful is thought to be unsatisfactory. As it happens, Nozick is suggesting that there is somewhere that we can stop that is satisfactory. We can stop at something that is unlimited, or ‘infinite’. (Though it may remain an open question why this is thought satisfactory, and why nowhere else is thought unsatisfactory). In response to this argument, I think we can just repeat the point made when discussing the epistemological argument. The important question is whether the places that we end up stopping this regress are any good. In describing examples of things that genuinely matter, I will be providing places whether it seems reasonable to stop (this will be done in Chapters VII and VIII). If I can show this, then we will have no reason to think that the *only* reasonable place to stop is at something unlimited (God).

ii. *Cottingham’s description of the deadlock between science and religion*

Cottingham, in On The Meaning of Life<sup>77</sup> has a position that is very similar to the position I have been defending in section 3 of this chapter. In the second chapter of On The Meaning of Life, Cottingham argues (as I have) that the religious and scientific perspectives end in a ‘deadlock’<sup>78</sup>. In this sense, it looks as though I can count Cottingham as an ally.

If we are simply looking around us, without any preconceptions either of a theistic or of an atheistic kind, then the observed facts seem to lead to a stand-off when it comes to evaluating the nature of the cosmos we inhabit.<sup>79</sup>

But, even though he has a position very similar to mine, Cottingham goes on to argue that someone’s life can *only* be said to be meaningful if there is a God. (Or perhaps better, life can only be meaningful if lived in the light of a faith in the existence of God).

In the final three chapters, I wish to explore whether anything (in a human life) matters independently of theistic belief. If Cottingham is right, then this project will be futile. So, I will need to assess whether Cottingham’s argument is justified. I will argue that his arguments are not particularly strong. But, discussing his view will bring forward a number of challenges that any non-religious account of the meaning of life will need to meet.

iii. *Cottingham’s argument from luck*

In (what I am calling) the argument from luck, Cottingham makes two claims about meaningfulness. These are given as (a) and (b) below. Cottingham goes on to show how these two claims cause two problems. He then presents religious belief systems as the only way to overcome these two problems. The two claims he makes are:

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<sup>77</sup> Cottingham, J. (2003) On The Meaning of Life Routledge: Oxon

<sup>78</sup> I recommend to anyone who has any doubts about the standoff between the scientific and religious perspectives to read On the Meaning of life, especially pp. 32-63.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid p. 62

- (a) Worthwhile activities are an integral part of a meaningful life. This is a claim I have no problem with. This relates to the discussion in Chapter III, and is something I will argue for in more detail in chapters VI and VII.
- (b) According to Cottingham, these worthwhile activities (that form an integral part of a meaningful life) need to be (in some sense) successful. When we engage in an activity that gives our life meaning, “we require it not just to be undertaken in the right spirit, but to achieve something.”<sup>80</sup>

I am quite happy to accept claim (a). It is a claim I will develop throughout this thesis. It is claim (b) that will be the real issue in this discussion. Cottingham argues that, because of (a) and (b):

our assessment of the worth of our activities is to some extent success-orientated ... in view of the obstacles which the pursuit of goodness often encounters, it seems that the path to a meaningful life offers an existence fraught with struggle, with chances of achieving a successful outcome that are often decidedly slim.<sup>81</sup>

According to Cottingham, this causes two problems. Firstly, it means that (without religious belief) whether a particular individual has (or even has the chance of) a meaningful life is subject to luck in a way that is unacceptable. If it is true that having a meaningful life is subject to luck, many people will (through no fault of their own) fail to have a meaningful life. This, according to Cottingham, would be ethically repugnant, as everyone ought to be eligible for ‘salvation’, for a meaningful life. “It is ethically repugnant because it goes against the long compassionate and egalitarian tradition, rooted in the best of Christian and Islamic thought.”<sup>82</sup>

I hope it is clear that, in basing his argument on religious belief systems, Cottingham is begging the question in the context of undermining the possibility of a non-religious account of the meaning of life. We are looking for reasons for thinking that we have to believe in God from a neutral perspective. So, it will not be enough to show that the teachings of major religions, suggest that we ought to think of belief in God as ‘compulsory’. This is, after all, no surprise.

The second problem Cottingham identifies is that, if having a meaningful life is subject to luck, then the possibility of a meaningful life is not guaranteed. In these circumstances, life would be too ‘psychologically challenging’. We would be asking to people to embark on the difficult journey of life, while giving them little hope of success.

I am not going to explore either of these claims in any detail. I have no problem accepting Cottingham’s claim that everyone ought to be capable of achieving a meaningful life (though it’s not clear that it is compulsory to think this). But the fact is, both the problems Cottingham identifies rely on the claim that the meaningfulness of our activities is inextricably linked to external success (claim (b)). Yet this is something that Cottingham himself goes on to deny. By page 83 of On the Meaning of Life, Cottingham starts to argue that religion teaches us that meaning *isn’t* inextricably linked to results and success (claim (b)).

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid p. 67

<sup>81</sup> Ibid p. 69

<sup>82</sup> Ibid p. 69

Most forms of spirituality have in common that they aim to turn us away from typical preoccupations such as career, status and the accumulation of wealth, and prepare us instead to focus [on] our presence here at this moment.<sup>83</sup>

Given the fact that the problems that Cottingham identifies are based on claim (b), it can start to look as though Cottingham has undermined the basis for his own argument. If it is, as a matter of fact, not true that the meaningfulness of life is inextricably linked with external success, we need not worry about the issues of the ethical repugnancy of luck, and the psychological despair this would imply. (After all, if meaning is not primarily based on external success, then there is little reason to see why there is any problem about luck and difficulty.)

Perhaps then, we can set Cottingham's argument out in a different form. Perhaps Cottingham's argument is that only by adopting the religious perspective can we see that meaning is not success driven. (This is not what Cottingham specifically argues, but something like this seems to be implied by other things he says.) "Involved in [the religious] mindset is a turning away from evaluations based solely on external success."<sup>84</sup>

I intend to show that a non-religious account of meaning *also* reveals that meaning in life isn't primarily focused on external success<sup>85</sup>, but rather on things that just about everyone is capable of achieving. If this turns out to be correct (if this becomes clear not only from a religious perspective, but also from a non-religious perspective) it is difficult to see how Cottingham's argument presents any kind of challenge.

#### *iv. Cottingham's argument from narrative structure*

Cottingham has another argument which attempts to show that religious narratives (religious accounts of the universe) are necessary if anything is to be genuinely meaningful. He defends this view in the following way.

The religious perspective ... offers the possibility of meaningfulness by providing a powerful normative framework or focus for the life of virtue.<sup>86</sup>

Cottingham suggests that, without the normative ideals we can only get from religious narratives, all we would be left with would be 'mere facts' about the world and ourselves. In Cottingham's view, 'mere facts' couldn't provide the necessary normative bite. In order to explain this further, I need to say something about the link I will make between meaningfulness and narratives. In Chapter IV, I argued that when we talk about something being significant or meaningful, we mean that it has a place in a larger narrative (or context). We have seen how religious accounts of the universe are able to provide this kind of narrative. In the next chapter, I will look at what is involved in experiencing one's own life as meaningful (issues to do with personal meaning). My account centres on the fact that, in order to experience one's own life as meaningful, one needs to be able to place one's life and actions in a certain context (have a broader

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid p. 83

<sup>84</sup> Ibid p. 85

<sup>85</sup> This will be done in various places. These are all brought together in Conclusion.4.vii.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid p. 72

story to tell about your life and your actions). Up to a point, Cottingham seems to agree. “It is intolerable that life should consist merely of one darn thing after another.”<sup>87</sup>

But, according to Cottingham, the ability to see one’s life in the context of a strong narrative one can tell about one’s own life is not enough to guarantee a truly meaningful life. In a footnote, when describing the relationship between meaning and narrative, Cottingham says:

It has become fashionable to say that such intelligibility depends on our ability to construct a narrative account of our lives; yet since not just any narrative can command our allegiance as providing a meaningful story, the power of narrative seems dependent on prior notions of value and meaning, rather than being itself generative of those notions.<sup>88</sup>

As it happens, I will be also be arguing that (for reasons independent of religious narratives) not just any strong narrative will allow us to experience our life as meaningful. (This is one of the central topics of Chapter VI). I will also be providing ‘prior notions of value and meaning’ in chapters VII and VIII.

A worthwhile life will be one that possesses genuine value – value linked to our human nature and the pursuit of what is objectively conducive to the flowering of that nature.<sup>89</sup>

I will return to this quote in the conclusion. I believe I will be able to provide precisely what Cottingham requires by starting with the idea of narrative, and without making reference to any religious perspectives.

v. *Meaning without religion*

Cottingham is insistent that spiritual practices (which provide the necessary normative framework, and provide ways of seeing through the wish for external success) cannot be ‘reduced’ to non-religious practices or belief systems.

the practices of spirituality generate a resonance, a depth of response, for which there is simply no analogue in the dry language of scientific rationalism or its associated systems of secular ethics.<sup>90</sup>

human beings, in their vulnerability and finitude, need, in order to survive, modes of responding to the world which go beyond what is disclosed in a rational scientific analysis of the relevant phenomena.<sup>91</sup>

In both of these quotes, Cottingham’s reference to ‘scientific rationalism’ or ‘scientific analysis’ seems to come out of no-where. (Cottingham gives no justification for the claim that scientific analysis is the only alternative to the scientific perspective.) We have seen that the scientific perspective is not one that can reveal whether anything

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid p. 32

<sup>88</sup> Ibid p. 108

<sup>89</sup> Ibid p. 32

<sup>90</sup> Ibid p. 98

<sup>91</sup> Ibid p. 99

matters. If the scientific perspective is the only alternative to religious accounts of the universe, Cottingham may be right that religious narratives are going to be the only way in which we can reveal that anything matters. But, in saying that the scientific perspective is the only alternative to the religious perspective, it appears that Cottingham is presenting us with a false dichotomy. Cottingham appears to say as much himself:

the idea that [science] has robbed the world of its vitality and beauty, and left us with a dead and colourless universe, a collection of inert mechanical rubble, seems to be a glaring non sequitur. In our inventory of what the universe contains, why should we give special prominence to the rocks and stones? ... our own nature must surely have at least some relevance to the question of the nature of that cosmos; and the evidence from the existence of human beings is that the cosmos is such as to produce beings who are eager for truth, receptive to beauty, and who find fulfilment in mutual affection and love.<sup>92</sup>

It is my intention to put religion to one side for the rest of this thesis, and to focus on examining whether there are things that genuinely matter given the nature of the world (and specifically given the nature of the human beings in this world). In doing so, I will not be focused on providing a rational scientific analysis. Rather, I will be talking about facts related to the nature of human existence (facts about - as Cottingham says - beings who find fulfilment in mutual affection etc.) I will be arguing that the world (seen independent of religious beliefs) need not be a meaningless place. After all, it contains us. I will argue that there are aspects of our existence that entitle us to say that there are some things that genuinely matter. While these are not 'purely' scientific facts, neither are these facts that incompatible with scientific inquiry. After all, there is a sense in which the scientific facts explain *how we come to have* the nature that we do. So, my account is not scientific, but neither is it in tension with any scientific evidence. My account is also not religious, but similarly, it is also not particularly in tension with any of the claims of religion. (It is based on facts about human existence that religious traditions do not deny.)

vi. *What will I need to show?*

So, in what follows, I am going to explore whether a life can be said to be meaningful, and whether anything genuinely matters independent of issues concerning religious views and traditions. The discussion here has brought up three concerns, three issues that will need to be dealt with if this strategy is to be shown to be successful. Firstly, from Nozick's argument, I will need to show that there are good (reasonable) places to stop in setting out why something matters, ones that are not 'infinite'. This was, anyway, my central concern. If I can find reasonable answers to my curious friend, this will also show that Nozick's view that only the 'infinite' can make things meaningful will also be shown to be unfounded. (This will be done in VII.2). Secondly, on the basis of my discussion of Cottingham's argument from luck, I will need to show that there are reasons (independent of religious belief) to think that external success is not a necessary or central aspect of a meaningful life. If I can show this, then we needn't worry about the problems of ethical repugnancy and difficulty. Finally, Cottingham's

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid p. 60

argument from narrative structure suggest that, in the context of issues around the meaning of life, I will need to show that my account of a meaningful life goes beyond the mere fact that there is a narrative that can be constructed around it. We need to show that there is a difference between good and bad narratives. I believe I will be able to show that I have achieved these things, independently of religious issues. (This will be done in Conclusion.4.viii).

So, the rest of this thesis is then an attempt to look into whether anything matters, and whether life has a meaning independent of religious beliefs. This account will focus on facts about human existence. These facts (that we are self-conscious, that we have needs etc.) seem to be true, even if the conclusions of science are accepted. They also seem to be facts about human existence that are true regardless of whether there is a religious account of the meaning of life.

## 5. The perspective of the individual

In this section, I want to discuss the fact that human beings are able to take up a perspective on the world and themselves. This will lead me to defend the idea that it is right to think of human beings as (potential) sources of meaning and significance. This is because human beings are forms of (self) awareness that do (except in exceptional circumstances) take a perspective on the world. In light of the discussion about what makes something significant (see IV.2.ii) the perspective of the individual is the kind of perspective that can generate meaning.

I argued in Chapter IV that the objective perspective was not one that could reveal the world as meaningful (see IV.2.iii). By contrast, religious accounts of the meaning of life provide the kinds of perspective that can reveal things that genuinely matter (in virtue of its relationship to a religious narrative). But, I am assuming that there are insurmountable difficulties in using religious accounts of the meaning of life as a way of answering my curious friend's questions (Given the fact that we cannot provide conclusive defences of such universe-wide narratives). In this chapter, we haven't yet seen any conclusive reasons for thinking that there *must* be a religious account of the universe if anything is to genuinely matter. So, my attempt to justify the claim that some things genuinely matter will be done without making reference to objective perspectives on the world (e.g. science) or to religious accounts of the meaning of life.

There are probably countless different perspectives we can take on the world, and on our own actions and choices etc. We can 'reveal' the significance of events in the world by adopting the perspective of a nation, a particular group (e.g. political party), the perspective of a family, a particular individual, the human race etc. There seem to be good reasons for thinking that things mattering in the human world (to nations, to the species etc.) can be traced back to the fact that it matters to individuals (from their perspective). It seems difficult to see how you could say something was significant for the English nation, if you were unable to show how it was significant for at least some English people. So, it seems right to say that something can only be said to matter in the human world (to a nation, to the species) if it matters to some individual human beings.

In the rest of this thesis, I am going to focus on the way in which the relative importance of events in the world is understood is by reference to what matters *to* a particular individual (from their own perspective.) In chapter VIII, I argue that human existence is *not* primarily individualistic. So, in starting from the perspective of the



individual, I do not mean to suggest some kind of stark individualism. I simply want to assess whether, using the individual perspective as our starting point, we can reveal things that genuinely matter.

The perspective of the individual meets the requirements necessary to be a potential source of significance. Human beings have awareness. (So, they have a perspective on the world.) We are also (to varying degrees) self-aware. From our perspective (in the light of our plans, projects, values and ultimate concerns) we experience connections between events, we experience some events as more significant than others etc. It is a fact about us that we experience events in the world, and our own lives as having significance (in the light of certain kinds of narratives I will discuss in the next chapter).

As it stands, though, the claim is merely that human beings have the *potential* to experience meaning. This claim is compatible with the thought that some people experience little meaning or significance in the world or their life (see II.3). Also, by itself, the fact that human beings experience things as significant doesn't provide a way of answering my central question. The question I am really concerned with is not whether human beings are capable of experiencing meaning, but whether human beings can, on occasions, be *right* in thinking that something genuinely matters. As will become clear, there is a threat of arbitrariness (one we have come across before) if we adopt the perspective of the individual.

## 6. The threat of arbitrariness

We seem to have had a very long discussion simply to reach a conclusion I argued for in Chapter II, that human beings are unavoidably serious - people think some things matter. As I discussed in Chapter II, if things mattered *solely* in virtue of the fact that we happen to think they matter, we might have to accept that nothing genuinely matters (see II.6). To see this, think of my curious friend's questions. If things matter to us simply in virtue of the fact that we think they matter to us then we can be assured that we are not making a mistake when answering my curious friend's question. After all, *all* answers to my curious friend's question will be justified (as long as we genuinely act as though they matter). But, this would suggest that it is irrelevant what we choose to think matters (as any answer is as good as any other). If all answers to my curious friend's questions are equally right, then there can be nothing to choose between them. There can be no such thing as a correct (as opposed to false) view about what matters. If all answers are equally good, then there can be no rational consideration to help us decide between things that genuinely do and genuinely don't matter. (As long as you happen to think something matters, then it just does. Nothing more can be said about it.) If this is the case, Cottingham will have been shown to be correct when he said that, without religious beliefs, our decisions about what matter will lack any necessary normative bite. Also, Nagel will have been proved right when he said that "all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear ... when we take this view [we] recognise what we do as arbitrary."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Nagel, T. (1979) *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge p. 15. Nagel puts this point another way when he says "what seems to us important or serious or valuable would not seem so if we were differently constituted." (Ibid, 18) This way of putting things is not nearly as threatening. Given this account, there may be things that are genuinely important, serious and valuable *given* the way we are constituted. I will return to this at the end of this chapter.

On the other hand, if there is a contrast to draw between what really matters and what we mistakenly think matters (if we can show that some answers to my curious friend's question are better than others) then it looks as though my curious friend's next question is well motivated. My curious friend will be entitled to ask how we know that the thing we think matters is one of those things that genuinely matter, rather than one of those that doesn't. If we are at a loss to answer my curious friend, this may show that we don't know the difference between something that really matters, and something we only think matters. So, it looks as though we are under some kind of obligation to answer my curious friend's question about why something matters, as we will need to show that the thing we think matters is one of those things that *really* matters, rather than one of those cases that only seem to matter. Only if we can provide an adequate answer to my curious friend, we can be assured that we are not making a mistake. If we want to argue that our claims about what matters are not arbitrary (they have some basis in reality) we, at the very least, need to show that some answers to my curious friend's question are better than others (and perhaps show how we can tell the things that really matter from those that don't). This will be done in Chapter VII. Before doing this, in the next chapter I want to explore what it is possible to say about the meaning of life from the perspective of the individual, independent of religious beliefs.

## 7. Conclusion

In section 3, I argued that, if we are looking for definitive proof of the ultimate causes of things, neither religious belief nor scientific method seems to be able to give satisfactory answers. Religious belief doesn't seem susceptible to 'intellectual proof'. Science does provide intellectual proofs for its claims about the causes of things, but it is not clear that it is a method that can be used to discover the ultimate cause of everything. It is (very rarely) focused on discovering the ultimate causes of things.

I then looked at whether there was any reason to think that there is anything provided by God, or religious belief that is necessary if anything is to genuinely matter. What became clear is that, any account which attempts to describe those things that are genuinely meaningful, independent of religious belief, faces a number of challenges. Firstly, it needs to show how there can be good justifications for thinking something genuinely matters (places other than infinitude). Secondly, it needs to show, independently of religious belief, that we have reasons for thinking that meaning is not primarily about success, but is in fact something that just about everyone is capable of achieving.

The third challenge will be a central concern in the next chapter. In the next chapter, I will describe the way in which, in order to experience one's own life as meaningful, one needs to be able to place one's life and actions in a certain context (have a broader story to tell about your life and your actions). I will argue that this involves having a narrative (a story to tell about your life) that relates your life and your actions to the things you care about most (what I will be calling your ultimate concerns).

Cottingham argued that, unless we have the kind of meaning provided by a religious narrative, we would simply be left with the 'mere' facts about our existence. Such an account would be unable to provide the normative bite that only religious accounts of the universe can provide. Because of this, independently of religious beliefs, there could be no such thing as better or worse narratives. Any narrative will be as good as any other (so there is a genuine threat of arbitrariness).

There will be two questions I will be tackling in the next chapter. I will be asking whether we can justify claiming that the things we care about most (our ultimate concerns) genuinely matter. In the end, I will argue that the mere fact that something is your ultimate concern, doesn't guarantee that those ultimate concerns genuinely matter. So, this chapter doesn't allow me to answer my central question. The second question turns out to be more fruitful. I will be asking whether our ultimate concerns are arbitrary. Through assessing whether all ultimate concerns are equally good, I will find that there are good reasons for thinking that our ultimate concerns should not be selected on an arbitrary basis. This is because (for us) some ultimate concerns are definitely better than others in delivering the sense that our lives are meaningful. This is an important conclusion, given the fact that, in Chapter VII Part 2, whether or not our ultimate concerns are effective in delivering a meaningful life is one of the things that *genuinely* matter to us.

## CHAPTER VI

### ARE OUR ULTIMATE CONCERNS ARBITRARY?

#### 1. *Introduction*

In the last chapter, I made the decision to focus on the perspective of the individual. In the next chapter, I will be arguing that, from this perspective, some things genuinely matter. Before doing this, I want to take the opportunity to assess whether, from the perspective of the individual, life can be said to have a meaning.

I will do this through assessing one potential answer to my curious friend in detail. The potential answer I am interested in is when we answer my curious friend by saying that something matters because it is the thing I care most about, it is my ultimate concern. For example, I might say that my family is the most important thing to me. I will discuss how our ultimate concerns might help us to experience our life as meaningful.

It becomes clear that attempts to claim that our ultimate concerns genuinely matter face the charge of arbitrariness I described in V.6. I attempt to show that our ultimate concerns are not arbitrary, by arguing that we can make mistakes concerning our ultimate concerns. In Chapter VII. Part 2, I will argue that it genuinely matters to us that our ultimate concerns are effective in enabling us to experience our lives as meaningful. I will describe the way in which we can mistakenly believe that our ultimate concerns are effective. I will also describe the fact that some ultimate concerns couldn't effectively provide the sense that our lives are meaningful (and so choosing such ultimate concerns would be a mistake). Through this discussion, it should become clear that our ultimate concerns are far from arbitrary.

At the start of Chapter V, I described two ways in which we might ask whether life has a meaning. We can ask the question about *all* life. Asked in this way, we are asking whether there is something that all (human) life shares that makes all (human) life significant. In other words, we can ask whether life has a *universal* meaning. The last chapter was focused on assessing the kinds of narratives that provide universal meaning; religious accounts of the meaning of life.

At the end of the last chapter, I put religious accounts of the universe (and issues to do with universal meaning) to one side, and decided to focus on the perspective of the individual human being. When it comes to questions concerning the meaning of life, focusing on the individual means switching the discussion to the issue of *personal* meaning. In particular, this means being interested in what is involved in a particular person experiencing their own life as meaningful.

#### 2. **Personal meaning**

In this section, I want to outline what it means to experience one's own life as meaningful (significant, valuable, worthwhile, important etc.) It will perhaps be better to start with a contrast. What does it mean to experience one's life as *lacking* any meaning? It is possible (e.g. in cases of depression) to experience one's life as simply a series of disconnected (random) events. In other words, the events in your life do not

hang together in any meaningful sense. As Cottingham says, “It is intolerable that life should consist merely of one darn thing after another.”<sup>94</sup>

Note how this relates to the discussion of significance in IV.2.ii. There, I argued that things gain meaning or significance by being placed in a context. So, when a person’s life lacks personal meaning, we might say that they lack any broader context (or narrative) through which the individual events in their life are revealed as significant. They fail to have any broader story to tell about their life that connects up the different events in their life, and lends it a sense of coherence. By contrast, think of someone who is able to put their life and their actions in some broader context. The fact that they have some broader story to tell about how the disparate events in their life are connected will prevent their life being experienced as a series of unconnected, random events and experiences.

There is much more to be said about what is involved in experiencing your own life as meaningful. We might think that we not just are looking for ‘any old’ story. Rather, we are looking for a narrative which also reveals the world we live in as meaningful, which identifies purposes worth living for, and which gives us reasons for thinking that our life makes a positive difference.

So, we might hope that the story we have to tell about our life helps us experience the world as containing things of real *significance* and importance to us (perhaps the story gives us a real sense of what is genuinely important). Because our life and the world is experienced as significant, this *motivates* us to act in the world. Finally, it seems right to say that a central aspect of experiencing your life as meaningful involves having a sense that, through your actions, you are capable of making a *difference* to something you think important (you do not just make a difference, but that you make a valuable, significant difference.)

### 3. *Religious beliefs as a source of personal meaning*

In the last chapter, I made the decision to put religious accounts of the meaning of life to one side. Before finally doing this, I just want to describe the way in which religious beliefs can be the source of someone’s personal meaning. Many people experience their life as having a personal meaning (they experience their own life as meaningful) on the basis of their belief in a religious narrative. For example, someone might understand the world in the context of the stories told in the Bible. This broader story might allow them to experience their own life, and the world as meaningful (insofar as they are created by God).

So, someone’s religious beliefs can help them make sense of their life and the world. In virtue of this story (the religious narrative) the world contains things of significance and importance (to God, and so to them). It may provide them with a sense that their actions are significant. For example, someone might think that a sin genuinely matters. And they would say that is not just significant in virtue of the fact that they happen to think it significant. They think it is *really* significant, in virtue of their beliefs about their relationship to God.

Having a life that you experience as meaningful means more than this. In particular, we might think that it involves some sense that you think that your life and your actions are significant and important. It is not at all clear that the mere fact that you sincerely believe in a religious account of the universe will always lead to experiencing

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<sup>94</sup> Cottingham, J. (2003) *On The Meaning of Life* Routledge: Oxon p. 32

your own life as significant in this sense. Still, regardless of anything else, it might be thought that a person's religious narrative might give them a sense that each living thing (including themselves) is *always* significant, in virtue of its relationship to God.

As I said in the last chapter, I want to put religious answers to the meaning of life to one side. In what follows, I am interested in exploring whether there are ways in which we can experience our lives as meaningful that are totally independent of religious belief. In order to do this, I want to talk about the things that matter most to people (what I call our 'ultimate concerns.')

#### 4. *Ultimate Concerns*

In the next section, I will be arguing that life can be personally meaningful for someone, even if they don't have any religious beliefs. In order to do this, I first want to introduce the idea of 'ultimate concerns' (the things that matter most to people). In order to see how the things we care most about might provide us with a sense that our life is meaningful, here is a description of what I will be calling 'ultimate concerns' from Richard Norman:

What can make a human life into a coherent unity? It may be, perhaps, that one's life is given a shape by some dominating aim and object. This may be an involvement in a certain kind of work; or a commitment to a religious or political ideal; or the focus of one's life may be some relationship or set of relationships with other people, family relationships perhaps, or sexual relationships. To give unity to one's life, such a dominating concern will not be all-embracing, but it may be the centre around which everything else organises itself, so that one may be able to say of it, 'This is what ultimately matters to me', and other independent interests may be integrated into one's life by being brought into relation to this central concern.<sup>95</sup>

I want to start by setting out a few examples of the kind of things that might function as an ultimate concern. (This is not supposed to be an exhaustive list). The first set of ultimate concerns could be loosely described as making other people your ultimate concern. For example, in Chapter III (Section 9: Work with worthwhile goals) I discussed the ways in which people may devote themselves (in a way that suggests that it is of ultimate concern to them) to the health or interests of other people. We could include in this group people who live by political ideals, teachers, health workers, aid workers etc.

Of course, one's concern for others need not be 'professional'. In a later chapter, I will be discussing the value of relationships. (Chapter VIII) If asked what their ultimate concern was, many people would mention a particular relationship, or set of relationships. They might talk about their partner and children as the most important thing in their life. They might describe how they work long hours at work to provide for them etc.

One's ultimate concerns need not relate directly to other people. For example, someone might make activities such as painting, craftsmanship and film making etc. the central concern of their life (see the discussion of creative activities – play – in Chapter III). You might give this a central place because of your love of the activity, out of a

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<sup>95</sup> Norman, Richard (1983) *The Moral Philosophers* Clarendon Press: Oxford p. 165

passion or need to express yourself, or out of a love for what you produce through this activity.

Or, someone can make their own self-interest their central concern. They might fundamentally be concerned with gaining things for themselves, or they may just be motivated to pursue their own happiness (the difference between these two things will be discussed in VII.10).

By talking of someone's ultimate concern, I don't wish to suggest that it is *only* thing that matters to them. For example, someone who (ultimately) cares about their family will also be likely to care about their career. But they may (in part) care about their career because it contributes to the interests of their family. So it is not that someone with an ultimate concern will only care about one thing. Rather, they will care about any number of the things that are significant for their ultimate concerns. I will often talk as though people always have one single ultimate concern. But, I don't mean to imply that someone cannot have more than one ultimate concern. (After all, people do find themselves faced with dilemmas.) It is possible that a particular activity (e.g. painting) and a set of relationships (with your family) are both of ultimate concern to you. (In dilemmas, your priorities may be tested).<sup>96</sup>

## 5. How ultimate concerns can provide personal meaning

In this section, I want to look at the way in which having a strong ultimate concern can help make your life personally meaningful. Firstly, having an ultimate concern can provide you with a coherent story to tell about all the different aspects of your life. This can help you see how the disparate events of your life can 'hang together' in virtue of their relationship to the things you care most about. In this way, our ultimate concerns can help us make sense of our lives.

In virtue of our ultimate concerns you will experience a world that contains things of importance or significance to you. For example, if your family is your ultimate concern, the needs, health and happiness of the members of your family will be experienced as important and significant. So, having an ultimate concern can help you highlight those things that are of real significance to you.

Because the world contains things of importance to you (things matter to you in the light of your ultimate concerns) you will be motivated to act. As I said, if your family is your ultimate concern, then the interests of your family members will be of real significance to you. And, if you really do care about your family members, you will be motivated to act in caring ways towards them.

Imagine you are motivated to act by (say) the love of your family, to act in such a way as to make a positive difference to their lives. Given the fact that your family is something you care deeply about, you will have the sense that you make a positive difference to something that you consider valuable. The sense that you make a difference or have an impact on the world (in particular, an impact on things in the world you value) is certainly one thing we might be looking for in a meaningful life.

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<sup>96</sup> I have not attempted to explore the complexities of all this. For example, for the last six months, I have made finishing my PhD my ultimate concern (working on my PhD outweighed other things I think of as genuinely important to me – e.g. my family). I am happy to make this my ultimate concern in the short term, but would not want to always prioritise philosophy over my family for my whole life. In what follows, I often talk as though people simply have one ultimate concern. This is a simplification, but it does allow me to have a shorthand way of talking of the things that matter most to people.

All of this suggests that, through centring our lives on certain ultimate concerns, we are able to experience our life as meaningful. Our lives can be seen, not as a series of disconnected events, but as a coherent whole that we can make sense of. In virtue of our ultimate concerns, certain aspects of our lives and the world will come to be seen as significant. Because we experience the world as significant, we will care about those aspects of the world and our life. If we care about them enough, we will be motivated to act (in accordance with our ultimate concern). Through our actions, we will be able to make a significant difference to something that we think of as valuable (our ultimate concerns). So, we will have a sense that we make a valuable, positive difference.

It seems that, the stronger someone's commitment to an ultimate concern, the more things will matter to them, and the more they will be motivated to act. This suggests that if we ask whether a particular person's life is meaningful (in the personal sense) we are not necessarily looking for a simple yes or no. After all, "there is ... nothing odd in saying about a man who has made a partial recovery from a deep depression that there is now again 'some' meaning in his life."<sup>97</sup> The question then is not so much whether someone has a life that they experience as meaningful, but *how* meaningful they experience their life as being. Whether or not someone experiences their life as meaningful is something that needs to be assessed on a case by case basis. There is no general conclusion we can reach about whether people in general experience their life as meaningful.

## 6. Ultimate concerns and my curious friend

In the last section, I have discussed the way in which centring your life around an ultimate concern can help you experience your own life as meaningful. In this section, I want to assess whether our ultimate concerns might help us answer my curious friend's challenge. Imagine I tell my curious friend that I am going to help my mother. My curious friend might ask me why helping my mother matters. I might reply that my family is my ultimate concern (it is the thing I care most about). Because of this, the needs of my mother matter. So, if my curious friend asks 'why does your family matter?' I can say that this is the most important thing in my life. It is the centre of my life. It is the thing that matters most to me in the world. In this sense then, answering my curious friend's question with my ultimate concern, appears to make my view that something really does matter to me entirely reasonable.

Still, my curious friend might question whether I have any *good reasons* for making my family my ultimate concern. After all, if my decision to make something our ultimate concern is itself arbitrary (if I am unable to justify making something my ultimate concern) then citing the fact that something is my ultimate concern won't provide a satisfying answer to my curious friend's questions.

In Chapter VI (see V.6) I argued that if things only mattered in virtue of the fact that we think they matter, we would have to concede that it is arbitrary what we choose to think matters. This same threat of arbitrariness also seems to apply to ultimate concerns. So, we cannot claim that something matters simply in virtue of the fact that it is someone's ultimate concern. If this is the case, then it looks like it is not possible to make a mistake about our ultimate concerns. This implies that there are no rational constraints on someone's ultimate concern. So, someone may as well pick *anything* at

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<sup>97</sup> Edwards, P. (2000) 'The Meaning and Value of Life'. From Klembe (ed.) The Meaning of Life. Oxford University Press: Oxford p. 144



all. It doesn't matter whether we choose to think that our family, or counting blades of grass is our ultimate concern. Simply by making it our ultimate concern, we would be sure that it matters. But, this suggests that our ultimate concerns (what matters most to us) will not be open to rational assessment in any way. In the rest of this chapter, I will be attempting to show that we can make mistakes about our ultimate concerns. I will also attempt to show that some ultimate concerns are better than others.

Even if I show this (if there are rational considerations we can use to distinguish a good from a bad ultimate concern) I will still face the questioning of my curious friend. After all, if it is possible to make mistakes about our ultimate concerns, it seems I will owe my curious friend some guarantee that the ultimate concern I have chosen is not a mistake.

## 7. Are mistakes about ultimate concerns possible?

In this section I want to set out a couple of ways in which we might talk about someone making a mistake about their ultimate concerns. As will become clear, there can be significant differences between different ultimate concerns. We can talk about ultimate concerns being more or less *effective*. I will argue (see VII. Part 2) that it genuinely matters to us that our ultimate concerns are effective. If this is the case, then it genuinely matters that we choose ultimate concerns that are likely to be effective in delivering a sense that our lives are meaningful. In this section, I want to show that it is possible to make mistakes about our ultimate concerns. If I can show this, it will demonstrate that our ultimate concerns are not arbitrary. I will also say something about how we might assess whether an ultimate concern really is effective. This will allow me to set out the kinds of mistakes we can make about our ultimate concerns.

### *i. Making a mistake 'by your own lights'*

Imagine that (up until last year) believed that my career was all that mattered to me. This year, I realise that this was a mistake. Perhaps my view now is that I was wrong to give my job the centrality in my life that I did. As a result, I now regret making it my priority to be the first employee at work and the last one to leave. I have realised that this emphasis prevented me from gaining things that I now understand to be very important to me (e.g. giving time, energy and attention to my friends and family). In this sense, there seems to be nothing wrong with thoughts such as; 'I thought it mattered to me, but I now believe that was a mistake'<sup>98</sup>.

Imagine someone who wants to deny that mistakes are possible. They might say that, even in examples where we have come to believe from our own perspective that we have made a mistake, there is still a sense in which mistakes about what matters are impossible. After all, even if I come to realise that my career no longer matters, I would still accept that *at the time* it really did matter to me (after all, this is what explains the fact that I worked such long hours, consistently took my work home with me etc.) It can start to look as though we cannot be mistaken about what matters to us.

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<sup>98</sup> Of course, it is possible to change your ideas about what ultimately matters to you without thinking that your earlier view was mistaken. Someone might think that it was not a mistake to make his career the centre of his life, while they were single, even though, now they have a partner and child, they have become his ultimate concern.

By itself, the fact that we cannot be mistaken at the time doesn't imply that mistakes about ultimate concerns are impossible. Compare the way in which, in one sense, it is impossible to be mistaken about what you think at a particular time. If you really do think that Belfast is the capital of the Republic of Ireland at a particular time, then you cannot be mistaken about this. This really is what you think. Of course, there is another sense in which you *can* be mistaken in thinking Belfast is the capital of the Republic of Ireland. By the same token, the mere fact that you cannot be mistaken about the fact that something matters to you at a particular time doesn't (by itself) imply that there cannot be another sense in which we can be mistaken about what matters. This suggests that it may still be possible to think that, in our own view, we have made a mistake.

*ii. Assessing ultimate concerns*

I introduced ultimate concerns in the context of a discussion of the meaning of life. The thought was that, in virtue of the fact that someone could centre their life around an ultimate concern, they could experience the world and their own life as meaningful. In section 3, I described how ultimate concerns can help us experience our life as meaningful. Perhaps this description can provide a way in which the effectiveness of our ultimate concerns could be assessed. We can ask whether a particular ultimate concern is effective in providing someone with a sense that their life has some kind of *coherence*. We can ask whether they provide the person with a sense that the world contains things of real *significance* and importance. We can ask whether their ultimate concerns *motivate* them. We can ask whether they provide the person with a sense that their life and their actions have some kind of significant, *valuable impact*.

Apart, perhaps, from the issue of motivation (which I will return to in *iii.*) it seems that we assess whether someone's ultimate concerns are effective by looking at how that person *feels* about their own life. In the example (in *i.*) where I came to believe that I had made a mistake in making my career my ultimate concern, the fact that I no longer thought that my career was most important to thing to me centred on the fact that I didn't find myself satisfied by a life that had my career as my ultimate concern. I realised that it failed to deliver the sense that my life was meaningful. In this sense, Broadly speaking, we might say that, when ultimate concerns work effectively, they deliver the sense that a person is satisfied with their life, and how it hangs together. There is more to say about how we might assess the effectiveness of ultimate concerns. I will do this after assessing whether it is possible to make mistakes about whether we are satisfied with our life (see *iv.*)

Before doing this, I want to look at the issue of motivation. One of the things we might hope for in a meaningful life is that we are motivated to act in the world because our ultimate concerns are so important to us. It looks as though this could provide a way of assessing the effectiveness of someone's ultimate concerns that doesn't just depend on 'how they feel' about their life.

*iii. Having ultimate concerns and actions that are inconsistent*

**I want to look at another kind of mistake we might make concerning what matters most to us. Imagine someone who, when asked (or whenever they think about it to themselves) says that there is something that is of ultimate importance**

**to them. If they are never *motivated* to act in the light of this ultimate concern, we would be tempted to say that they are making a mistake about their ultimate concerns. For example, imagine they always say that the environment is the most important thing to them. If they also happen to drive a high polluting car and never make an effort to recycle etc. we seem to have grounds for saying that they have made a mistake about their ultimate concerns. If having a fast car is more important to them than the environmental impact of their car, then the environment simply cannot be the most important thing to them (despite what they say or think).**

We discussed this issue when discussing the unavoidability of seriousness (see II.3). There I argued that what matters to someone is primarily shown through how they act<sup>99</sup>. So, if they are constantly given the opportunity to act in accordance with their (supposed) ultimate concern, but consistently put other things above it, I think we have good reasons for saying that they are making a mistake in their claims about what ultimately matters to them.

I myself have made this kind of mistake. I first went to university to do a degree in physics. I (sincerely) believed that I wanted to do a degree in physics. But, I was asked to leave the course before the end of the first term for lack of attendance and lack of effort. It is now clear to me that I never really wanted to study physics. I was quite weak willed and wasn't particularly self-aware (both of these will be discussed below) and I think I just accepted other people's views (particularly my father's) that I should want to do a physics degree. My failure to apply myself to my studies taught me that physics was not that important to me. In this sense, we seem clearly able to say that I made a mistake. My mistake was in thinking that something mattered to me, when it didn't actually matter to me.

One response to this could be to say that we ought to retain the idea that I was right to think that physics really did matter to me, but I was just weak willed (and that explains why I didn't put the work in). I don't want to deny the reality of weakness of will, but in this context, we might ask *why* I was weak willed. My sense is that what explains my weakness of will (in the context of physics) was the fact that I had no passionate connection to physics. This would also explain why, when I started studying philosophy four years later, I had absolutely no problem applying myself.

Of course, it is possible in some cases for someone's lack of action to be explained by the fact that they lack the *capacity* to do things. For example, someone may, because of ill health, be unable to put large amounts of energy into the things they value. In such cases, we seem to be talking about a general weakness that the person suffers (not just weakness of will).

Compare this with the case of someone who says that their ultimate concern is their family, but who always put watching Manchester United on TV above their family. If we take their actions at face value, we would have to say that they act as though watching football is more important to them than their family. (After all, when they are forced to choose between the two, they always put watching football first). In such circumstances it will not be enough to simply state that they actually care for their family more, but are weak willed. We would need some explanation of why their actions are out of step with their actual values. Otherwise, talking about weakness of will in this context will just look like a poor excuse.

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<sup>99</sup> We might add that this is true given certain constraints. They have to be capable of acting in such a way and are given the opportunity to act in this way.

This discussion suggests that, if someone's sincere beliefs about their values are (to a large degree) inconsistent with their actions, we will have grounds for saying that they are making a mistake concerning the nature of their ultimate concerns.

*iv. Self-awareness*

In (ii.) I argued that how the individual feels about their life is the main criteria we have for whether their ultimate concerns are effective. If it is thought that it is impossible to be mistaken about how you feel, when someone (sincerely) says that they are satisfied with their life we would have to accept that it is impossible for them to be mistaken.

The idea that someone could make a mistake about how they feel may look counter-intuitive. In philosophical terms, self-awareness is often thought of as unproblematic. After all, we do have a privileged form of access to the events in our own mind (so the story goes, from Descartes<sup>100</sup> to Sartre). Perhaps, if we are just thinking about our immediate sensations and our immediate thoughts, it might be right to say that we have a privileged first person perspective on these things. But, I would argue, when it comes to our deepest desires and needs, our over-all level of happiness etc. there is no reason to think that the person themselves is *always* in the best position to judge these things.

Imagine you know someone well. Perhaps, if they are particularly lacking in self-awareness or prone to denial, you may know them better than they know themselves. Think of someone like this, who says (apparently sincerely) that they are fully satisfied with their life (even though they seem unhappy and lack any motivation). In such circumstances, you may get a clear sense that (underneath the bravado) they are actually dissatisfied with their life. You might clearly see that they are not motivated by their ultimate concerns (the things they say matter most to them). In these circumstances (where the issue revolves around problems with their self-awareness) there do seem to be grounds for denying their sincere views about how satisfied they are with their lives. In other words, we can be right to say that they are making a mistake about the effectiveness of their ultimate concerns.

I want to discuss another example in order to show that self-awareness is not always a simple given. Think of the way in which it can take time for the fact that a relationship or an activity has become of central importance to your life to become clear to you (it might slowly dawn on you that someone has become the love of your life etc.) Similarly, think of the way it can take time to discover that you have fallen out of love with a person or activity. This suggests that understanding your deepest desires is not something that features in your experience in an immediate, clear way. We might say that self-awareness requires paying attention to ourselves (and, perhaps, skill and patience). Because of this, there is no reason to think that self-awareness is a given (or indeed easy).

Of course, this is not to deny that (given a reasonable level of self-awareness) the individual is the final judge of whether they are satisfied with their life. But, if there are grounds for thinking that someone lacks an understanding of their true feelings, it may be appropriate to talk of them making mistakes about their ultimate concerns.

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<sup>100</sup> I've always found it useful to read Descartes as showing that it doesn't matter how hard you think about things (in your own head – in isolation from others) if you don't have the help of other people, you won't even be able to tell whether what you are seeing is real or merely an hallucination.

v. *Denial*

Denial is one of the ways in which we can (actively) avoid self-awareness. Broadly speaking, I am talking about the inability or unwillingness to confront certain aspects of your life. This implies that you are going out of your way to avoid full awareness of yourself and your actual situation. In this sense, there is a clear link between denial and a lack of self-awareness.

As with a lack of self-awareness, denial can also lead someone to choose ultimate concerns that are not sensitive to their actual situation. For example, imagine a man who makes his relationship with his wife his ultimate concern. For some reason, his wife falls out of love with him, and she comes to think that she no longer wants to be with him. (She leaves their home, making it clear that she is never coming back.) Despite this, he continues to make this relationship with his partner the centre of his life. (He might rationalise this by saying that, despite everything she has said and done, she still loves him, and will be back). We might say that such a man has ignored the clear evidence that his relationship with his (ex-) partner would be an inappropriate ultimate concern. Given the fact that he no longer sees her, he will be unable to have a significant effect on the thing he most values. In fact, it is difficult to see how devoting yourself to someone who doesn't want anything to do with you could lead to any kind of lasting satisfaction.

It may look as though there are principled difficulties in explaining how denial is possible (as it seems to suggest that we both know and don't know something at the same time). In the last section, I argued that understanding our true feelings about things requires attention. Insofar as someone is able to avoid giving attention to their situation and their feelings about it, we can at least understand how someone can retain views about themselves and their situation that are (to everyone else) clearly false. Perhaps denial can in part be accomplished through the attempt to constantly distract themselves from their situation, or the attempt to only think about those aspects of themselves and their situation that fit their 'preferred' worldview.

Insofar as we think of them attempting to evade the truth of their situation, we have to assume that (on some level) they are aware of the truth. Yet, if denial is to be even moderately successful, there must also be a sense in which they are (on another level) unaware of the truth. What should be clear is that people in denial will fail to be (or stronger, will go out of their way to avoid being) fully self-aware. Perhaps people can have such a low level of self-awareness, that they are capable of sustaining contradictory beliefs. (This explanation of denial is just a sketch. I simply haven't got the space to develop this in any detail).

What we can say is that, if someone is unsatisfied with their life, but in denial about this, it seems appropriate to say (despite their sincere claim that they are satisfied) that they are making a mistake concerning the effectiveness of their ultimate concerns.

vi. *Lack of awareness*

It is possible to have examples of mistakes concerning your ultimate concerns that do not arise from denial, but simply from a lack of knowledge. For example, imagine someone who comes to university to study philosophy, in the belief that a life centred around philosophy would be a satisfying one for them. They may have made a mistake about what exactly studying philosophy involves (perhaps they made their decision on the basis of reading 'Nausea' and a bit of Nietzsche). We might say that

when they made the decision to make philosophy their ultimate concern, they were not aware of all the relevant facts. Even if they are aware of what academic philosophy involves, it may take some time for them to realise that they have no real aptitude for philosophy (or they get no real pleasure from it). In such circumstances, we might say that (through a lack of awareness) they have chosen an ultimate concern that isn't effective.

To make it clear, this kind of lack of awareness is not (necessarily) a form of denial. Denial would be where, perhaps because someone has invested so much in the thought that philosophy will make them happy, that they might avoid facing the fact that they are not satisfied by a life with philosophy as their ultimate concern. This would be a mistake.

vii. *The criteria of an effective ultimate concern*

I have been discussing a number of 'mistakes' that someone can make concerning their ultimate concerns. This discussion suggests that we should amend the criteria of whether our ultimate concerns are genuinely effective put forward above (in *ii.*) I will be assuming that, whether someone is satisfied with their life *is* the criteria of whether an ultimate concern is effective. But, we should add that this is true only if their actions are consistently in accord with their ultimate concerns (they are motivated by their ultimate concerns – see *iii.*) and they have an adequate awareness of themselves (see *iv.* and *v.*) and their situation (see *vi.*) This, I would argue, is the mark of whether an ultimate concern is effective at delivering a satisfying life for someone.<sup>101</sup>

## 8. **Ultimate concerns that look badly mistaken**

In this section, I want to introduce three examples. These are examples that seem to meet the requirements of an effective ultimate concern, while at the same time looking like potential examples of mistakes. This takes us back to one of the challenges posed by Cottingham in Chapter V (see V.4.iv). I have argued that, by centring our life around the kind of narrative that can be provided by an ultimate concern, we are capable of experiencing our life as meaningful. As I discussed in the last chapter (see V.4.iv) Cottingham argued that, without God, we would lack the ability to distinguish between good and bad narratives. In terms of my discussion, this would imply that we would be unable to distinguish good ultimate concerns from bad ones. In this section, I look at examples of lives which most people would think of as unsatisfying, or as mistakes. I examine these examples because they seem to match the criteria of an effective ultimate concern. If we are unable to distinguish these three examples from lives where someone makes their family the centre of their life and is deeply satisfied with their life as a result, we might have to admit that Cottingham is right.

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<sup>101</sup> Many of the examples seem to reveal that problems arise concerning people's ultimate concerns in virtue of the fact that their emotional and intellectual responses are not sensitive to the real situation (or to their feelings about the situation). Or, their actions may not be in accord with their intellectual understanding of their ultimate concerns. This perhaps suggests that the best way to avoid persistent problems is to aim to be like Aristotle's account of the virtuous person (a person whose emotions, thinking and actions are in harmony, and are appropriate to their situation). C.f. Aristotle (1953) *Ethics*. Penguin: Middlesex

The first example is suffering a psychotic episode (having what would be described as delusional beliefs). The second is suffering a serious addiction (e.g. to heroin). The third is making something insignificant your ultimate concern (e.g. a life devoted to counting blades of grass).

I want to look at the ways in which lives of this kind can share many of the properties of a meaningful life. As I said, we might worry that our ultimate concerns are threateningly arbitrary if there is no way to distinguish the life of an addict, or the life of someone with bizarre delusional beliefs from the life of someone who puts their family at the centre of their life, and gains a deep satisfaction as a result.

On the other hand, few people would choose a life full of psychotic episodes over a truly satisfying one. This might suggest to us that (intuitively at least) people do not think that all ultimate concerns are equally good. In order to untangle this, I want to set out each example, and try to show to what extent they meet the requirements of an effective ultimate concern. In the next section, I will assess whether it is possible for us to distinguish good from bad narratives.

### *i. Psychosis*

I am interested in what would be described as a form of mental illness. I will be labelling the kind of experience of the world I am interested in as ‘psychosis’. (Though this term also has other connotations from the one I am giving it). The kind of worldview I am interested in is one which involves seeing the world as *saturated* with meaning. For example, imagine someone who experiences everything in the world as the work of demons.

If such a person always acts so as to thwart the evil intentions of the demons, it looks as though this might satisfy the criteria for an effective ultimate concern. Every single event in the world is made meaningful in virtue of the fact that it is the work of demons. It might lend a sense of coherence to their view of their life and the world. Events in the world would be experienced as meaningful in virtue of the fact that it is the work of demons. Their own life might be seen as meaningful in light of the fact that they may be able to thwart the work of the demons, and so they have a sense that their actions are significant. The fact that everything is the work of demons might make them highly motivated to act. In this sense, their actions may be fully in accord with their beliefs. So, someone suffering psychosis seem to meet all the criteria of a meaningful life, yet we want to say that their ultimate concerns are a mistake of some kind.

The perspective of someone suffering psychotic episodes seems to have parallels to religious accounts of the meaning of life. In both cases there is a sense in which everything is made meaningful – by its relationship to God in the case of religious beliefs, or in virtue of its relationship to demons in the case of psychotic delusion. (Despite these parallels, it is not my intention to suggest that religious beliefs are like delusional beliefs.<sup>102</sup>).

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<sup>102</sup> One of the problems with psychotic episodes is that the importance of everything else diminishes. In Chapters VII and VIII, I will argue that our needs, our happiness and our relationships genuinely matter. If this is accepted, then someone suffering psychotic episodes may stop seeing the importance of things that are *genuinely* important. On the other hand, my claims about what genuinely matter seem entirely compatible with the beliefs of most religious traditions.

ii. *Heroin Addiction*

Think of the life of someone who is seriously addicted to heroin, such that it becomes her main felt need. It seems right to say, at least on the surface, that her beliefs and her actions both suggest that getting heroin is her ultimate concern. Again (as with those suffering psychotic episodes) this might give her life a sense of coherence (all her actions are aimed at getting enough heroin). It will mean that getting money, and finding dealers with heroin becomes highly significant to her. She is able, through her actions to make a difference to the amount of heroin she has (which is something that matters to her). And she is certainly motivated by her concerns to act in the world. Again (as with psychosis) we seem to have a case that meets all the criteria of a meaningful life, while intuitively we feel that we ought to be able to say that such a life is a mistake of some kind.

iii. *Counting the grass*

The final example I want to discuss is the example of someone who devotes his entire life to something apparently trivial.<sup>103</sup> Imagine someone says that counting grass is his ultimate concern (and they do, as a matter of fact, spend as much time as possible counting blades of grass.)

Once again, this might give his life a sense of coherence (all his actions are aimed at counting blades of grass). It will mean that finding blades of grass to count, and being able to count them becomes highly significant to him. He is able, through his actions to make a difference to how many blades of grass he counts, so he is certainly motivated by his concerns to act in the world. Again (as with the two examples above) we seem to have a case that meets all the criteria of a meaningful life, while again we feel that we ought to be able to say that such a life is a mistake of some kind.

## 9. Dealing with the problem cases

In 7.vii, I argued that the main criterion of whether an ultimate concern is effective is whether a person living by that ultimate concern is satisfied with their life. But, I also argued that this is only certain to be true if their actions are consistently in accord with their ultimate concerns, and they have an adequate awareness of themselves and their situation. In each of the three examples then, we might want to ask whether the people we are talking about are really satisfied with their life. We might ask if they have a full awareness of themselves and their situation. And we might ask whether their actions are in line with the things they really care about. This might help us see whether the examples we have discussed are really effective ultimate concerns.

i. *Dealing with psychosis*

In the case of someone suffering psychosis, it is (perhaps too) easy to say that they are clearly making some kind of factual error. We might say that they have made a

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<sup>103</sup> This example comes from Griffin, 1986, *WellBeing: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* Clarendon Press: Oxford p. 323. The fact that it is not my example, and is a little abstract for my tastes becomes important when assessing this kind of worldview below (see section 9.iii).



mistake about what is happening in the world. We want to say that all the events in the world are not, as a matter of fact, the work of demons. There are, after all (we might say) no demons. And, as a matter of fact, people suffering delusional worldviews *are* normally treated as though they were making a mistake. If this is so, then we can say that this is a clear case of being mistaken about the significance of things (despite the person's own sincere, motivating beliefs). I'm unhappy helping myself to this though, given the fact that I have put religious accounts of the meaning of life to one side. Insofar as psychotic beliefs are similar to religious beliefs, I'm not sure what grounds I could have for simply dismissing the view that everything in the world is the work of demons. (I admitted my ignorance of these kinds of issues in the last chapter).

We seem to have good reasons for saying that people suffering psychosis are motivated by their ultimate concerns. If someone believes that the only way to prevent their destruction by demons is to wash their hands 42 times, we can clearly understand why (given their beliefs) washing their hands this many times matters to them. Given their belief system (in the case of someone suffering from psychosis) their actions look entirely appropriate.

Perhaps then, if we are genuinely working within the worldview of (say) someone suffering a psychotic episode, there may be a (thin) sense in which we could talk about such a life being satisfying (as they wouldn't be satisfied with a life where they don't try to affect the demons, but let them do whatever they want). If we look a little deeper though, it should become obvious that such people can rarely be said to be genuinely satisfied with their lives.

If their ultimate concerns are to be effective, what is important is not just that their life hangs together, but that it hangs together in a *satisfying* way. While we have reasons to say that someone suffering psychotic episodes has a life that hangs together in some sense, there are I think reasons to deny that these lives are experienced as genuinely satisfying. There is a problem with saying anything too specific about such a person's attitude to themselves and their life, given the vast variety of cases of psychosis. At one end of the spectrum, you may have people who are masochistic and depressed. At the other end you have people who are sadistic and tend to suffer manic episodes. In the first case it is perhaps clearer that such a person does not value their own life (there may for example, be things such as self-harming, self-abuse and self-loathing which suggests that such a person is not genuinely satisfied with their life). It may be more difficult to say this about someone whose usual state is mania, and who turns all their 'hate' outwards. I will say that, at its extreme, such people would be described as psychopaths. If this is a correct description of someone, we might think that (insofar as psychopaths are unable to fully connect with the world and other people) they are not actually a candidate for experiencing meaning in the sense I am interested in.

Certainly, if someone suffering psychotic episodes is willing to undertake the arduous process of therapy (go through the trauma of 'facing their demons') we may have grounds for saying that they are not *truly* satisfied with their life as it is. We might also wonder if someone in this position can be said to have full awareness of themselves and their situation. When people are suffering psychosis, it may be incredibly unclear exactly how aware they are of themselves and their true situation. At the very least, their behaviour will be strange enough to suggest that they are having trouble being fully aware of themselves and their true situation. This is an issue it is too complex to deal with here. At the very least, there seem to be a number of reasons to suggest that someone suffering psychosis is unlikely to satisfy the criteria of an effective ultimate concern.

ii. *Dealing with addiction*

Again, the actions of a heroin addict look (in one sense) highly rational. We can understand why it matters to a heroin addict to find some heroin. (After all, they have an unbearable longing that only heroin will take away). In other words, it is clear why getting heroin matters to them. As with the person suffering psychotic episodes, given their felt needs, their actions again look entirely appropriate.

Again though, if we scratch beneath the surface of an addict's view of themselves and their life, there may be a number of reasons for thinking that such a life is not valued *by the person themselves*. (In which case it is difficult to see how we could say it is personally satisfying). There might be ample evidence that they do not value a life primarily focused on taking heroin. They may warn other people of the dangers of heroin (they would not recommend their lifestyle). They may experience self-loathing – they may be horrified that they are willing to sacrifice everything other than heroin in order to feed their addiction.

While it is clear that their life is centred around heroin, we again seem to have grounds for denying that their life hangs together in a satisfying way. For a start, heroin users can fall into a life of heroin, without giving up the idea that there are other things that really matter to them. But, given their addiction, they may be unable (as things stand) to act in accord with other things they care about. (There will be a mismatch between their actions and the things they care about). The fact that they may damage their relationships (which they still value) while feeling that they cannot help but act the way they are, may lead to things like self-loathing and self-harm. (There may even be cases where we might want to talk about taking heroin as a form of self-harm). In these circumstances, it is not at all clear that addicts do experience their life as valuable. They may indeed feel trapped by their addiction, and think of their addiction as the source of their unhappiness.

One of the reasons why they may not experience their life as meaningful is that their activities appear to be valueless in the way described by Schopenhauer. (See IV.5) Someone strongly addicted to heroin has a life full of the pursuit of goals with (increasingly) short-lived positive results – which, when achieved are simply replaced by new cravings. When taking heroin gets to the point where it simply takes away the unbearable craving for heroin, we might understand (given their felt needs) why this person is acting in this way, but it is difficult to see how such a life *could* lead to any kind of lasting satisfaction.

There may be reasons for thinking that there is a relationship between addictions of this kind and denial. There may be reasons for thinking that addiction (particularly to mind and mood altering drugs) might be motivated by denial. The fact that drugs get you 'out of your head' will make it a convenient tool to use if you wish to avoid full awareness of your situation. Even if you are not motivated to take drugs by denial, taking drugs is likely to be an impediment to full awareness of yourself and your situation.

As with the case of suffering a psychotic episode, the ways in which people in these situations may fail to meet the criteria of an effective ultimate concern for any number of these (or other reasons). Nothing can be said 'in general' about all cases of addiction or suffering psychosis. But, the discussion of these examples has shown that there is no reason to think that people who are highly addicted to heroin, or who are suffering from psychotic episodes have effective ultimate concerns. There is certainly no reason to think that cases like this can't be clearly distinguished from genuinely effective ultimate concerns. In both cases, there are a variety of plausible problems

surrounding whether such people are truly satisfied with their lives, whether they have a full awareness of their situation and whether their actions really are in line with what they care most about. In other words, I will continue to argue that the idea that personal satisfaction (with all the caveats) is the central criterion in judging whether someone's ultimate concerns are effective. In the next section, I want turn to the example of someone who devotes their life to something that looks particularly insignificant – counting blades of grass.

*iii. Dealing with the grass counter*

If a man can devote his life to counting blades of grass, and he seems satisfied as a result, we might be forced to accept that, trivial though it seems, such an ultimate concern can be effective for him.

There is though, something that troubles me about this example. As it stands, the example is quite abstract. In particular, I wonder how we could set out the details of such a case. If I were to hear of such a person, I might wonder if, perhaps, their behaviour is compulsive, or I might wonder if they were high on the autistic spectrum.

Certainly, the behaviour of this man looks potentially obsessive compulsive. His behaviour might be, not so much a passionate belief in the value of counting blades of grass, but more like the need to absorb himself in an activity in order to avoid reflection on some other aspect of his situation. A full account of his situation and his behaviour may clearly show that he is far from being truly satisfied with his life and his situation.

On the other hand, imagine we discover that this man is really satisfied with his life. My suspicion, if this really is the case, is that such a person may be very high on the autistic spectrum. There are clear reasons for making this assumption. We have reasons for thinking (for anyone capable of experiencing the world as meaningful) that activities like counting blades of grass couldn't be effective ultimate concerns. After all, through this activity, someone would make no significant difference to the world. The activity is so basic, in that it allows for little self-expression (there is no real spontaneity, variety or development in the activity).

It may well be that someone who is high on the autistic spectrum could be satisfied with a life devoted to counting blades of grass. But then, we perhaps have good reasons for thinking that (insofar as autism seems to involve what might be called 'meaning blindness'<sup>104</sup>) people high on the autistic spectrum are going to have particular difficulties having the kind of meaningful life I am concerned with.

This discussion suggests that, for most people, some activities (ones that are exclusively passive in relation to the world) could not be an appropriate ultimate concern. Elsewhere in this thesis, I claim that there are other things that could be effective ultimate concerns. In VII.9, I argue that pleasure for pleasure's sake couldn't be an effective ultimate concern. In Chapter VIII, I argue that pursuing our narrow self-interest couldn't be an effective ultimate concern. If it is accepted that these kinds of ultimate concerns are mistakes, then our choice<sup>105</sup> of ultimate concern isn't arbitrary,

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<sup>104</sup> Jordan, R. (1999) *Autistic Spectrum Disorders* Dave Fulton Publishers: London. Jordan describes one aspect of autism as "the inability to make meaningful connections." p. 1

<sup>105</sup> In some contexts, talk of choosing ultimate concerns may be misleading. There is definitely a sense in which people can *discover* meaning in their life and the world (as opposed to simply making an abstract decision to value something 'for no reason'.) You might find that a particular activity or relationship has become your ultimate concern even though you were not initially motivated to do engage in the

and shouldn't be made on in an arbitrary way. After all, we need to make sure that we don't choose an ultimate concern which *couldn't* be effective.

In Chapter V, I discussed Cottingham's claim that, unless we have the kinds of narratives that only religious belief systems can supply, we would have no way of distinguishing good from bad narratives (stories in virtue of which our life is meaningful). The examples of psychosis, addiction and grass counting seemed to make this claim threatening. Intuitively, we feel that these kinds of narratives are a mistake. Yet, their lives have exactly the same kind of narrative structure that is required if life is to be meaningful. As it happens, the discussion of these examples has shown that not just any narrative *will* in fact do. The examples we have discussed, while providing the person with a strong narrative to their life, fail to be an effective ultimate concern (they are not satisfying narratives, they are mistakes). It seems that, without the help of religion, we are able to distinguish good from bad narratives (ultimate concerns). I have more to say about Cottingham's challenge, but this will be done in the conclusion (see Conclusion.4.vii).

## 10. Are ultimate concerns arbitrary?

In this chapter, I have argued that it is possible to make mistakes concerning our ultimate concerns. There are (broadly speaking) two central ways in which we can make real mistakes (that persist). We can make mistakes due to a lack of awareness, or we can make mistakes due to the addictive or compulsive nature of our behaviour.

Firstly, someone might (through a lack of awareness, of their situation or their own true feelings) carry on living by an ultimate concern that shows no signs at all of being effective. As long as we have a reasonable level of self-awareness, someone may come to realise that making something their ultimate concern has not led (and shows no sign of leading) to a satisfying, meaningful life. This might realise that, in one sense, they made a mistake. (Though they may think that they were right to give it a try). As long as someone has the awareness (and perhaps the strength) they can bring their mistake to an end. In these circumstances, such a person has learnt something about what they care about most, rather than being simply mistaken.

By contrast, if someone lacks awareness of their situation or their true feelings about their situation, they can fail to notice (perhaps through the fact that they lack the skills necessary) or fail to pay attention (perhaps through denial) to the fact that their ultimate concern is not making them satisfied, or shows no sign of making them satisfied. A lack of self-awareness can also make you believe that something is your ultimate concern even though, if your actions are taken at face value, it doesn't seem to be the thing you most value. It seems right to call cases like these genuine mistakes.

Secondly, addiction can act so as to distort the things we really care about. Addiction might make an addict incapable of acting as though her family is more important to her than heroin, even though her family is her ultimate concern. Addictions and compulsions generally appear to be cases that match Schopenhauer's account of activities (see IV.5). Insofar as an addict's behaviour is directed at achieving a short-term aim (at the removal of a painful craving) which brings no positive lasting satisfaction, it is not clear how such behaviour could help us achieve a satisfying meaningful life. So, we might say that they have chosen an ultimate concern that

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relationship in order to gain an ultimate concern. It may even strike you as surprising that this has now become your ultimate concern. (But you do not doubt that it has).

couldn't lead to a satisfying life. It also seems right to call this a mistake. (Psychopaths and autistic people could not make a mistake, as they are not candidates for the kind of meaningful life I have been discussing.)

There is another sense in which we might think that ultimate concerns are not arbitrary. There seems to be a sense in which, from the perspective of the individual, not just any ultimate concern (even ones that might be capable of leading to a satisfying life) will do. For example, it seems that people can think that some activities could be potentially effective ultimate concerns *for some people*, we may at the same time think that they could not be effective for *them*. For example, I have gone to a couple of line dancing events. Having experienced the music, the activities involved etc. I sincerely believe that I could not (currently) imagine making line-dancing my ultimate concern. Given my musical tastes, the kind of activities I find satisfying etc. a life of line dancing wouldn't give my life a sense of coherence which would motivate me, could make me satisfied with my life. Now, this is not to say that other people couldn't make line-dancing the centre of their life. (After all, there was a man at the line dancing event who seemed to do just this, and as far as I could see, he seemed very happy and satisfied as a result.) If making something our ultimate concern is to be effective, making that ultimate concern the most important thing in our lives *has to work*. It has to lead to a satisfying, meaningful life. Therefore, it is by no means true that any randomly chosen ultimate concern will do for a particular individual. (Some activities and relationships will be unsuitable for us). This suggests that we should not pick our ultimate concerns in an arbitrary way (at random). For any given individual, not just *any* activity can be experienced as satisfying or valuable. If we have reasons for thinking that having a satisfying life genuinely matters to us (as I will argue in VII.Part 2) it will genuinely matter to me whether my ultimate concerns are effective.<sup>106</sup> We might say that the effectiveness of our ultimate concerns needs to be 'tested against experience'. If we want our ultimate concerns to be effective, we need to choose on the basis of what *really* satisfies us.

## 11. Conclusion

It seems right to say that there is a sense in which not just anything will do for a particular individual as an ultimate concern. If something is going to work as an effective ultimate concern for me, I will have to find it satisfying. Given the fact that people have different tastes, aptitudes etc. it looks as though only certain things could (potentially) make someone's life meaningful. At this stage, some people may want to 'dig their heels in'. They might argue that our tastes and preferences are themselves arbitrary.

I'm not sure we need to go into that. It is probably enough to say that, as a matter of fact, different things satisfy different people. How an individual feels (given adequate awareness of themselves and their situation, a lack of denial and as long as their actions are consistently in accord with what they think) is the mark of whether an ultimate concern is effective at delivering a satisfying life for them. It seems right to say

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<sup>106</sup> This may actually be part of the explanation of why people are motivated to believe (despite the evidence to the contrary) that their ultimate concerns are delivering a meaningful life. In other words, this may be part of the motivation behind denial.

that not just anything is capable of delivering this sense of satisfaction (even if it is true that our tastes are arbitrary).

The caveats to the claim that how we feel is the mark of an effective ultimate concern arose out of the descriptions of a number of ways in which people may make mistakes about their own experience of how satisfying and meaningful their lives are. Through a lack of awareness of their situation or themselves they might come to believe that their ultimate concerns are effective when they are not. In these circumstances, we might say that they are not in the best position to say whether their ultimate concerns are really effective.

We are now in a position to say that our ultimate concerns are not arbitrary. They are not arbitrary to the extent that not just anything will do as an ultimate concern – it has to be something capable of leading to a satisfying life, and it has to, as a matter of fact make us satisfied. We might say that our ultimate concerns need to be sensitive to what makes us genuinely satisfied with our lives. If they are to be effective for me (and it genuinely matters to me that they are effective – see VII. Part 2) my ultimate concern must satisfy me and motivate me and provide a sense of coherence to my life (and it must be sensitive to our actual situation and our real feelings). When someone (in full awareness) meets all these conditions, we can say that they are not mistaken in making something their ultimate concern (as opposed to those who lack self-awareness, suffer extreme addiction etc.)

My central concern in this thesis is to discover whether anything genuinely matters. Given the arguments in this chapter, are we able to say that, if someone makes line-dancing their ultimate concern (and is satisfied as a result) then line-dancing *genuinely* matters? We can certainly say, given the right circumstances that such a person is not making a mistake in thinking that line dancing is an effective ultimate concern. And, they would be right to think that it genuinely matters that to *them* that this should be the case. But it simply doesn't follow from this that it is *true* that line dancing genuinely matters in any wider sense. As I have repeatedly said, the fact that line-dancing matters to them will not be enough to show that it *genuinely* matters in any wider sense.

In this chapter, I have suggested that, given the way we are constituted (our tastes, preferences, abilities etc.) and given our situation, some claims about what matters from the perspective of the individual will be better than others (in terms of their effectiveness). In the final two chapters, I want to turn to facts about how *all* human beings are constituted. I will be arguing that our vital needs our happiness and our relationships with others are things that genuinely matter to all people in virtue of the way human beings are constituted (in virtue of our nature.) I will start the next chapter by explaining what grounds these claims, by explaining what makes it the case that these things genuinely matter.

## CHAPTER VII

### DOES ANYTHING *GENUINELY* MATTER?

#### 1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I argued that our ultimate concerns are not arbitrary, as in order to be effective they need to be sensitive to what genuinely satisfies us. (I argued, amongst other things that we can make mistakes about our situation, or about our real feelings) One of the things this implies is that some activities (e.g. excessively passive or uncreative ones) and some relationships (e.g. ones with people who want nothing to do with you) are totally unsuitable as ultimate concerns<sup>107</sup>. Still, it seems right to say that we cannot, in the abstract, say what will, or ought to be someone's ultimate concern. And, there is no reason to think that simply because something is our ultimate concern, this ensures that our ultimate concern *genuinely* matters. Our ultimate concerns certainly matter to us, and (as will become clear in Part 2 of this chapter) it genuinely matters that our ultimate concerns deliver a sense that our life is meaningful. But, this doesn't mean that simply by making something our ultimate concern, it comes to genuinely matter. I want to now leave aside questions concerning the meaning of life. (I will return to these issues in the conclusion.)

For the last two chapters, I want to attempt to set out three examples of things that genuinely matter. In this chapter, I will argue that our vital needs genuinely matter to us (see Part 1). I will also argue that our happiness (and that our ultimate concerns effectively) genuinely matters (see Part 2). In the next chapter, I will argue that our relationships with other people genuinely matter. Before setting out these examples, I want to say something about what grounds the claim that these things genuinely matter. So, before turning to the examples, I want to try to describe why our needs, our happiness and our relationships genuinely matter to us.

#### 2. Why some things genuinely matter from our perspective

In what follows, I want to assess whether there are some things that genuinely matter to *all people*. My aim in the next two chapters is to show that there are some things (our needs, our happiness and relationships) that genuinely do matter to us. The claim that these things genuinely matter to us is grounded in facts about the nature of human existence. Specifically, there are two facts about human existence that I want to focus on. The first is that we are self-conscious. In Chapter II, Nagel linked both the unavoidability of seriousness and the inescapability of doubt to the fact that we are self-conscious. My account is different from Nagel's, but I will also argue that some things genuinely matter in virtue of the fact that we are self-conscious. The other fact about human existence that I am interested in is the fact that we have needs. This, we might say, is a fact about human existence.

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<sup>107</sup> I also suggest that the pursuit of 'mere' pleasure (VII.9) and the pursuit of our own narrow self-interest (see chapter VIII) are unsuitable ultimate concerns. In the conclusion, I also argue that the pursuit of wealth, status and power for their own sakes are unsuitable ultimate concerns.

It may look as though there are problems with using the fact that we have needs as a way of arguing that some things genuinely matter. After all, the fact that we have certain vital needs might be described as an objective fact about us. But, I have argued (see IV.2) that we cannot ground things genuinely mattering in objective facts about the world. In this context, I might perhaps be accused of claiming something that is I myself have said is impossible.

In order to see why I am not contradicting myself, think of the way in which we might describe the fact that a plant *needs* light and water as an objective fact about the plant. We may accept that this is true, while still denying that getting enough light and water matters *to the plant*. (As I have repeatedly argued, to be significant is to be significant from an ‘aware’ perspective.) So, it might matter to me whether my houseplant gets enough water, but there is something odd about talking about these things mattering to the plant itself.<sup>108</sup> Still, in certain circumstances, we might think that the plant’s needs are significant (as *we* are able to adopt a perspective on the plant and its needs). From our perspective, it seems we have a choice whether or not we are going to regard the needs of the plant as significant for us. My central claim is that this is not the case when we become aware, from *our* perspective *of our own needs*.

So, the claim that our needs matter *can* be construed as arising out of objective facts about the world. But it does not arise out of the objective facts *alone*. It is only when a perspective is taken on objective facts that anything will be revealed as genuinely mattering. When we take a perspective on our own needs, these things are revealed as mattering in a non-arbitrary way. They genuinely matter to us. This is grounded in the way in which facts about ourselves (perhaps in relationship to the environment in which we find ourselves) are experienced from our own perspective. When the perspective we take on the world (the fact about our needs) is the perspective of ourselves, when we see these facts about existence as a part of ‘our story’, they are thereby revealed as genuinely mattering.

This claim is not meant to be an attempt to argue that meaning can only arise for human beings. I wish to remain agnostic about the kinds of beings there may be in the universe (i.e. God, angels, aliens etc.) Rather, I want to make a quite general claim. We might say that, when *any* creature is capable of taking up a perspective (the kind that can reveal significance) on its own needs, its own needs will thereby be revealed as genuinely mattering to them.

In all of this, we are staying within the context of the perspective of the individual. In some ways, this might suggest that the conclusion that our needs genuinely matter *to us* is unsatisfactory as an account of the things that genuinely matter. After all, this seems to suggest that things only matter subjectively. There may be something in this. But when I claim that something genuinely matters to us, the focus is supposed to be on the ‘genuinely’. Given the account of significance described in IV.2, it was always going to have to ground the claim that some things matter by reference to some form of awareness.

We wanted to know if anything genuinely mattered. The fact is that, from the perspective of the individual, we can be very clear that we would not be making a mistake in thinking that our needs genuinely matter to us. We are absolutely right to think that our needs matter. In thinking this, we are not making a mistake.

I am going to argue that, because it is an objective fact about us that we have needs, and because we are self-conscious (capable to taking up our perspective on our

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<sup>108</sup> We can ‘metaphorically’ talk of it mattering to the plant – in that it is something the plant needs. But, it would generally be accepted that we do not mean that the plant itself thinks that it matters.



own needs) our vital needs, our happiness and our relationships with others all genuinely matter to us. This is not to say that these things could never be outweighed. (Something can genuinely matter without mattering absolutely).

In this chapter, I want to defend the idea that we are not making a mistake in thinking that our own *needs* (Part 1) and our own *happiness* (Part 2) both matter to us. In claiming this, I mean that these things don't *just* matter to us in virtue of the fact that we think (or act as though) they matter (although it is certainly true that we do think and act in this way). They matter in virtue of facts about the nature of our existence.

In Part 1, I will argue that our vital needs matter to us in a non-arbitrary way – if we think they matter to us, we are not deciding that they matter on some kind of random basis. They are things that matter to us, regardless of whether or not we want them to matter, or regardless of whether we choose to think they matter. My discussion of why our own needs matter to us also provides an opportunity to return to the question of whether our own death is bad for us. After all, one of the reasons why our needs matter to us is because our own death would be bad for us.

In the case of happiness, I will argue that happiness is universally valued. As a matter of fact, all human beings wish to be happy. This will require some clarification, and I will need to show how my account of happiness avoids the charge of emptiness. (The charge of emptiness is avoided by showing that, even though everyone wants to be happy, this doesn't mean that happiness just is whatever anyone happens to want.) In part, my claim will be that being happy (being satisfied with our life) is a human need. It is not a vital human need (such as food, sleep etc.) It is what we might call an existential need. It seems right to call happiness a need, in virtue of the fact that it is a (universally) felt need.

## PART 1 : VITAL NEEDS

### 3. Meeting our needs *really* matters

Given the features of our existence, there are certain things that human beings require – that we *have* to have. In Part 1, I will be arguing that our vital needs (food, water, sleep and shelter/clothing seem the best examples) genuinely matter to us. I will be arguing that our needs matter to us in a non-arbitrary sense (it is not up to us to decide whether or not they matter, it is not a random decision to think our needs matter to us). We do (generally) act as though these things matter to us. I will be arguing that we are right to do so.

I want to examine whether citing our needs might provide a way of answering my curious friend. Imagine my curious friend asks me why eating my dinner matters. I say to him, 'I'm hungry. If I do not eat, I will eventually die. I *need* to eat.' Of course, my curious friend might then ask me why it matters to me whether I die or not. On the one hand, there is a temptation to say that this is one of my curious friend's questions that seems wholly unmotivated ('It just does' seems a reasonable response).

Having said that, we can think of examples (such as deep depression) where people no longer care whether they die (they may even be motivated to take their own life). So, there may be circumstances in which someone might find the question 'why does it matter if you die or not?' pressing. If someone's own life no longer matters to them (if they are deeply unhappy, and cannot see how their life is - or is capable of being - valuable) we may have good reasons for saying that their needs no longer matter

to them. (As we will see, someone in this position is likely to answer my curious friend's questions in a different way.)

This might suggest that our vital needs are only hypothetical needs - needs that we have because of some previous choice we have made. So, for example, I might say that I *need* a passport. But I only need a passport because I have decided that I want to travel to Barcelona.

Someone may say that all our needs, even our vital needs are actually hypothetical in the way needing a passport is. They might say that I only need food because I have chosen, or decided that I want to stay alive (or because we have chosen to think of certain things as needs). If this is the case, then it looks as though my curious friend's next question becomes pressing again. If my vital needs are only seen as needs because of some prior choice I have made to value something (my life) then my curious friend seems justified in asking me to justify my prior decision to value my life.

I will argue that our vital needs are not hypothetical needs. We do not think that our vital needs matter because of some choice we make to think that our continued existence matters to us. I will in effect be arguing that my need for food is not dependent on some prior choice (in the way my need for a passport is).

Before doing this, I want to say something else about our vital needs, which suggests that thinking our needs matter is not a choice we make. There is a sense in which needs *force* themselves on us. If you try to ignore (say) the need to eat, your hunger will eventually make itself un-ignorable. (You will end up with unbearable cravings). In this sense, it looks as though the failure to meet your needs can be a source of pain. There seems to be a genuine sense in which the importance of our vital needs makes itself transparent to you in your experience, even if you make every effort to ignore them. It looks as though these consequences of failing to meet our needs are beyond our control. (We do not choose to feel pain if we fail to meet our needs).

#### **4. Is life valuable?**

In this section, I want to assess whether (and in what circumstances) we can talk of our life being valuable. Hopefully, this will help assess whether valuing our own life is a 'free choice'. This also provides an opportunity to return to the question of whether our own death matters to us. In Chapter I, I discussed Nagel's claim that, while death is (given my assumption that death is the state of non-existence) a neutral state, life isn't a neutral state. Rather, life is valuable. Because of this, death involves the loss of (or missing out on) something of value. At the very least then, we can say that if my life is valuable then my death is a bad thing for me. This section should put me in a position to assess the circumstances in which our own death can be bad for us.

If Nagel's argument (that death is bad because life is valuable) is correct, then it looks as though we will have good reasons to meet our needs. If my life really is valuable to me, then my needs will matter to me. My needs (at their most extreme) are necessary for the continuation of my life. So, if our own death is bad for us, we will have good reasons to meet our needs.

I now want to make some attempt to outline, in the light of the discussions throughout this thesis, a number of different ways in which a life may be experienced as valuable. I am going to mention three (potential) ways in which life can be said to have valuable content: Pleasure, satisfying activities and making a valuable contribution. (A fourth one, happiness, will be discussed in the second half of this chapter). I will also

discuss the sense in which a life could be said to be potentially valuable. This list is not supposed to be an exhaustive one.

*i. Pleasure*

Human beings find many things pleasurable. We saw in Chapter II that there may be reasons for thinking that not all pleasures are valuable to us (e.g. the kiss that breaks up your happy marriage). Still, we might say that (other things being equal) being pleasurable just is valuable to us.

What does it mean to say ‘other things being equal’? We might say that, until we know the context surrounding the pleasurable event, we do not know whether the pleasurable event is valuable. For example, if the pleasurable event damages something of real importance to you (your ultimate concerns, or your needs say) you can have reasons for not regarding a pleasurable event as valuable. Still, we might say that (if the pleasurable event happens without being problematic in terms of other things you value) being pleasurable just is valuable. (Or perhaps we might say that pleasure just is valuable, but in certain circumstances, this value can be outweighed.) On the other hand, if pleasure arises in the context of contributing to our ultimate concerns, or if it is part of meeting our needs, it seems we definitely have good reasons to say that something valuable is happening to us.

Before moving on to the next possible source of value in a life, it seems worth saying, in the context of our needs, that if pleasure is valuable, then the pain of deprivation (of failing to have our needs met) is something we would be right to think has a negative value for us.

*ii. Satisfying activities*

In Chapter III, I discussed the way in which we may come to regard some activities (play) as inherently valuable. To talk of an activity being inherently valuable is to say that we couldn’t be mistaken about whether it really is valuable to us (as it contains its value ‘within itself’). This means that you find these activities personally satisfying. You think doing these activities just is a positive way to spend your time.

Once again, we may want to say that such activities are only valuable other things being equal (or they are valuable, but can be outweighed). For example, if you engage in these activities in such a way that you fail to meet your needs (see III.8) or in a way detrimental to your ultimate concerns we may have reason to say that the value of the activities has been overridden (there can on occasion be things that are more valuable than the mere fact that an activity is found personally satisfying).

*iii. Making a valuable contribution*

When talking of people whose lives have a personal meaning (see Chapter VI) I discussed the way in which someone may experience their life as meaningful (in part) because their actions have a positive impact on things that ultimately matter to them (see VI.5). For example, if my ultimate concern is my family, and through my actions I am able to make a positive contribution to the lives of my family (by helping them meet their needs, pursue their interests, become happy etc.) I will perceive my own life and

my actions as valuable in virtue of the fact that it makes a positive difference to something I value.

Similarly, in the discussion of having a vocation (see III.9) I described the way in which certain kinds of work activities (ways of earning a living) could also be ways of acting on your ultimate concerns. If you are ultimately concerned with the (e.g.) health of others, then working in a hospital can be a way of making a difference through your actions to things of ultimate concern to you.

In both of these examples (because these people will have a real sense that their life is valuable insofar as it makes a valuable contribution to something they value) they will have good reasons for thinking that their life is valuable, and so will have good reasons for wanting to meet their own needs.<sup>109</sup>

#### *iv. Potential*

In this section, I want to explore whether there are reasons for thinking that all human beings have a life that is valuable in some sense (i.e. potentially valuable). I have set out three ways in which a life may be said to have ‘valuable content’. (As I said, this list is not supposed to be exhaustive in any way). There may be a case for saying that all human life contains something of value. In many cases, the presence of this kind of positive content might provide us with good reasons for thinking that our life is valuable<sup>110</sup>. But it also seems fair to say that some human lives may contain more events with a negative value (pain, suffering etc.) than positive (valuable) content. In these circumstances, would we be right in saying that their life isn’t valuable, and so their needs don’t really matter to them?

Before exploring this in more detail in the next section, I want to assess whether, even if you do not think your life is (currently) valuable, there is a sense in which your life has a *potential* value (it has the potential at some future time to be valuable to you).

What might we base this claim on? Perhaps we might say that it is always possible (and this is something that we can improve our chances of through our efforts) for someone’s life, which currently lacks value, to improve. It is always possible that, in the future, someone may become truly happy and content with their life.

Still, we might have to admit that not all human life is valuable (not even potentially). It may be possible for someone to make mistakes about whether their life has any potential value.<sup>111</sup> But, it seems right to say that some human lives appear to lack valuable content (even potentially). Think, for example, of someone who has a fatal illness. It may be possible, using the most advanced medical treatments, to keep them alive for a couple of months. But, these months will be full of extreme pain. They will carry on living, but will be incapable of enjoying any aspect of their life. They could not

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<sup>109</sup> While (except in extreme cases) we cannot be mistaken about whether we find something pleasurable, or find an activity satisfying, we can be mistaken about whether we are making a valuable contribution to something we value. It can be true (even if you do not experience it as such) that through your actions, you make a significant difference to things you value (Think of the film *It’s a Wonderful Life*). Similarly, you can believe that you are making a significant difference to something when in fact you aren’t. (For example, you might be misled into thinking that you are playing a vital role in a project, when in fact other people are making all the significant decisions.)

<sup>110</sup> In Part 2 of this chapter, I will be arguing that this alone is not enough to ensure a satisfying life. It is possible to imagine a life that contains things of value to you, but which fails to lead to you being satisfied.

<sup>111</sup> We might have reasons for thinking that someone in depression or suffering psychosis is not in a particularly good position to see whether their life has potential value in this sense.

spend any quality time with the people they love, they could not engage in valuable activities. There is also no realistic hope that their life has the potential to change for the better (there is absolutely no hope of remission). In such circumstances, it is difficult to argue that this life must be valuable, regardless of how it is experienced<sup>112</sup>. So, it seems that we cannot argue that human life is always potentially valuable.

## 5. Is the desire to carry on living a choice?

In this section I want to look at two examples of situations where we may have reasons for saying that people do not value their needs or their life. The first example I will discuss is depression. Given the fact that I want to argue that our vital needs matter to us in virtue of the nature of human existence, someone suffering extreme depression looks like a clear counter-example to my claim. It is, after all, an example of someone with the same nature as us, who doesn't care about their own needs. Also, in the context of the discussion of whether our vital needs are only hypothetical needs, this example may suggest that our vital needs are only 'felt' needs because of some prior decision to value our own life. The second example I discuss is martyrdom. Such people, in acting against their vital needs, or in sacrificing their life suggests that thinking our needs matters is a 'free choice'. Both these examples seem to show that (in extreme circumstances) people can choose not to meet their own needs. This might imply that, if we care about meeting our needs, this must also be a choice.

### *i. Depression*

When discussing the unavoidability of seriousness (see II.4) I discussed the example of someone suffering extreme depression. A person suffering depression seems to be a case of someone who doesn't think anything matters. In these cases (especially if there is some reason to think that the potential for them living a valuable life is slim) such people may have difficulty seeing why their needs might matter to them. (Which may explain why suicide becomes a 'live option' for them). It may look as though this is an example of someone who is making a choice not to value their needs. But it should also be clear that the life of a depressive, insofar as it is a life that is experienced as meaningless, unhappy and lonely, does not look like the kind of life anyone would *choose*<sup>113</sup>. In coming to be depressed, someone may come to think that their vital needs don't matter. But this is because they (regrettably) *find* their life lacking value, not because they have *chosen* to see their life as valueless. By the same token, people who experience their life as (potentially) valuable are not making a choice to think their life is valuable (unless they are in denial).

It might be thought that the example of extreme depression shows that my claim (that our vital needs genuinely matters to all people in virtue of our nature) cannot be universal. After all, here is an example of someone who doesn't care about their vital needs.

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<sup>112</sup> Unless there is some reason derived from a religious account of the universe – but, as I've repeatedly said, I don't feel I'm in a position to comment on this.

<sup>113</sup> It is possible to think of examples where we may say of someone that they are choosing to be miserable. It may well be right, even in cases such as this, for us to say that such a person is still seeking a life they believe will be satisfying for them (we might say, they *like* being miserable). This seems more accurate than saying that they are actively genuinely seeking a meaningless, unhappy, lonely existence.

One way of describing people who contemplate suicide is that ending their life becomes a real option for them because of the fact that their deeper existential needs (happiness etc.) are not being met. This suggests that, even if someone does not experience their life as valuable, its lack of value is likely to reside in the fact that needs that matter to them (in this case deeper needs) are not being satisfied. In Part 2, I will argue that our own happiness genuinely matters to us. In chapter VIII, I will be arguing that good relationships with others genuinely matter to us. In saying that these things genuinely matter, I am saying that these things are properly thought of as needs. What makes them needs is the fact that they are *experienced* as needs. Because of this, the absence of happiness, meaning and good relationships is not experienced as something neutral. (It is experienced as a deprivation).

So, even if we are thinking of someone who thinks they would be ‘better off dead’, we might say that these are not people who do not experience anything as a need. The fact that they do not see the point of taking care of their own needs arises because of other (existential) needs are not being met. This seems particularly true if it leads to genuine attempts to commit suicide. This is a situation in which their unhappiness matters so much to that they are willing to go through the effort of committing suicide in order to make their life stop. It seems we have reasons to say that it matters to them that they experience their life the way they do. In depression, someone finds themselves in an unbearable situation, and as such may come to believe that their life lacks value (and so their vital needs may not matter to them). The most important point to make is that none of this implies that people in depression are choosing to not value their life. Nor does it imply that people who are *not* in depression must be making an arbitrary decision to value their life. Because in neither case is their a ‘free choice’ to value or not value our life, this implies that our needs are not hypothetical needs.

## ii. *Martyrdom*

There are people who are not depressed, but who may still choose to forfeit their life or their needs (fighting in a war for their country, going on hunger strike for a political cause, becoming a suicide bomber dying for a cause they believe in etc.) It looks as though such people choose to avoid meeting their needs (hunger striker) or to put their life at risk (soldier), or even to end their life (suicide bomber).

We might retain the idea that their life (and so their needs) really do matter to them, and say that their act of martyrdom is evidence that something matters *more* to them than their life (that it is a *sacrifice* worth making). So, we can retain the idea that, if your life is valuable to you, then meeting your needs matters in a non-arbitrary way. But we can say that it is still possible for this to be *outweighed*. (Think for example of a mother who goes without food in order to feed her child.) Someone can choose to sacrifice their life and their needs, but the examples seem to suggest that this is not because they believe that their life isn’t valuable, but because they think something else is *more* valuable. So, neither depression, nor martyrdom seem to support the idea that meeting our needs is a hypothetical need. In the next section, I want to examine whether the fact that something is a vital need can help us provide a satisfying answer my curious friend’s questions.

## 6. Justifying my needs to my curious friend

I am talking to my curious friend about why I am preparing a meal for myself. He says ‘Why does eating this meal matter to you?’ I might reply that eating is one of my needs. He might then ask ‘Why does it matter to you if you meet your needs?’ I might reply that if I don’t eat, I will become weak and start feeling pain. If I go too long without food I would eventually die. My curious friend might ask ‘Why does it matter to you whether you live or die?’

This may seem to be one of those questions to which ‘It just does’ seem the most reasonable response. If I were to give an answer, I might say that my life is valuable to me. My life contains a lot of valuable content (pleasure, satisfying activities, making a positive difference to things I value etc.) My curious friend might then ask ‘Why does it matter whether or not you lose something of value to you?’ Again, ‘it just does’ seems the most appropriate response to this question. (Surely, I might say to him, if you understand what ‘valuable’ means, this question looks senseless.)

Alternatively, my curious friend might ask me to *justify* my choice to value my own life. The discussion in section 4 suggests that it is wrong to talk about this as a choice. Either, we (rightly) think our continued existence matters, or we find ourselves in the lamentable position of being unable to see why our continued existence might matter. If (as I will argue in Part 2) human beings have a ‘felt need’ to experience their life as valuable, the fact that someone with depression is unable to say why their life is valuable suggests that something that genuinely matters is happening to them – they are not satisfied with their life. In all of this, it is not at all clear that people in depression are making a (neutral) choice about what they value.

Even people who do not see the value of their lives might still have what looks like a reasonable response to my curious friend. They wouldn’t answer the question: ‘why do your needs matter?’ in the same way I did, by saying that their continued existence is valuable (and so meeting their needs matters). But, if my curious friend asks someone who believes their life lacks value the question ‘Why does it matter whether you meet your needs?’ they are not going to answer this by saying that their life is valuable. Instead, they may say ‘If I don’t eat, the pain is unbearable.’ My curious friend might then ask ‘Why does it matter to you if you feel unbearable pain?’ (Again, it seems most appropriate to answer by saying ‘It just does’). This suggests that, even when you are unable to see the value of your life, your vital needs are still properly described as felt needs. If anything, the experience of depression suggests that people don’t *just* have vital needs (needs they have to meet in order to survive). There is also the need to experience their life as happy, meaningful etc. (As I said, this will be discussed in detail in Part 2).

In cases where someone has a life they regard as valuable, it looks like meeting their needs (as prerequisites of their continuing existence) really does matter to them. (They are not making a mistake in thinking their needs matter. Their needs don’t just matter because we happen to think, or act as though they matter). Even in cases where someone does not experience their own life as valuable there may still be good reasons for thinking that their needs do matter to them in a non-arbitrary way. (Due to the fact that their life is potentially valuable, or due to the fact that failing to meet their needs leads to suffering).

When I claim that our needs really do matter to us in a non-arbitrary way, I am not claiming that they matter in some absolute way. As I’ve said, the thought that our needs really do matter is compatible with the thought that on occasions (because our needs are not the only thing that matters to us) our vital needs can be outweighed by

other considerations (our existential needs in the case of depression, or our ultimate concerns in the case of the martyr).

## 7. Should my needs be my ultimate concern?

I do not want to suggest that meeting our own needs ought to be our ultimate concern. We might almost say that it is unfortunate if we find ourselves in a position where meeting our needs has to be our central concern. Someone who has to focus all their energy on finding ways of meeting their needs will certainly find it more difficult to have a life full of positive content. (This is not to say that it is impossible, but it may be more difficult).

Think of the discussion of someone who works simply in order to meet their vital needs (see III.4). In Chapter III, I suggested that (in the absence of any other content) it is difficult to see how such a life could be valuable. Here we have an example of someone who does not engage in activities because they find the activities valuable (contributes to their ultimate concerns) or satisfying (inherently valuable) or pleasurable, but simply in order to meet their vital needs. I argued that it is difficult to see how such a life could have any valuable content, or could be experienced as valuable or meaningful. If a life of happiness and meaning (a life felt to be valuable and satisfying) is a deep human desire (as I will argue in Part 2) we might say that a life that has to be devoted exclusively to doing activities that lack any value, simply in order to survive, is regrettable.

This seems to relate back to Schopenhauer's pessimistic account of human action. (See IV.5). It is not clear how a life that consisted of simply meeting our needs (e.g. hunger) could bring any lasting satisfaction. If your life simply involves meeting your needs (which will not stop the fact that at a later stage you will again have to meet those same needs) you do not seem to be achieving anything that lasts. It is difficult to see how any lasting satisfaction could follow.

Having said all this, given the main argument of this section (meeting our needs matters in a non-arbitrary sense) we can see why, if someone has no choice, choosing such a life is perfectly understandable. The fact that meeting our needs genuinely matters shows that (in a sense) a person living this kind of life is not making a mistake. Rather, it is perfectly rational and reasonable to live a life of unsatisfying work if there really are no alternatives (but, we might add, it is regrettable that this is the case).

There are two other things to be said about such a life. The first is that such a person may believe that there is always the *possibility* that their life will improve (they may rightly think that there is the potential for their life to change for the better). Secondly, someone may spend all their time involved in activities that they see no value in (simply to meet their needs). But, they may work with people they like, or they may have other relationships in their life that they value. This can also be a source of valuable content for them. (In the next chapter, I will argue that relationships with others are something that has – or can have - genuine value for us). If this is the case, their vital needs will not be the only thing that matters to them (and there may be the possibility of real value in their life).

So, I hope it is clear that our needs are not only hypothetical needs. They are not experienced as needs in virtue of some prior choice (to value my life say). It seems wrong to say that people in depression *choose* to not value their life. Rather, this is a fact about how they experience their life. In the same way, it would be wrong to think that people (who are not depressed) have made some prior decision to value their life



(and that once they have made this choice, they experience their vital needs as needs). Someone who values their life has not *chosen* to value their life<sup>114</sup> and as a result of their choice finds that their vital needs matter. (Even if you choose to ignore your vital needs (e.g. by going on hunger strike) your vital needs will still be experienced as needs (you will feel deprived of your needs) despite your choice.

Before turning to the claim that our happiness genuinely matters to us, I want to return to Nagel's claim that death is bad for us because life is valuable (Chapter I). Nagel claimed that death involves the loss of (or missing out on) something of value (life). The conclusion I reached at the end of Chapter I was a hypothetical one; if my life is valuable then my death is a bad thing for me. The discussion of our vital needs has demonstrated that, for most people, it is true that their life is valuable. It has also become clear that, when people cannot see their own life as valuable (e.g. in depression, or during a painful death) they may then fail to see that their own death is a bad thing. This implies that Nagel is right to say that death is bad for us in circumstances where our life is valuable. Because there are a number of factors involved in assessing whether an individual's life is valuable, whether someone's death is bad for them is something that needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

In the discussion of depression, I suggested that experiencing your life as valuable (as meaningful, happy) might also be thought of as a need. (And it is in virtue of this need not being met, that someone can come to see their life as not worth living.) In the next part of this chapter, I will attempt to support the claim that being happy is itself a human need, by arguing that our own happiness *genuinely* matters to us.

## PART 2 : HAPPINESS

### 8. Happiness *just does* matter to us

When discussing depression (see 5.i) I suggested that happiness could be described as a human need. It seems right to say that being happy just is a valuable state (for us). So, I want to argue that human beings are unavoidably orientated towards their own happiness. (This is a fact about our nature). Throughout this thesis, I have discussed a range of things that human beings value. I will be arguing that it is right to give happiness a special status.

In fact, the major issue I tackle in Part 2 is how we should define happiness. We could define happiness as whatever it is that everyone aims for. And, of course, it will follow from this that human beings unavoidably aim for their own happiness. The problem is that this claim faces the charge of emptiness (everyone unavoidably aims for what everyone aims for). Avoiding the charge of emptiness involves explaining how (while everyone wants to be happy) people can come to want things that don't actually make them happy. So, given the fact that people can be mistaken about those things that will lead them to be happy, I am not saying that whatever people aim for is called happiness. My discussion will also lead me to attempt to define happiness in a way which strongly parallels the definition of a personally meaningful life (described in Chapter VI).

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<sup>114</sup> Perhaps people in denial could perhaps be described as people who (mistakenly) *choose* to value their life.

## 9. You cannot be mistaken in thinking that you aim to be happy

The claim that our happiness matters in a non-arbitrary sense is not based on the fact that just about every person (as a matter of fact) happens to aim for their own happiness (although this happens to be true).

There may be many different things that human beings aim for (for example, wealth, relationships, achievements etc.) The fact is that happiness (as something we aim for) is special.<sup>115</sup> Imagine I believe that wealth, status and fame are what are most valuable to me (my ultimate concerns). What do I do if I become wealthy, achieve a high status and become famous, but find that I am really not happy with my life? If happiness were just another thing to aim at (if our choice of what we want is arbitrary) then it looks a though we could just as well say; 'I have what I want. If I am not happy, I can't have wanted happiness'. In fact, if we get many of the things that we strive for, but find that we are still not happy, we are much more likely to think that we were striving for the wrong things.

This suggests that happiness is not something we desire in the way we might desire wealth etc. Someone who aims to be happy is not looking for another item to put on their list of achievements. Rather, they are expressing their wish that the things on the list should 'add up to something', should fit together in a coherent way and should lead to a satisfying life. Both of these features (coherence and satisfaction as the criteria of a happy life) have clear parallels with personal meaning. In both cases, to find happiness, or meaning in your life is not to seek for yet one more end. In both cases, our own satisfaction with our life is the main criteria we should use in judging whether in fact our life is a happy, meaningful one. The parallels between happiness and personal meaning will be explored throughout my discussion.

It might be argued that we can make sense of the idea of someone being mistaken about the fact that they wanted to be happy. Imagine someone who, in their attempts to be happy, focuses all their energies on having the best possible time at any given moment. At some later stage, they might come to realise that they want more in their life. Perhaps they want to tackle something serious – that involves sacrificing some of their pleasures and comforts. On the surface, this may look like they have decided to turn away from their own happiness. But, if we use another (broader) understanding of happiness (one that incorporates the importance of personal meaning to a satisfying life) we might say that they have given up the idea that they can be happy through the hedonistic pursuit of their own interests. They have come to understand that such a life doesn't make them truly satisfied. It seems more natural to say that they have revised their view of the kind of life that would make them satisfied, rather than that they have given up wanting a satisfying life. This suggests that we cannot make a mistake in thinking we want to be happy, but we can be mistaken about the sorts of things that will make us happy.

We return here to the idea that a lack of self-awareness can lead to making mistakes about what exactly makes us truly satisfied. (Once again, there are parallels between happiness and meaningfulness). People's belief that their own happiness will result from the achievement of a given goal may be so strong, that they ignore the evidence that it is not making them happy (not giving them a sense that their life is valuable and satisfying.) This would explain how people could say 'When I thought wealth and status was all that mattered, I thought I was happy, but I now realise that I

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<sup>115</sup> This argument is in part based on Norman's discussion of Aristotle in Norman, R. (1983) *The Moral Philosophers*. Clarendon Press: Oxford (see pp. 39-43).

wasn't satisfied.' There might be reasons for saying that finding the kind of life that truly satisfies you requires a great deal of effort (see VI.7.iv).

I want to claim that a happy life is not guaranteed by the fact that a life is full of what is perceived as valuable content. (I also want to deny that everyone is in a perfect position to understand what kind of life would make them happy.) I want to discuss two forms of valuable content: The experience of pleasure and the achievement of goals. In both cases, I will argue that being happy cannot be guaranteed by the mere presence of such valuable content.

## 10. Can pleasure alone make us happy?

In Chapter I, it was clear that pleasure is not the only thing that can be described as 'good for us'. In other words, while there may be reasons for thinking that pleasure (other things being equal) is something we value, there are other things that we value that can outweigh the value of pleasure. For example, imagine that you have a kiss with someone behind your partner's back. At the time, you find the kiss extremely pleasurable. But then your partner finds out, and as a result, they end the relationship. Far from thinking of the kiss as something valuable, you might come to think of that moment of pleasure as the worst moment of your life, and the source of your unhappiness. (Surely, no-one would want a life full of pleasures of this kind.)

Obviously, it is not my intention to suggest that a life filled with pleasure couldn't be a happy life. There may indeed be reasons for thinking that pleasure is an important component of a happy life. Rather, I want to argue that the *mere* presence of lots of pleasure does not guarantee that a life is a happy one.

### *i. Are humans only motivated by pleasure?*

I have discussed a number of different ways in which things can be valuable for us, and have suggested that, while pleasure can be one of those things, there are occasions when the value of pleasure can be outweighed. So, it is wrong to think that the only things human beings are interested in (the only idea they could have of a valuable life) is gaining pleasure and avoiding pain.

Imagine someone who wants to retain the idea that pleasure is the only thing that people aim for. They might claim that (despite my arguments) the only thing humans ever seek is pleasure. They might say that the reason why we do not value the kiss in the example above is that it leads to deeply un-pleasurable (painful) experiences; your regret, the pain of the end of the relationship etc. So, it is in fact true that we only seek pleasure, and we now regret the kiss because, in the long run, it led to lots of unpleasant experiences.

The claim that pleasure is the only thing we seek may begin to look irrefutable. Whenever anyone comes up with something that (looks as though it) can be described as seeking something other than pleasure, we simply find a way of re-describing it as seeking pleasure (or avoiding pain).

I want to draw on an example to get a clearer view about all this. It is an example I like so much that I will set out a long quote to illustrate it, and I will use the example again in the next chapter (against a different target, but in a similar way – see VIII.3.ii).

A group of investigators led by Dr. David Rosenham, professor of psychology and law at Stanford University, had themselves admitted as patients to various mental institutions. The hospital staff did not know there was anything special about them; the investigators were thought to be simply patients. The investigator's purpose was to see how they would be treated.

The investigators were perfectly 'sane', whatever that means, but their very presence in the hospital created the assumption that they were mentally disturbed. Although they behaved normally – they did nothing to feign illness – they soon discovered that everything they did was interpreted as a sign of some sort of mental problem ... Even their protestations of normalcy were turned against them. One of the real patients warned them: 'Never tell a doctor that you're well. He won't believe you. That's called a 'flight into health'. Tell him you're still sick, but you're feeling a lot better. That's called insight.'<sup>116</sup>

In this example, as is the case with pleasure, it was possible for the doctors to interpret everything the patients did as the acts of people with mental health problems. But, just because all the behaviour of the 'sane' investigators could be interpreted in this way, this doesn't mean that it is *true* that the investigators really were insane. (The most shocking thing about the example is that the people working in the hospital are in a sense, experts about mental illness. Even so, they were unable to tell the difference between a sane and an insane person.) Similarly, the mere fact that every motivation can be re-described as though it was merely the pursuit of pleasure does not show that pleasure *really is* the only thing that motivates us.

In both cases, it looks as though important distinctions have been lost (due to the ease with which we can re-describe the examples to fit a preconceived idea about what we presume must be going on.) If we re-describe all motivations as cases of seeking pleasure and wishing to avoid displeasure (or pain) we then seem to lose all the different ways of distinguishing between the vast array of feelings and emotions human beings are capable of having. Surely something important gets lost if we describe a kiss and the joy of a long term relationships as simply two instances of the same thing – pleasure. Similarly, we might think that important distinctions have been lost if we describe a punch in the face on the one hand, and grief and loneliness on the other as simply instances of displeasure.

While it is true that all human action can be (re-described) as motivated by seeking pleasure, this does not mean that it is *true* that we only seek pleasure (just as it is not true that the investigators are really insane just because all their actions can be described as though they were insane). We do, as a matter of fact, think of other things apart from pleasure as valuable. I will be suggesting that a life filled with mere pleasurable content does not guarantee a happy life (see *iii*.) The reasons for this should become clearer if we first look at another form of valuable content, achieving your aims.

## *ii. Achieving your aims*

As has already been discussed, it is possible to achieve things you have been working towards (in the belief that the possession of these things will make you happy)

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<sup>116</sup> Rachels, J. (1993) The Elements of Moral Philosophy (Second Edition). McGraw-Hill: London p. 73

but find that you are not, as a matter of fact, happy<sup>117</sup>. So, happiness is not *just* a case of having content that you think of as valuable (pleasure, achievements etc.) This valuable content needs to come together in some kind of satisfying way. We can certainly imagine a life that contains things of value, but which does not come together in any kind of coherent way, and is in fact experienced as a series of disconnected events.

All of this suggests that happiness is not something ‘merely’ additive. As I have said, in this respect, there seems to be a strong parallels between happiness and having a life with a personal meaning. In both cases, what is important is not so much the nature of the content, but whether it hangs together in a satisfying way. One does not assess whether someone is happy by adding up positive ‘moments’ and subtracting ‘negative’ moments. In both cases, the final test of whether someone is happy or has a meaningful life is the person’s own satisfaction with their life. The mere presence of content you perceive to be valuable is not enough.

### *iii. Why pleasure cannot cohere effectively*

There may even be reasons for saying that making the accumulation of ‘mere’ pleasure your ultimate concern (making it your idea of a happy, meaningful life) is a mistake. It seems right to say that (if you are seeking pleasure for pleasure’s sake) then the value of a pleasurable moment will be found *in* that moment (not in the connection between that moment and other moments). We can of course have pleasure from the connection between events. For example, the pleasure of finishing my PhD is related to my goals, my aims, my ultimate concerns. In this case, we could describe the pleasure as ‘connected’ pleasure, as the value of my pleasure is connected to other aspects of my life which I think of as valuable. (Seeking this kind of pleasure is not a mistake). By contrast, if you simply achieve something that only has a discrete value in each moment (pleasure for pleasure’s sake) it is not at all clear how your life could hang together in any satisfying sense.

## **11. The two extremes of a satisfying life**

I have suggested that there are strong affinities between a happy life and a meaningful life. It looks as though the criterion of a happy life is the same as the criterion for a meaningful life (see VI.7.vii). In both cases, it is not just the content of the life that is important. It is also important that the content of the life hangs together in the right way. In both cases, the final criteria of whether a life is a happy or meaningful one comes down to whether the person finds their life satisfying. In both cases, problems around self-awareness can cause people to make mistakes. When talking about a meaningful life, I argued that it was important that we were motivated to act in accord with our ultimate concerns. In the context of happiness, we might say that it is important that we feel that we have purposes worth living for (i.e. we are not depressed). So, it looks as though there is virtually no difference between happiness and meaningfulness. But, if we set out examples of a happy life on the one hand, and a

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<sup>117</sup> This is one possible explanation of a ‘mid-life crisis’. If you manage to achieve all the things you think of as valuable (say a house, a car, a family) but find that you are not, as a matter of fact, satisfied (you have a real sense that it has not made your life a coherent, satisfying whole) you may be confronted by the fact that you have been pursuing the wrong things (the wrong ultimate concerns).

meaningful life on the other, it might start to look as though there is a real difference between them.

Firstly, imagine a man who devotes his life to something which leads him to be confronted with extreme pain and suffering, but which to him amounts to a satisfying life. He becomes a health worker in Africa, working with people with Aids. He gains some sense that he makes a difference to his 'patients' lives, but he is constantly confronted by the extreme suffering of those with Aids. (They are able to make a difference, but can never really solve the problem.) Still, they feel that they have 'no alternative'. There are reasons for saying that such a person experiences his own life as valuable. We might also say that there is a sense in which he experiences his life as satisfying (or, at the very least, that they would not be satisfied if they didn't help these people.)

Compare this example with the case of an artist, who fills their time with satisfying activities to which they are deeply connected, and which gives them a deep sense of satisfaction. Perhaps they affect people with their work, but they would say their happiness arises from the fact that they enjoy and value how they spend their time. Once again there is a sense that this kind of life can be experienced as valuable and satisfying (though in a slightly different sense).

These examples might suggest that being happy (the second example) is different from having a meaningful life (the first example). What links these examples is that, in both cases, the people involved have ultimate concerns that hang together so as to be effective in delivering the sense that the person's life is personally satisfying for them. In my view, these two examples are best seen as two ends of a spectrum. The kind of life that would satisfy most people involves a mix of commitment to worthwhile goals, and personally enjoyable time. The mix that is most satisfying to someone cannot be outlined in the abstract (they need to mix these according to their own preferences). As I have said, whether your life is meaningful (happy) or not is something that needs to be tested against experience. If having an ultimate concern that is effective will deliver the sense that we are satisfied with our life (which genuinely matters to us) then we should accept that it genuinely matters to us that our ultimate concerns are effective.

## **12. My curious friend**

If it is accepted that it is a need to find satisfaction in your life, can the fact that something contributes towards our happiness provide us with a way of answering my curious friend's questions? Imagine my curious friend asks why (say) teaching Tai Chi matters to me. I might answer that it matters to me because it makes me happy. My curious friend might then ask 'Why does it matter to you if you are happy?' Once again, the response 'It just does' seems appropriate. There may be a discussion we could have about what facts about human beings that makes this the case. If my curious friend is asking a genetic, physiological or historical etc. question, I would admit that I don't know why it happens to be that human beings seek their own happiness. But it's not clear that I have to be able to answer this kind of discussion to think that I have given my curious friend a perfectly reasonable response.

We may though face a genuinely live question if my curious friend were to ask me; are you right to think that teaching Tai Chi really will contribute to your happiness? (But then, full awareness about what will make us happy is not guaranteed). This brings us back to the charge of emptiness. After all, I seem to be saying that happiness just is whatever satisfies people, whatever that is. It is, I think, more complex than this.

Everyone pursues their own happiness in a concrete way. (By trying to get the things that they think will satisfy them). If we assume that not just anything will make someone happy, it seems conceivable that people can make a mistake and pursue ways of life (ultimate concerns) that couldn't possibly lead to a satisfying life for them. In section 10.iii, I argued that pursuing pleasure for pleasure's sake is one such mistake. In the next chapter, I will argue that making the pursuit of our own narrow self-interest our ultimate concern is also a mistake. In the conclusion, I will argue that pursuing power, status and wealth for their own sakes is a mistake (see Conclusion.4.iii). In this respect, it should be clear that I am not saying that happiness is whatever people happen to pursue.

### **13. Conclusion**

At this stage, I want to make clear what is involved in claiming that our own needs and our own happiness genuinely matter to us. In section 2, I argued that, given our nature, there is no problem with thinking that things could genuinely matter to us from our perspective. In this chapter, I have defended the view that we are right to think that our own needs and our own happiness really do matter to us (it is not just that in some arbitrary way, all people just happen to think that these things do matter to them).

In Chapter IV (see IV.2.iii) I argued that nothing could matter 'objectively'. In this chapter, I have argued that our own vital needs, and our own happiness matter in virtue of our nature. But, I have argued that they don't matter simply in virtue of our nature (objective facts about us). Rather, I have argued that they matter in virtue of the fact that we are able to take up the perspective of ourselves on the facts about our own nature. When we do this, we discover that our own needs and our own happiness genuinely matter to us.

In Chapter V (see IV.5) I made the decision to investigate the things that genuinely matter independently of religious belief. It is not clear how, even if there is a true religious account of the universe, this would undermine the conclusions I have reached in this chapter. The facts about human existence I have made reference to are not one's that religion generally denies. It seems better to say that if there is a true religious account of the universe, then perhaps there will be extra things that genuinely matter.

If the arguments in this chapter are accepted, we seem to have an answer to one of the challenges posed by religious belief. In Chapter V (see V.4.i) I discussed Nozick's version of the epistemological argument. He argued that, when it comes to meaning, the only reasonable place to stop would be at the 'infinite' (i.e. God). I argued that, if we could show that there were reasonable places to stop (other than the infinite) then Nozick's challenge will have been overcome. I take it that the arguments in this chapter make it clear that some (non-infinite) things can genuinely matter. So, there are reasonable places to stop in defending the claim that something matters, which fall far short of 'infinite'.

The arguments in this chapter might be thought troubling for another reason. If our own happiness and meeting our own needs is what fundamentally matters to us, this might suggest that we have good reason to be self-interested and selfish. In the next chapter, I will argue that this is not the case. I will use some facts about our birth to show that human beings are not inherently selfish. In fact, I hope to show that positive relationships with other people are necessary if we are to meet our needs and to be happy.

## CHAPTER VIII

### DO OTHER PEOPLE MATTER?

#### 1. Introduction

The content of the last chapter (our own needs and our own happiness genuinely matters to us) may suggest that the most rational attitude we can have is to only care about our own self-interest. In section 2 of this chapter (Birth) I will be arguing that other people do matter to us (in so far as they are necessary if we are to have our needs met.) This claim is based on the fact that all human beings are born helpless - incapable of meeting their own needs. If our own needs matter (as I argued in the last chapter) then until we are capable of looking after ourselves, other people obviously matter to us.<sup>118</sup> We will *need* other people.

This discussion should help moderate the fact that I have focused on the perspective of the individual in drawing out the things that genuinely matter. The arguments in this chapter show that, even if we start from the perspective of the individual, other people are vitally important to us right from the start of human existence.

I will also be discussing egoism - the view that human beings are naturally selfish. I will argue that, if it is true that human beings are inherently selfish, we would have to accept that other people couldn't genuinely matter to us. I will be attempting to show that human beings are not inherently selfish. I will also be arguing that selfishness is not natural to us, as human beings are naturally social in nature.

In the second part of this chapter, I will be arguing that not only do other people matter insofar as they are necessary for us to meet our needs, they are also important to us if we are to be happy. I will argue that we require the help of other people if we are to learn to love ourselves and be aware of ourselves (both of which are integral to our happiness). Given the fact that our needs and our happiness do matter to us, then other people really do matter, insofar as they are necessary for us to achieve things that do matter to us. This might suggest that other people do matter, but still for selfish reasons. In response to this, I will be arguing that being selfish is incompatible with having the kinds of positive relationships that genuinely matter to us (see section 3.i).

#### 2. Birth

##### *i. Birth and needs*

I want to start by arguing that relationships with other people are a necessary and integral part of human existence<sup>119</sup>. This is to say that relationships matter to us in a

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<sup>118</sup> There are some complications in all this that I haven't addressed. In particular, it might be thought that there are difficulties with saying things matter *to* a baby (given the fact that they lack self-awareness). At the very least though, most children will have a long period where they have some level of self-awareness while they are also to some extent dependent.

<sup>119</sup> This argument developed out of suggestions from Norman, R. (1983) *The Moral Philosophers*. Clarendon Press: Oxford (see p. 150) and Fromm, E. (2001) *The Fear of Freedom*. Routledge: London (see pp. 19-27)



non-arbitrary way. Our belief that relationships matter to us is not an arbitrary choice made with no rational constraints. In fact, it isn't a choice at all. My argument is based on a fact about the way in which all human life starts. Human beings are born *helpless*. Because of this fact, human existence *implies* human relationships.

Babies, without exception require a phenomenal amount of care.<sup>120</sup> A human baby can do virtually nothing for itself. They need to be fed. They need to be kept clean (have their nappies changed etc.) They need to be given enough stimulation. And they need to be given the right conditions for sleep. In comparison with an adult, this list of needs looks quite basic. But having these needs met is vital, and it is impossible for them to meet their needs themselves. So, human babies require having their vital needs met by someone else (someone who is capable of meeting their needs.) We might say that human beings are born *requiring* care.

Meeting a baby's needs well can be a difficult process. They are (in one sense at least) born with an extremely minimal communication system. All they can do to inform you of their needs is to cry. They cannot communicate in any sophisticated sense about their current needs.<sup>121</sup> There are a number of different ways in which a human baby is helpless. It is may be eight months before they can move around under their own control (a year – or more - until they do this standing up.) A year before they can feed themselves (and this is only true as long as the food has been prepared for them, and given to them in a way they can get to). It is two years before they can manage basic communication.

Until children become self-sufficient, some of their needs and interests will need to be met by others. This process of becoming self-sufficient may take different amounts of time in different cultures, and depending on different circumstances.<sup>122</sup> The amount of time it takes to learn to take care of one's own needs might depend (in part) on how sophisticated those needs are. (Do you need to be able to work a computer, drive a car, fill out tax forms etc. to be self-sufficient in this culture?) We can at least say that it is a good many years before people are capable of meeting their basic needs without assistance.

Because a relationship (of carer to cared-for) is necessary if a baby is to live, then relationships with other people (at least initially) are not something freely chosen. We might say that human beings are born *into* relationships. Our incredible level of dependency requires that, if we are to reach an age where we can achieve self-sufficiency (a point at which, perhaps, relationships can be freely chosen) we must first be cared for. This means at least one relationship (the relationship of carer to cared-for) is a necessary part of the life of every human being that reaches a certain age. (Even when self-sufficiency is reached, these relationships will still form an integral part of a person's history).

All this implies that human beings do not need to 'decide' (from a position where we have no relationships with others) whether there are good reasons to think that relationships matter to them. Relationships with others are not something we can

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<sup>120</sup> Even when they die early in their lives, it is incredibly rare that people haven't 'tried their best'.

<sup>121</sup> Perhaps it's not as simple as all this. I looked after my niece for a couple of months. To begin with, I did have to go through a short list (almost at random) of reasons for her crying: Is she bored? Is she tired? Is she hungry? Does she need her nappy changed? Is she comfortable? Is she teething? Does she have colic? As time went on, I found that I had a greater capacity to 'tune in' to the reasons for the current crying, so I didn't have to go through the list in such a random way.

<sup>122</sup> A case could be made for saying that people in western cultures become self-sufficient much later than in, say, a hunter-gatherer society.

take or leave (at least not initially). We are born into relationships. Human existence already implies relationships of care (and dependency).

As it happens most humans are born into a whole range of relationships. We are born into relationships with a state (birth certificate, national insurance number etc.). In virtue of our relationship to the state, we are also placed in a wider range of further relationships – people are designated as your teachers, your social worker, your bin man, your postman, your local shop keeper. We are born into relationships; not just with our parents but also all the people your parents have relationships with - your parents' wider family (my uncles, aunts, nieces, grandparents) and also their friends. (We might say, at least initially, that these relationships are not chosen).

ii. *The development of children is a social process*

In order to learn the skills and abilities that will allow us to be self-sufficient (capable of looking after ourselves) we *need* other people. Other people teach us the skills required to be self-sufficient, either through instruction or by their example.

There are connections here with a discussion in Chapter III. In that chapter, I suggested that the kinds of creative activities that lend themselves to play (which can be done in virtue of the fact that they are seen as inherently valuable or enjoyable) can also be those that help one develop skills (see III.6). We need other people then to learn the skills that increase our ability to be self-sufficient (take care of ourselves)

We also need other people to learn the skills that can help us improve our ability to express ourselves. In order to learn how to express ourselves (both in language and through our activities) we require the help (and the time) of others. In particular, language is a thoroughly social acquisition. You learn your language (and so learn the skills required to express yourself in language and to think rationally) from other people. In learning a language, one does not just acquire words, but also ideas and concepts. You can only exist as a thinking rational individual by acquiring the language of a community.

All of this suggests that, in an important sense, given the fact that the development of the self towards self-sufficient is a social process, and given the fact that relationships are an inherent part of human existence, that the self is (at least in part) social. Much philosophy tends to think of the self as (inherently) fully self-sufficient and fundamentally isolated from others.<sup>123</sup> The arguments discussed here suggest that full self-sufficiency is something that the self only achieves in virtue of its relationships with others. So, even if human beings reach full self-sufficiency, it is because of their connectedness to others. This will be discussed again in the context of the claims of egoism.

iii. *Birth and freedom*

The discussion so far has shown that there is a very obvious sense in which babies are not born free. They are born *dependent*. Of course, given the right kinds of help from other people, they are born capable of becoming free (self-sufficient). I want to suggest that the length of human dependency is the basis of our profound freedom.

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<sup>123</sup> I'm thinking in particular of Sartre's account of the free self. Descartes and Hobbes could both be accused of having a similar view.

Human beings incredible level of dependency signals how little of their behaviour is instinctual. Think of creatures highly dominated by (innate) instinctual responses. A beetle may have the instinctive response to move away from certain kinds of movements, seek certain kinds of smells etc. in a purely mechanistic way. One of the advantages of these kinds of instinctual response mechanisms is that, not needing to be learnt, they can be operative very quickly. This makes the young of such creatures highly self-sufficient very early in their lives. There is no particular flexibility or any real sense of development in their skills. But the skills required to make them self-sufficient are present straight away. In this sense, purely instinctive creatures do not need to be cared for.

Human beings are not the only creatures that require care. For example, chicks require care from their parents. Perhaps one bird has to sit on the nest, while another bird gets enough food for everyone. But, the skills needed for a bird to be self-sufficient (including *flying*) can be gained in about 2 months. Even animals of equivalent size to humans become self-sufficient much quicker than we do.

In a western culture like ours, there may be a sense in which people don't become self-sufficient until their twenties. (University students are still, at least in part, supported by their families, their local council and (through debt) supported by their future selves.) It may be a separate question when a person is *capable* of becoming self-sufficient. Think of how old a child would be before – if you lost them in the wilderness – they would be capable of being self-sufficient.

(To put it in a way that may be – philosophically<sup>124</sup> – contentious) we might say that the enormous length of our dependency is the foundation of our freedom. Human beings' incredible level of dependency signals how little of their behaviour is instinctual. Human existence is not like the existence of a purely instinctive animal. (This is one of the things we might mean by saying that we are free.) We are not born with (basic, rigid, inflexible) skills. Rather, we have to painstakingly learn the skills we can use to become self-sufficient.

Babies may be highly dependent. But it is incredible how much they learn (think about how much information a mother – who is particularly proud – can give you about how many developments their baby has been through in a month). Having said that, it's amazing how 'incompetent' babies are to start off with and how little control they have (especially given the complexity of the skills they will eventually learn). Think of how much a baby has to learn in terms of control of their motor skills, before they can even begin to write the letters of the alphabet clearly (even if they are just copying them). Babies like this will eventually become capable of learning the skills required to drive a car, write a PhD, sell stuff they no longer want on e-bay, etc. None of these things (even in exceptional people) comes naturally. Each skill builds on further skills, all of which have to be learnt, practiced etc.

This may explain *why* human beings are dependent for so long. We take years to develop the skills required to be self-sufficient because the skills that we learn, or are capable of learning, are so sophisticated and flexible. Again, this seems to tie in to the discussion of play in Chapter III. There I discussed the way in which creative activities could be both enjoyable and at the same time develop your ability to look after yourself, express yourself etc. In a very obvious sense, children learn through play.

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<sup>124</sup> I do not intend to get involved in the debate between free will and determinism, though perhaps a case could be made on the basis of the arguments in this section that hard determinism will lose sight of a real distinction between rigid, purely instinctual skills on the one hand, and the kind of highly flexible skills I have been discussing on the other.

### 3. Egoism

#### i. *Egoism and relationships*

In the last chapter, we saw that human beings want to be happy. We ought therefore to be interested in *how* to achieve happiness. (In the last chapter, I argued that, in order to achieve happiness, we shouldn't just think about getting what we want, or doing pleasurable things. It mattered whether the individual events and goals in our life cohere in a satisfying way). It might seem that, if our own needs and our own happiness genuinely matters to us, that one rational way to answer to pursue your own happiness is to maximise your own self-interest.

I am particularly interested in the claims of psychological egoism. This is the claim that the only thing that ever motivates people to act is that they think that they are promoting their own self-interest. For example, according to Hobbes, we can say "of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some *Good to himselfe*."<sup>125</sup> If it is true that everyone is motivated to act in this way, then events and actions would have significance for people only in so far as they have a bearing on their own self-interest.

Even a selfish person is of course interested or concerned with others. But they are concerned with other people in so far as other people impact on their own self-interest. (There may be a case for saying that selfishness promotes manipulation.) Because of this, there seem to be good reasons to say that selfish people are incapable of loving relationships. (When I talk of love in this chapter, I am not primarily concerned with sexual love. I am concerned with caring relationships with others in general). One central aspect of love may be the thought that the interests of the person you love are seen as significant and desirable enough to prompt action, concern etc. In other words, if you love someone, their interests become your interests (they may even, on occasion, outweigh your own interests). In this way, their interests can motivate you to act. If egoism is true (if people are only motivated to act by their own interests) then it looks as though loving relationships are impossible. Someone who is selfish is incapable of truly loving other people (the same might be said of other forms of self-obsession – see section 4).

This is not to say that a selfish person is entirely unconcerned with the interests of other people. For example, if I am selfish, and a friend asks me to give them a hand moving their sofa, I might think 'Well, if I help him, he will owe me. I know that he is very good at fixing computers. My computer is broken, so it is in my self-interest to exchange an hour of my time because in the end, it will save the £100 it would cost to have a professional fix my computer.' In other words, I might think that it is worth acting in someone else's interest because there are 'instrumental' reasons for helping them. In this case though, I am *only* being motivated by my own interests. I do not experience the other person's interests as having any intrinsic value. So, even though I am, in a way, concerned with another person's interests, I am still only motivated to act out of concern for my own interests. I do not genuinely care about their interests. I am not acting out of love.

This fact will be important in what follows. It may be thought that the arguments I am presenting really show that we have selfish reasons for engaging in positive relationships with other (as there is something in it for us). Still, if selfish people are unable to have truly positive relationships with others, the benefits from relationships

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<sup>125</sup> Hobbes, T. (1971) *Leviathan*. Penguin: Middlesex p. 192

(the needs that only positive relationships with other people can supply) will not be available to those who are only motivated by their own self-interest.

ii. *Are we naturally selfish?*

The claim of the egoist was that people generally are only concerned with their own self-interest. This, according to them, is human nature. If this were the case, then genuine, loving relationships with others would be impossible. In this chapter, I have been arguing that in order to survive and develop, human beings require a phenomenal amount of care. In this section, I want to assess whether this provides us with a clear counter-example to the egoist's claim.

As I have said, human beings are born requiring care. Unless someone takes the effort to care for them (is concerned with their interests) they will die. So, we might reply to the egoist that someone who cares for a child must be concerned with someone's interests other than their own (namely the child they care for). Given the fact that children (generally) survive to adulthood, someone must have been concerned with the child's interests (not just their own interests).

A committed egoist has a possible response to this. They might say that parents take care of their children out of self-interest. In saying this, the egoist is making a claim about a parent's motivation. So, the question is, when looking after their children, are parents *motivated* to do so purely by their own self-interest? As we saw with the example of helping my friend move his sofa, it is possible to act in someone's interests while, at the same time, being motivated only by your own self-interest. So, it may be that if we look at the motivations behind child rearing, we will find that parents are really, at heart, acting selfishly.

There seem to be two plausible ways to 're-describe' the actions of a parent in order to justify the claim that they are motivated by their own self-interest. The first possible selfish motivation they might be: It is in people's own self-interest to take care of their children because taking care of their children makes them happy. The second possible selfish motivation could be: People care for their children because if they didn't care for them, they would feel guilty.

In both cases, we might start by questioning whether the motivations as described could really be described as selfish. In the first case, we could ask: Why does taking care of their child's interests make a parent happy? The most obvious explanation for this would be that they genuinely care about their child. This is why caring for their child makes them happy. But, if they are motivated by their care for another, it is less clear that they have a purely selfish motivation. It looks as though caring for their child makes them happy because they love their child. We might find that parents would feel guilty if they don't care for their child have similarly selfless motivations. Perhaps they would feel guilty because they care about the well being of their child, and think that they *ought* to care for their child. If this is their motivation, again it is not clear that they are acting selfishly.

Of course, the fact that it is possible to re-describe the actions of the parent as though they were selfish is not enough to justify egoism. If the egoist is right, then it must be *true* that a parent's real motivations are always selfish ones. This was clear in the last chapter where I discussed the fact that all human behaviour could be described as motivated by pleasure (see VII.10.iii). There I argued that the fact that we can universally describe behaviour in a single way doesn't show that this way of describing behaviour is true. (In fact, as was clear with the example of the sane investigators of the

mental institutions, the fact that we describe behaviour as though it was always the same may suggest that we may be missing something important).

So, the question is, are parents really motivated to look after children purely in order to make themselves happy? It may be a fact that looking after their child does make them happy. Still, this does not mean that this is what *motivates* them to look after their child. It is not (usually) the thought that looking after their child will make them happy that makes the difference between a parent caring for, or not caring for their child. (And anyway, we might wonder how selfish someone is if caring for other people really makes them happy.) We can say something similar if the egoist says that parents care for their children because, if they didn't, they would feel guilty. We might again wonder how common it is for people to be motivated to care for their child primarily from this motivation. (It is hopefully quite rare).

While there may (unfortunately) be cases where people are motivated to care for their children for purely selfish reasons, it is a big leap from this to the claim that all parents *are* motivated to care for their children for just these reasons. It is simply not enough that it is always possible to re-describe what someone does in selfish terms.

In order for egoism to be justified, it needs to show that people are always motivated<sup>126</sup> by such selfish reasons. In the case of a parent, the most reasonable explanation of the fact that they care for the interests of their child is that they love them. This would explain why caring for their child would make them happy. It would also explain why they might feel guilty if they failed to care for their child.

It might be accepted that we are not naturally selfish. Still, it might be thought that the arguments in the last chapter (that our own needs and happiness really matter to us) shows that having a selfish attitude is still the most rational attitude we can have (would be the best way of ensuring that we achieve the things that really matter to us). So, even if we are not inherently selfish, there may be reasons for thinking that we *ought* to be selfish. In the next section, I will argue that a selfish attitude is actually a hindrance to leading a happy life (and, as I argued in VII.Part 2, our own happiness genuinely matters to us.)

#### 4. Happiness and self-love

In this section, I am interested in the ways in which someone may be said to love, or care for themselves. There are a couple of things we might mean by this. We might say someone loves themselves if they are concerned with their own needs and happiness – someone who takes care of themselves. But, we might also mean that someone who loves themselves is satisfied with who they are – that they *like* themselves.

I want to suggest that there is a relationship between loving yourself (in this second sense) and being satisfied with your life (happy). We might wonder whether someone can be unsatisfied with themselves (fail to love themselves in this sense) while being fully satisfied with their life. If you are not, to some extent, satisfied with yourself, it is difficult to see how you could have a belief in your life's value. It might suggest that you do not perceive your life as significant, valuable etc. This suggests that

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<sup>126</sup> Perhaps it needs to show even more than this. It depends on whether the claim is that all actual human motivation is (as it happens) self-interested, or the stronger claim that any possible human motivation is necessarily self-interested. If the latter, even if it were true that all actual humans are in fact always motivated by self-interest, this wouldn't be enough to prove the point.

valuing yourself (loving yourself) is a central part of being satisfied with your life, with being happy (in the broad sense discussed in Part 2 of the last chapter).

Insofar as loving someone involves being concerned with their interests, it may look as though selfish people (given the fact that they are ultimately concerned with their own interests) must love themselves. I want to argue that this is not the case. I have three arguments to try to support the claim that selfish people (despite appearances) do not love themselves.

The first is an empirical claim. The evidence from psychoanalysis<sup>127</sup> is that people who are selfish (or self-obsessed generally) do not love themselves.

Close observation shows that while the selfish person is always anxiously concerned with himself, he is never satisfied, always restless, always driven by the fear of not getting enough, of missing something, of being deprived of something ... If we observe still closer, especially the unconscious dynamics, we find that this type of person is basically not fond of himself, but deeply dislikes himself.<sup>128</sup>

It might seem that we need some kind of explanation of how it could be that someone whose ultimate concern is themselves (who puts their own needs and interests above everything else) doesn't love themselves.

Selfishness is rooted in this very lack of fondness for oneself ... While on the surface it seems that these persons are very much in love with themselves, they are actually not fond of themselves and their ... selfishness is an overcompensation for the basic lack of self-love.<sup>129</sup>

There are a group of character traits we might describe as forms of self-obsession. Selfishness is one such attitude. Others are attitudes like vanity, smugness, arrogance and narcissism. With all of these attitudes, you view the world as though you were superior to others, or you deserve more than others. The evidence from psychoanalysis then, is that forms of self-obsession are not manifestations of self-love, but are in fact manifestations of (or an overcompensation for) a basic insecurity. Intellectual smugness, for example, could be described as a strategy to find ways of bolstering one's basic lack of self-love and self-esteem by finding ways in which you are 'better' than other people. This strategy suggests that you need to constantly find ways of 'affirming' your own value. In this sense, forms of self-obsession are actually a manifestation of a basic *lack* of self-love.

The second argument relates to the way in which selfish people attempt to pursue their own self-interest. There seem to be good reasons for describing selfishness as a form of greediness, in that it seems to contain an element of insatiability, but never any real satisfaction or contentment.

In the previous chapter, I argued that happiness doesn't follow simply from gaining the things that you want (or desire). It is important both that you are self-aware enough to know what kind of life would truly satisfy you, and that your achievements need to hang together in some meaningful way.

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<sup>127</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Fromm, E. (1939) 'Selfishness and Self-love', *Psychiatry*, Vol. 2., No. 4, November 1939.

<sup>128</sup> Fromm, E. (2001) *The Fear of Freedom*. Routledge: London. p. 100

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid* p. 100

If we return to Schopenhauer's claims about the meaningless nature of life (see IV.5) we might see why a selfish person's attempts to find satisfaction are inherently unsatisfying. Schopenhauer argued that if we achieve our goals, we find them ultimately unsatisfying (as the achievement of any goal simply gives rise to a new goal that needs to be reached.) When discussing this claim, I argued that Schopenhauer's account of our aims and goals does not apply to all human action. But, Schopenhauer's account does seem true of forms of self-obsession. For example, when someone who is deeply vain gets complimented on their looks, there may be a short-term boost to their fragile self-esteem. But this simply perpetuates their 'felt need' to be valued for their looks. Similarly, when someone is selfish, getting more of something may make them feel good. But, insofar as they are selfish, this will not bring their need to have more than others to an end. Rather, the next time they are in a similar situation, they are going to feel the need to have more than other people again. In both cases then, there may be a short-term satisfaction, but there doesn't seem to be the possibility of any lasting satisfaction.

In the last chapter (see VII.10) I argued that in order to achieve happiness, one couldn't *just* think about getting what you want, or doing pleasurable things. It mattered whether these individual events and goals cohere in a satisfying way. So, while it might seem that one rational way to answer to pursue your own happiness is to maximise your own self-interest, if this is pursued on a purely case-by-case basis – prompted by immediate desires – two potential problems arise. Firstly (given the threat based on Schopenhauer's pessimism) it is difficult to see how any lasting satisfaction could follow. Secondly, it is not clear how each of these individual achievements could add up to anything coherent. As with seeking pleasure for pleasure's sake (see VII.10.iii) the value of the achievement of your self-interest will be found *in* that moment (not in the connection between that moment and other moments). So, it seems right to say that the mere fact that you often achieve a short-term gain in your self-interest cannot, on its own, guarantee a happy meaningful life. As the value of each event has a discrete value, it is not at all clear how your life could hang together in any satisfying sense. (This is an argument against pursuing your self-interest in 'too narrow a way'. So, it may not be an argument against someone who takes a more long-term approach to pursuing their own self-interest).

The third argument is based on the fact that self-obsessed people seem to be making some kind of mistake about their identity. In this chapter (see section 2) I have argued that the self is always (at least in part) a social self. In this respect, people who are ruthlessly selfish are acting only in the interests of their (isolated) desires. If the self is always (at least in part) social, we might almost say that selfish people lack self-awareness. (and they are failing to act in the interests of their true self). The claim that the self-obsessed person doesn't act in the interests of the 'total personality' is even clearer in cases such as vanity, intellectual smugness, or any form of arrogance based on specific abilities. A vain person believes that appearance is of fundamental importance in relation to self-worth. To the intellectually smug person, being intelligent is central to being a worthwhile person. But, insofar as they are not just intellect, or not just their appearance we might say that they do not love their 'whole' self.

It should now be clear that the self-love I am describing (self contentment - genuine fondness for the self) is very different from selfishness (those who 'love themselves too much', who are selfish or self-obsessed). I have argued that, despite the intuitions, selfish people do not effectively love themselves. The discussion in this section also suggests that selfishness can frustrate your happiness. There are in fact reasons for thinking that self-obsession is not a rational way to pursue your own



happiness. It is difficult to see how selfishness can lead to any lasting satisfaction or meaning. Given the fact that our own happiness genuinely matters to us, this section illustrates that, pursuing our own interests in too narrow a way (by not obsessing about your own narrow self-interest, or narrow aspects of the self etc.) is not an effective way to become happy.

So, if our happiness genuinely matters to us, we have good reasons to avoid the narrow pursuit of our own self-interest, as pursuing our own narrow self-interest is not an effective way to achieve happiness. In the next section, I will argue that people who are selfish (insofar as they will be incapable of truly caring relationships with others) will be cut off from some of the potential benefits of truly positive relationships. In the next two sections (5 & 6) I will attempt to describe some of these potential benefits.

## 5. The value of relationships

### *i. The importance of attention*

In this section, I want to discuss the ways in which gaining self-confidence and self-respect (believing you have self-worth, believing you are valuable) *requires* positive relationships with others.

Firstly, I want to suggest that, unless others treat you as valuable, it is difficult to sustain the idea that you really *are* valuable. Think of a homeless person on the streets of London. They stand in the same place all day asking passers by ‘Any spare change?’ Every so often, someone talks to them, or gives them money. Occasionally, someone might be rude to them. But the majority of people pass by acting as though nothing has been said to them. The homeless person’s actions appear to have had absolutely no effect on the world, and the people in it. It is as though they never spoke.

If a person’s actions have no effect on other people (or if nobody cares about them) they will have difficulties in sustaining the idea that their life really is valuable. Homeless people in this position are found to have increasing levels of mental health problems.

writers on schizophrenia such as R.D. Laing have shown from empirical studies how the constant invalidating or ignoring of a person’s actions and utterances, especially from within a family, can quite literally produce a loss of any coherent sense of who one is, or of being a person, to the point of mental breakdown.<sup>130</sup>

Specifically, people in this position appear to have difficulty in holding on to any sense of a self (and certainly difficulty having any real sense of self-worth). So, it is extremely difficult to hold on to the idea that you are worthwhile or valuable if no one treats you as valuable. (If a parent behaved in this way, we would call it psychological abuse). By contrast, when others give their attention ‘unreservedly’ to what we say, we are given the message that we are worth listening to etc.

The importance of having the attention of others might also be seen when a young child is starved of attention. (Imagine their only carer spends all day ignoring them, watching the television instead). We might say that children *require* attention – not just of their physical needs. If a child gets no attention, they would rather have *bad*

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<sup>130</sup> Norman, R. (1983) The Moral Philosophers. Clarendon Press: Oxford p. 166

attention than no attention. They would rather have their father shouting at them than live in a world of other people where their existence isn't recognised.

I argued in the last two chapters that part of living a meaningful, happy life involved having some sense that our actions make a difference, that they have an impact on the world. Insofar as human beings are social creatures, in order for life to be meaningful, it is important that our actions have an effect on the 'social world'. In this context, it seems that we cannot gain the sense that we have a valuable impact on the world (are a valuable member of the social world) unless we have some positive feedback from others.

## *ii. The importance of respecting others*

You don't just need other people to treat you as valuable. You also need to respect the opinion of those who value you. Think of what happens when someone you have absolutely no respect for falls in love with you. In these circumstances, you do not get the same sense of having your value affirmed. You are being treated as valuable. But, unless you respect the opinion of the person, you cannot truly take on board their opinion of you.

When someone you respect - whose opinion you value - treats you as valuable, you are getting the strongest possible affirmation that you really are valuable. You are capable of having true self-confidence. (Unlike, say, the achievement of a goal that arises out of self-obsession, this kind of affirmation is genuinely capable of quietening your uncertainty about your value.)

There may be reasons for thinking that, if you are to get your value affirmed by others (in circumstances where they value you, and you value their opinion) you need to be yourself in the relationship. The fact that they are affirming your value only works if you are truly yourself. Imagine you think that a side of your self is 'shameful'. Your embarrassment may lead you to conceal this part of yourself from others. The affirmation of your value from another will not help you in these circumstances. Their affirmation of your value is an affirmation not of you, but of the part of you that you allow them to see. Given the fact that you know that their judgement of you does not relate to the 'true' you, you know that your self is not affirmed in their love.

Forms of self-obsession actually seem to damage your chances of gaining the benefits of this kind of relationship (they can actually be a barrier to achieving the kinds of things that can lead to a genuine sense of self worth). Think of the effect of arrogance and smugness on one's ability to affirm your own self-worth. Arrogance places a barrier in the way of valuing other people. The attempt to bolster one's confidence through finding ways in which you are better than other people, means that you have a vested interest in believing that other people are less valuable than you. If you are always looking for ways in which you are superior to other people, you are going to find it particularly difficult to find people whose opinions you value.

## **6. Self-awareness**

### *i. The importance of self-awareness*

Throughout the last three chapters, it has become clear that there is an important relationship between one's capacity to seek a fulfilling life and one's level of self-

awareness. (For example, see VI.7.iv,v,vi). In this section, I want to argue that knowing yourself requires positive relationships with other people. People can fail to have full self-awareness of their deeper needs. If someone is in denial, other people may in a better position to describe their true situation (and even feelings) than they are. People can lack the ability or desire to ‘interpret’ their inner feelings. People unskilled in these kinds of activities may not be the best judge of their true situation. (They will require the help of people with more ‘insight’.)

Denial (in part) involves putting lots of your energy into keeping up the illusion that you are happy. There seem to be parallels with selfishness here. Just as someone’s concern with their own interests can actually be motivated by their doubts over whether they really are valuable, so, the fact that someone in denial attempts to keep up a cheerful façade can actually be a manifestation of the fact that they are not happy. In both cases, it is tempting to describe such behaviour as a form of *overcompensation*.

Cases of denial are clearly linked to self-awareness, at the very least in the sense that you are pretending that facts about yourself are not true. Also, insofar as denial involves the suppression of some element of yourself, you are not acting on the basis of your ‘total personality’. In this sense, denial makes it more difficult to discover what *truly* satisfies you.

## ii. *The role of others in gaining self-awareness*

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that other people are vital in teaching us the skills that allow us to express ourselves. In my view, your ability to know yourself and your ability to express yourself are inextricably linked. Even when it comes to knowing what we think, I want to suggest that positive relationships with other people are required.

I want to discuss an example, in order to make this convincing. I once had a student who came up to me after his first ever philosophy lecture. He told me that he had solved the meaning of life. He asked me if he could e-mail me his argument. His argument had 24 premises (each of them equally strange and unclear). The first premise was: Only physical things are real. I had to explain to him that this claim might mean a vast range of things. At its strongest, it might suggest that air is not real. On a weaker reading, it might imply that e.g. gravity is not real. As the claim stands, I had to explain to the student that it is not at all clear what he is trying to say with this claim. When faced with my questions about what exactly his claim meant, the student actually became unsure about what he thought. He said he needed to go away and think about it a bit more.

He at least had the intelligence to recognise that his claims were not expressing what he thought clearly. From my point of view, there were holes and ambiguities throughout all of his premises. In many of the cases, when presented with these ambiguities, the student didn’t really know what to say. In this sense (especially given the student’s responses) it seems right to say that, prior to our discussion, it wasn’t yet clear what this student actually thought.

The activity of philosophy (the attempt to clearly state and defend our views) suggests that through dialogue with others we can become much clearer about what we think and why we think it. It is through our attempts to communicate our thoughts to others that we can come to clarify and sharpen our understanding of our own thoughts. Writing essays, books and papers (or teaching) are all public forums. They all embody the idea that we need to test our thoughts in a public arena in order to fully clarify our

thinking. Only by expressing our views as clearly as we can, and by taking other people's responses seriously, can we come to have a clear grasp on what we think and why we think it. Philosophy is, by its very nature, a social effort. We can come to understand what we think, and whether we have good reasons for our views, through the attempts to explain and convince others.

All of this suggests that, unless you can get back the opinion of other people whose view of the world, and more importantly yourself, you respect, there is always the chance that the understanding you have of yourself is only true 'in your own head'. If you do not listen to people whose views you respect, and take on board their criticisms, you cannot move towards clarity, and a proper understanding of yourself.

There are other examples that seem to suggest that other people are of vital importance in helping us achieve full self-awareness. It can be particularly difficult for us to become aware of our own habitual behaviours. For example, I used to have a habit of humming a song every time I entered a room; I also used to, on occasion, to talk too loudly. It took very good friends (one's I had strong relationships of trust and care with) to tell me that I did these things (and prompted me to think about why I did them).<sup>131</sup>

So, positive relationships with other people are invaluable in helping us see the truth about our true feelings and our actual situation. In particular, when it comes to accepting 'difficult' facts about ourselves, we need people whose views we respect. More than this, we need people with whom we have a relationship of trust and care. It might be thought that, when it comes to our deepest worries (issues we may be defensive about) we require relationships with a high level of trust. If it is thought that trust can arise only in relationships in which each person is convinced that the other person cares for them, then people who are incapable of genuinely caring about the interests of others will have problems developing these kinds of relationships.

## **7. Other reasons why people matter**

Among other things, other people are often a source of great happiness. Quality relationships enhance your life and are the source of valuable content. To give just one example, think of the pleasure there is in sharing a great joke with someone. If someone says something that makes you laugh (in a genuine way) there is a real sense in which something is shared. This might help you feel connected to other people, it might help you see things in a new light, or it might just make you feel good.

It is also clear that loneliness is a component of many unhappy lives. Loneliness is not something that is necessarily alleviated by being around people (you can be lonely in the centre of London). Loneliness is caused by the fact that you do not feel connected to other people (or that you cannot make a good connection with others). If you never connect with another person, it can feel like you are disconnected from the social world. This is one of the ways in which life can be experienced as lacking meaning. I have discussed the way in which it is important to us that our lives and action make a difference, and have an impact. This is probably truest when it comes to the world of other people. This is just another reason why relationships with others are genuinely important to us.

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<sup>131</sup> Because they were habitual, it was difficult to change them. I'm grateful to Lucy and Stu (the people who told me these things) for helping me become more aware of myself.

## 8. Conclusion

I would like to go much further in drawing the parallels between our relationship to ourselves and our relationships with other people. My experience has been that there is a direct correlation between the quality of your relationship to yourself and the quality of your relationships with others. We might say, that it is through loving others that we come to understand what real love/caring is (and so become capable of having a truly loving relationship to ourselves). Loving yourself, and thus having self-respect, self-worth and self-confidence, goes a long way towards making a life a happy, contented one.

The affirmation of my own life, happiness, growth, freedom is rooted in the basic readiness and ability to love others as the incarnation of essentially human qualities.<sup>132</sup>

Unfortunately, I simply haven't got the space to explore this view fully. So, I will finish this chapter by recapping what I have been able to say. Relationships with other people are not something about which we have an entirely free choice. At the start of our lives, other people are required if our needs are going to be met. Other people are required if we are to learn the skills necessary to be self-sufficient, and to express ourselves (and so become self-aware). Even if we have reached the stage where we have become self-sufficient, we are already in innumerable relationships with other people (with the people who enabled us to reach a stage where we can make a free choice about relationships).

In effect, the egoist misrepresents the context in which we make choices. It presents the individual as already self-sufficient, yet without any pre-existing connections to other people. The egoist asks us to see ourselves making our choices in a world in which we have no pre-existing connections with others. It can then look as though we need some independent (selfish) reason for being concerned with other people's interests. We might say that this is an assumption of anyone who acts selfishly – in that they ignore their ties with others, and ignore the role of other people in allowing them to become self-sufficient. Instead, they see all their choices as requiring some current benefit to their isolated self before they will be motivated to act. Given the fact that the self is always (at least in part) social, the egoist misrepresents our situation.

I have argued that, even when (if) we become self-sufficient, we still require positive (i.e. non-selfish) relationships with others in order to become fully self-aware, to have self-esteem, to feel a connection to the social world. More than this, positive relationships with others can be a source of happiness.

I argued that, if human beings were naturally selfish, positive relationships with others would be impossible. Thankfully, I argued that there are no good reasons for thinking that people are only motivated by their own self-interest. While on the surface it may seem that self-interestedness is the best way to pursue your own needs and your own happiness, I have tried to show that this is not the case. As a matter of fact, selfishness is not a particularly effective way to be happy. It might be thought that I have actually been providing selfish reasons for caring about our relationships. Even if this is the case, I have argued that one cannot have positive loving relationships with others as long as we are selfish. (In other words, selfishness is self-defeating).

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<sup>132</sup> Fromm, E. (1995) The Art of Loving. Thorsons: London p. 4

This chapter is an attempt to say why our own happiness and our own needs are inextricably linked to positive relationships with other people. Given the arguments in Chapter VII that our own happiness and our own needs matter to us, it seems clear that other people *really* do matter to us.

## CONCLUSION

### 1. Introduction

I am going to start the conclusion by going through each of the challenges to the idea that some things genuinely matter. This will allow me to set out my own positive proposal in the light of these challenges. This should make it clear why we are justified in thinking that some things genuinely matter. I will also return to the issue of the meaning of life (personal meaning). I want to see what lessons may be drawn from my discussion of personal meaning. I also want to make clear that there is no reason to think (in the light of the challenges set by Cottingham) that a human life could only be said to be meaningful in the light of religious beliefs. Finally, the title of each chapter posed a question to be answered. I will end the conclusion by answering each of these questions.

### 2. Challenges to the idea that that some things genuinely matter

#### *i. The inescapability of doubt*

In Chapter II, I discussed the unavoidability of seriousness. This was Nagel's claim that people think some things matter. This is an unavoidable aspect of human existence (a fact about our nature). This is something I accepted.

In chapter II, I also discussed two attempts by Nagel to show that doubts about whether anything genuinely matters are inescapable. Nagel argued that we are unable to determine why anything matters. If true, this would suggest that we are unable to make decisions about what matters on the basis of any kind of rational procedure. I argued that Nagel's arguments for the inescapability of doubt are inadequate. But, in the chapters that followed, Nagel's arguments continued to provide ways of getting clear about the question of whether anything genuinely matters, through the questioning of my curious friend.

I will take the second argument I discussed (the epistemological argument) first. This argument concerned the way in which my curious friend could put pressure on my claim that something matters. Any time I claim that something matters, he can ask me to justify my claim that it matters. Whatever answer I give, my curious friend will simply ask me to justify my claim that *this* genuinely matters. I argued that there is no reason to think, simply on the basis of the epistemological argument, that all claims that something matters are entirely arbitrary. If the epistemological argument does pose a problem, it poses it for all types of justification. There is no special problem for the attempt to show that some things genuinely matter.

In Chapter II, I also discussed another aspect of Nagel's inescapability of doubt - the special experience argument. This was the claim that human beings (given the fact that they are self-aware) are capable of viewing the world from a totally detached perspective. I argued that, unless we had some grounds for thinking that we ought to take this 'perspective from which the world is meaningless' seriously (unless there were reasons for thinking that it was a *true* account of the world) it could not cause 'inescapable doubts' about whether anything genuinely matters. So, neither of Nagel's arguments for the inescapability of doubt were successful.

ii. *Objectivity*

In Chapter IV I discussed an attempt to prove that the special experience ought to be taken seriously. Another description of this detached way of seeing things is the objective perspective. If we think that the objective perspective reveals an account of the world ‘as it really is’ then it looks as though we have good reasons for taking this distanced perspective seriously. I argued that significance (whether something matters) cannot be an objectively real feature of the world. Given the fact that significance arises as the result of a particular awareness taking up a perspective on the world, we can see why an account of the world independent of all forms of awareness doesn’t reveal any significance. But, I also argued that the objective perspective cannot help us determine whether anything matters. After all, if it is an open question whether our world contains anything of significance, looking at that environment independent of all awareness will *always* reveal nothing as objectively significant.

The argument from non-objectivity is an attempt to show that nothing could matter (all answers to my curious friend’s questions are equally bad). In Chapter IV, I also discussed three other attempts to show that all answers to my curious friend’s questions are equally bad. These were arguments based on our size, our mortality, and the consequences of our activities. I argued that none of the arguments in chapter IV gives us any reason to think that we are making a general mistake in thinking that some things matter. In other words, we have no reason to think that all answers to my curious friend’s questions are bad.

iii. *Science (back to objectivity)*

We might think that the results of science show that nothing genuinely matters. Given the fact that the scientific perspective takes up an objective view of the world, it should be no surprise that science doesn’t reveal anything as genuinely mattering. Science is a way of exploring the nature of the world independent of awareness. So, science doesn’t seem to be a particularly fruitful way to examine whether anything genuinely matters. It might be thought that evolutionary theory shows that human life is the result of blind, meaningless forces. I argued, as I will explain below, that even if the evolutionary account of the emergence of human life is true, it need not rule out the thought that some things genuinely matter.

iv. *Religion*

In Chapter V, I argued that it is not possible to use religious accounts of the universe to show that some things genuinely matter. It was not my intention to imply that religious belief is irrational. Nevertheless, there seemed to be reasons for thinking that we are unable to prove that a particular religious account of the universe is true. In these circumstances, we will be unable to use religious beliefs as a way of answering my curious friend’s questions (in a way that could count as a *rigorous proof*).

Even so, it seemed that it might still be true that religious belief (or God) provides something necessary if anything is to be genuinely meaningful. In Chapter V, I looked at three arguments, each of which set challenges for any attempt to show that some things matter (or that life is meaningful) independently of religious beliefs. The first argument is the easiest to deal with. Nozick argued that the only way in which



something could be said to be genuinely meaningful was by reference to ‘the infinite’ (i.e. God). This had strong parallels with the epistemological argument. I argued that if we could come up with a reasonable answer to my curious friend (a place where it is reasonable to stop in justifying why something matters) we would have a reasonable response to Nozick’s challenge. Chapters VII and VIII showed that there are reasonable places to stop that fall far short of ‘the infinite’. So, Nozick’s challenge need not concern us.

There were also two challenges from Cottingham. These challenges question whether life could be meaningful independent of religious belief. His first argument is based on the claim that (without religious belief) whether or not someone’s life is meaningful is unacceptably subject to luck. This argument is based on the claim that the meaningfulness of a life is inextricably related to whether the activities in that life are successful. In fact, Cottingham later denies that meaningfulness is inextricably linked to success. I took two challenges out of this discussion. Firstly, if I could show that (even from a non-religious perspective) meaningfulness has little to do with external success, there would be nothing to concern us in Cottingham’s argument. Cottingham also claimed that every human being ought to have the potential to lead a meaningful life. Although it is not clear that we have to accept this claim given the fact that Cottingham bases this claim on religious doctrine.

Cottingham’s second challenge relates to the discussion of personal meaning. I argued that, in order to experience your own life as (personally) meaningful, you need to be able to place the events of your life into some kind of narrative (in such a way that the events of your life ‘hang together’). Cottingham argued that, without the normative structure provided by religious belief, we would just be left with the idea that we have a narrative account to tell. So, without the narrative structure provided by religious belief, we would be unable to distinguish good from bad narratives. We would have to accept that any narrative is as good as any other.

The challenges that Cottingham sets us principally relate to whether life is meaningful. I will return to these issues below, after I have discussed the issue of personal meaning.

### **3. The positive proposal**

None of the challenges to the idea that some things might genuinely matter were conclusive. But they do show us what we need to do to answer the question ‘Does anything genuinely matter?’ Firstly, we need to provide an adequate answer to my curious friend. (This would also provide us with a reasonable response to Nozick’s worry that only ‘the infinite’ could be a source of meaning). In other words, we need to show that we can be justified in stopping at a particular justification. (As we have seen, the mere fact that we happen to act as though some things genuinely matter will not be enough). Secondly, given my account of meaningfulness, we have seen that something can only be said to be meaningful from a particular perspective. So, any answer needs to involve the kind of perspective that can be the source of meaning. Thirdly, I have argued that religion cannot provide a conclusive way of answering my curious friend’s questions. (So, any answer we give cannot make reference to religious tradition). Fourthly, I have also argued that the scientific perspective is not one that can help us in finding something that genuinely matters. (So, any answer we give cannot be a purely scientific one).

I set out a position that is based on facts about human existence. While these are not ‘purely’ scientific facts, neither are these facts incompatible with scientific inquiry. (After all, there is a sense in which the scientific facts explain how we come to have the nature that we do.) Neither do the facts about human nature that I discuss seem to be in tension with religious claims. It seems that the facts about our nature that I focus on are true independent of religious belief. Religious beliefs may posit further characteristics of our nature, but they do not, for example, deny that human beings are self-conscious, and have needs.

The perspective of the self-conscious human being is the kind of perspective that can be the source of meaning. Human beings are capable of experiencing the world ‘through’ a particular context. As was clear when looking at the reaction to Ronaldo’s penalty kick (see IV.2.ii) human beings are capable of experiencing the world in the light of certain narratives, histories, contexts etc. (That is why so many people I know were upset when Ronaldo scored his penalty). I argued that, when a human being (or anything for that matter) takes up a perspective on their *own* needs, their own needs are thereby experienced as *genuinely* mattering. This provides us with a reasonable place to stop in answering my curious friend’s questions. Our needs don’t just matter because we happen to think they matter. From our own perspective, our own needs genuinely do matter. On occasion, there may be other things that matter more, but from our own perspective, we live in a world where some things ‘already’ matter. (This shows that Nozick was wrong to say that only the ‘infinite’ could be a source of meaning.)

While I have argued that our vital needs, our happiness and relationships with other people genuinely matter to us, this was not meant to be an exhaustive list. So, I want to end this discussion by mentioning a number of things that may also genuinely matter to us. Firstly, it might be thought that, given the relationship between self-awareness and a satisfying life (through a lack of self-awareness, we can perpetuate mistakes about what makes us satisfied) our level of self-awareness is also something that genuinely matters to us. Another candidate for something that genuinely matters to us is our freedom. Throughout my discussion of ultimate concerns, I have assumed that we are free to choose the kind of life we want to live (we can choose our ultimate concerns). There may be some circumstances in which this is less true (for example, if you live under a totalitarian government<sup>133</sup>). If it matters that we choose our ultimate concerns on the basis of what most satisfies us, it may genuinely matter to us that we are capable of choosing the ultimate concerns that are best for us. Given the fact that our needs genuinely matter, there may also be reasons for thinking that the environment genuinely matters to us. These are just suggestions. I just wanted to give some indication that the things I have claimed genuinely matter may not be an exhaustive list.

#### **4. The Meaning of Life**

##### *i. Ultimate concerns*

I want to say a little more about the sense in which life can be experienced as meaningful. In chapter VII Part 2, I argued that it genuinely matters to us that our life is experienced as satisfying. This suggests that it genuinely matters to us that our ultimate

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<sup>133</sup> For all the rhetoric about the value of freedom in our society, it would be a mistake to think that our own culture is one in which freedom is a given. (C.f. Fromm, E. (2001) *The Fear of Freedom*. Routledge: London, particularly pp. 207-37)

concerns (the things that individual cares about most) are effective in delivering the sense that their life is satisfyingly meaningful.

In chapter VI, I argued that, when it comes to being effective, our ultimate concerns are not entirely arbitrary. Some ultimate concerns will be better than others at delivering a sense that our life is meaningful. This suggests that it would be a mistake to pick our ultimate concerns arbitrarily. It would be a mistake to simply accept other people's assertions about what ought to be your ultimate concern. It would be a mistake to simply adopt an ultimate concern at random, because of the felt need to have one.

My discussion has suggested that the final test of whether an ultimate concern is effective is your own satisfaction with a life that has this ultimate concern as the centre of your life (with the caveats discussed in Chapter VI concerning awareness and motivation). This may suggest that there is little concrete that can be said about what someone's ultimate concern should be (as it is a matter of personal taste). Nevertheless, in this section, I want to explore what it is possible to say, given my discussions.

ii. Are there ultimate concerns that couldn't be effective?

I think we can say that two particular ultimate concerns are ineffective ways of attempting to achieve a satisfying life. In chapter VII part 2, I argued that, if you made your ultimate concern seeking pleasure for pleasure's sake, you would face serious problems in achieving a satisfying (meaningful) life. This is because part of what it is to experience your life as meaningful is to experience the fact that the separate events in your life hang together in a satisfying way. There are difficulties in seeing how the separate *pleasurable* events in your life could provide a sense that the valuable aspects of your life cohere into a satisfying life (see VII.9). This is because the value of a pleasurable event for you will be found exclusively in the pleasurable moment – not in the connection between different pleasurable moments. Throughout Chapter VIII, I also argued that making your ultimate concern the pursuit of your own (narrow) self-interest also faces difficulties in leading to a satisfying life.

I made a number of other suggestions in Chapter VI. For example, I argued that certain activities (e.g. excessively passive ones) are inappropriate as ultimate concerns (see VI.9.iii) It is not at all clear how solitary, unproductive activities could provide a sense that we make a significant or valuable effect on the world. I also argued that certain relationships (e.g. with people who want nothing to do with you) would make inappropriate ultimate concerns (see VI.7.v).

iii. *Power, status and fame*

I want to quickly say something about a number of potential ultimate concerns. These are the pursuit of power, status and fame. From the discussion in this thesis, it is perhaps understandable why people might want power (it will certainly provide them with a sense that they make a difference and have an impact on the world). As with pleasure for pleasure's sake, it seems perfectly reasonable to think that having power that allows you to make a positive difference to your ultimate concerns is valuable. But, power for power's sake (unless the difference you make through the use of your power is felt to be valuable to you) will be less able to provide you with a sense that you make a difference to something you *value*. The same kind of thing could be said about status and fame. Being valued (if you are awarded status or made famous) for something that

you value, is in a much better position to provide you with self-worth (in the case of status) or a sense that you are appreciated (in the case of fame) than being valued for something you do not yourself value. If they are connected to your ultimate concerns, things like power, status and fame can be considered valuable to you. But if these things are disconnected from the things we value (if they are pursued for their own sake) it is not clear that they will provide you with a sense that you make a *valuable* difference to the world.

iv. *What kinds of activities are capable of leading to a truly satisfying life?*

In chapter III, I discussed Schlick's particular definition of work and play. I want to return to this discussion in order to see what kinds of activities are suitable candidates for paid employment. We might think that it is important that we are able to be self-sufficient. If meeting our own needs genuinely matters, we might think it is important (as an adult) that we are able to support ourselves.<sup>134</sup> In this culture, this is usually achieved through engaging in economic work.

Given the amount of time people in this culture spend working, we might think that it is important that your work is connected in some way with your ultimate concerns (otherwise the time spent at work will not form a part of the 'story of your life', despite the fact that so much of your time is spent at work).

We might think that the discussion of play in chapter III suggested that there are two potential ways in which activities can provide the basis for a meaningful life. Firstly, someone can find an activity so enjoyable and rewarding that making this activity their ultimate concern (spending lots of time on this activity) fills their life with pleasures arising out of their ultimate concerns. If the activity is active and creative, it can provide you with a sense that you make a significant difference to the world. If the activity is creative, it will allow you to express yourself, and experience yourself as an active (significant) part of the world. If the activity is one requiring skill, then engaging in the activity will tend to improve your skill, and so improve your ability to create, and express yourself. This certainly looks like the kind of activity that could form the centre of a satisfying life. We saw in Chapter III that Schlick over-stated the centrality of play. Play is not the only thing that ought to matter to people. (After all, other things genuinely matter to us). So, even if you find an activity inherently satisfying, it is also important that it provides a sense that you make a difference to the world, and that it provides a centre to your life which provides you with a sense that your life hangs together in a satisfying way. It is also important that it allows you to take care of your needs and your relationships. After all, these things genuinely matter to you. All of this implies that not just any 'inherently satisfying activity' will do.

Even if your working activities are not satisfying in this way, there is a second way in which your activities at work can help provide a sense that your life is meaningful. If, through your work, you are able to have a positive impact on something you value (something connected to your ultimate concerns) this can also connect your time at work to the 'story of your life'. Insofar as you have this kind of connection to

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<sup>134</sup> I don't want to suggest that it can never be right or appropriate to be dependent on others. It looks reasonable in certain circumstances (for example, if you are a mother with a very young child, or if you are genuinely incapable of meeting your own needs) to be dependent on others. But, if someone does not live in conditions of this kind, the fact that you are dependent is bound to have negative implications for your freedom and/or your relationships.

your work, engaging in activities that promote your ultimate concerns (which as a result make your life satisfying) will increase your ability to have a meaningful life. Through your work, you will be capable of making a positive contribution, of making a difference to something you value.

These two ways in which economic work can be a source of meaning mirror the two extremes of a satisfying life discussed in VII.10. There is little I can say about which kind of work would be most satisfying for someone. That, in the end comes down to which kind of life *they* would find most satisfying (and perhaps what their options are.)

Having said that, because there are some things that genuinely matter, we might particularly value activities that are capable of making a difference to things that genuinely matter (i.e. contributing to the needs, health and happiness of ourselves and others) in such a way that our life hangs together in a satisfying way.

v. *What kinds of activities are not capable of leading to a truly satisfying life?*

This discussion of economic work suggests that there is a cost to work that is not satisfying as an activity, and does not contribute to achieving something you value. It is giving up your time (something of value to you – even if only potentially) in pursuit of some further end. If you sacrifice your time in order to achieve some further reward, the rewards had better be worthwhile (not driven by denial, a lack of self-awareness, addiction or compulsion).

It is deeply regrettable if the rewards you get from work are mere self-sufficiency. More than this, the arguments in this thesis suggest that if we engage in unsatisfying work simply to gain enough money to spend the rest of our time enjoying pleasure for pleasure's sake, or to pursue our own narrow self-interest, there are reasons to think that this is an ineffective way to achieve a satisfying life.

vi. *Relationships*

Given the fact that the quality of our relationships with other people genuinely matters I want to look at where other people fit into our activities. Relationships with other people can develop out of meaningful activities (and working activities). Through these kinds of activities, you may join with others in the pursuit of common goals. These can be truly described as positive relationships. Still, relationships with people outside of your work place may be important (and desirable). I have argued that having the time and energy to spend with people (giving them your attention) is important. If an activity dominates in such a way that having quality relationships becomes difficult, this could be problematic in terms of achieving a satisfying life.

Can anything be said about which is more important, your activities or your relationships? Imagine a standard dilemma. A man is forced to choose between a job he finds satisfying and spending as much time with his family as he would like. What should he do? I would want to say that there is no answer to this question (in the abstract).

At the same time, we might think that the right answer may become clearer once the person has decided what to do. In cases where someone who is truly torn between these two ultimate concerns, what this person finds personally satisfying may become

clear in the light of their feelings and actions following their decision. (It may become clear that their family is most important. It may become clear that their job is most important. They may find that they want to find a ‘proper balance’ between the two). Imagine he chooses his job over his family. Perhaps he comes to regard this as the best decision of his life. Alternatively, perhaps he comes to think it was a dreadful mistake. (In other words, dilemmas, and how we feel about our choices, may *teach us* what satisfies us most).

Whatever else we say about relationships, I have argued that we should take into account the fact that positive relationships with others are (even if only initially) an integral part of a satisfying life. Given the fact that relationships require time and attention, any work that prevents you giving time (due to the excessive hours you work) or attention (given the fact that you put so much into your work that you have no energy left) is bound to have a negative effect on your relationships.

vii. *A practical question*

This thesis has, in part, been an attempt to think through issues concerning the meaning of life. There is one reservation I want to make at this stage. It seems true to say that finding out what kind of ultimate concern truly satisfies you cannot be discovered simply by thinking really hard about the issues. You will find out what satisfies you most, and what is most important to you by looking to the relationship between you and your activities and the people in the world (particularly in how you feel about them, and whether they motivate you.) I have argued that our ultimate concerns need to be tested against our experience (in the light of a reasonable level of self-awareness). In this sense, finding a happy meaningful life is not just a theoretical question – it is also a practical one.

The key thing is to make sure that the things you think are important, and around which you centre your life, are truly satisfying for you, and provide a sense of commitment. (They motivate you to act.) Partly, this involves paying attention to yourself, being willing and open to discovering how satisfied you are with your life. If you find that you are not motivated by your ultimate concerns, have a long hard look at them. Even if we have a reasonable level of awareness and self-awareness, we may still make mistakes, but if we have a reasonable level of awareness, it will be possible to prevent these mistakes being perpetuated.

You can be hampered by a lack of awareness, or a lack of self-awareness - or habits that are aimed at avoiding full awareness of your experience and your situation. I just want to mention one habit that can cause problems. Unless you are willing to try out different kinds of activities, or are willing to put in the effort required to build strong relationships, you will limit your experiences of (potential) activities and relationships. In this sense, having a ‘small comfort zone’ is going to limit the options you come across. This will make it more difficult to find connections with particular activities and people. You will have a better chance of finding the kind of life that truly satisfies you if you are willing to take some chances. So, perhaps you need to try things out, with a decent level of awareness and self-awareness. It looks as though the most fruitful way to approach this is to look for what you love, what you are committed to. In all of this, it is important that, in the light of what you love and are committed to, you are able to find active ways in which you can contribute to the things you perceive to be valuable. In these circumstances, you have the possibility of finding that your life ‘hangs together’

in a satisfying way. You can have the sense that you make a valuable contribution to something that you see as important. You will feel that your life is significant.

*viii. Cottingham's challenges to meaning without religion*

In Chapters VII and VIII, I argued that some things genuinely matter to us. I also argued (in Chapter VI) that we can make perfect sense of a person experiencing their own life as meaningful independently of (irresolvable) issues around religious belief. (Although, it was not my intention to deny that the belief in a religious account of the universe may be the source of a person's sense that their life is meaningful).

Also, it is not clear that there is any tension between the claims I make about what matters and the beliefs of the world's major religions. Few, if any, of the major religions would claim that in order to live properly, you should ignore your needs, ignore your satisfaction and ignore your relationships.<sup>135</sup> It may well be that certain religious traditions might prescribe what kind of satisfying life you ought to be aiming for. So, they would agree that people ought to pursue a satisfying life – but, against what I have said, they may suggest that personal satisfaction is not the only, or the main criterion of the 'right kind' of life. Still, this disagreement doesn't concern whether it matters if our life is satisfying. Rather, it seems to revolve around what kind of life is really satisfying.

There were a number of challenges from Cottingham that still need to be dealt with. Cottingham's first argument was based on the claim that whether or not a life is meaningful is importantly dependent on whether the activities in their life are successful. As we saw, Cottingham himself later denies that meaningfulness is inextricably linked to success. I argued that, if I could show that, even from a non-religious perspective, meaningfulness is not based on whether our activities are inextricably related to success, there would be nothing to concern us in Cottingham's argument. Cottingham argued that religious belief was one way of showing us that meaningfulness is not inextricably linked to external success.

Most forms of spirituality have in common that they aim to turn us away from typical preoccupations such as career, status and the accumulation of wealth, and prepare us instead to focus [on] our presence here at this moment.<sup>136</sup>

My discussion of power, fame and money (see ii.) appears to reveal that, even if we are looking at whether life is meaningful independently of religious belief, exclusively pursuing these kinds of superficial success seems wrongheaded. So, whatever way we look at it, meaningfulness is simply not linked to external success (so Cottingham's argument from luck doesn't seem to cause any kind of problem.)

There was another aspect to Cottingham's discussion of the argument from luck. Cottingham claimed that every human being ought to have the potential to lead a meaningful life. He argued that only religion could meet this requirement. Because Cottingham's claim is based on the claims of religious tradition, it is not clear that we have to accept this. Still we might say that achieving positive relationships with others and finding satisfying ways of spending your time is the kind of thing that most people will be capable of achieving.

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<sup>135</sup> Perhaps my claims about what genuinely matters may be denied by some 'cults'.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid p. 83

Having said this, there may be people, because of where they are born (which, we might say is down to luck) who may have trouble achieving a meaningful life. For example, someone born in a famine ridden African country, will have extreme difficulty in meeting their needs. As we saw in Chapter III (see VII.7) there are reasons to think that this would diminish their capacity to have a happy, meaningful life. According to Cottingham, this “is ethically repugnant because it goes against the long compassionate and egalitarian tradition, rooted in the best of Christian and Islamic thought.”<sup>137</sup>

I think there may be a sense in which Cottingham is right to say that it is ethically repugnant if human beings are incapable of achieving a meaningful life, simply because of where they happen to be born. If we look at places where famine is rife, we might think that the rich nations of the world are part of the cause of the fact that some people in the world are robbed of the chance of meeting their needs (either through the West’s actions, or simply by omission). In this case, it may be appropriate to talk of moral abhorrence here. But, if this is accepted, then the fact that there are people in the world who are starving looks less like a case of luck. As I have said, because Cottingham’s claims are based on religious doctrine, it is not clear we have to meet this charge. Still it seems that the account I have given of a meaningful life is the kind of life that the majority of people will be capable of achieving. So, there is nothing in this discussion to lead us to think that my description of what is involved in experiencing our own life as meaningful misses something crucial.

Cottingham’s second challenge relates to my claim that, in order to experience your own life as meaningful, you need to be able to place the events of your life into some kind of narrative (in such a way that the events of your life ‘hang together’ in a satisfying way). Cottingham argued that, without the normative structure provided by religious belief, we would just be left with the idea that we have a narrative account to tell. This, according to Cottingham would be too ‘thin’. It would not allow us to distinguish ‘good’ narratives from ‘bad’ ones.

I hope I have shown that, even from the perspective of the individual (independent of religious belief) there is a great deal of difference between a good and a bad narrative. I argued that meaningfulness arises through our ability to construct a narrative around our ultimate concerns. My discussion has made clear that (without any help from religious narratives) we could still distinguish good from bad narratives. Good narratives are those chosen with a fair degree of self-awareness that motivate us, and allow us to see our life as a meaningful whole. Bad narratives fail to do this. In particular, I have argued that narratives constructed around achieving pleasure, self-interest, power, status and wealth for their own sake are bad narratives.

My account of the things that genuinely matter also provide us with a certain amount of ‘normative bite’. According to Cottingham:

A worthwhile life will be one that possesses genuine value – value linked to our human nature and the pursuit of what is objectively conducive to the flowering of that nature.<sup>138</sup>

In saying that our needs, happiness and relationships genuinely matter, I have attempted to describe things that are of genuine value to us, “value linked to our human nature.”<sup>139</sup> Again, as with all of Cottingham’s arguments, there seems little here to lead

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid p. 69

<sup>138</sup> Ibid p. 32

<sup>139</sup> Ibid p. 32



us to think that, without something provided by religious belief, we couldn't talk of life being genuinely meaningful.

## 5. Answering the questions

I am now in a position to answer each of the questions that form the title of each chapter. I will deal with most of these questions quite quickly, as they have already been covered in depth in this conclusion. But I will deal with the question of our own death in a bit more detail.

*Chapter I: Is our own death bad for us?*

***Chapter I ended with the claim that our own death matters to us, not because the state of being dead is a bad one (it does not involve the presence of anything bad). Rather death is bad because it brings to an end something positive (being alive). In Chapter VII, I discussed whether life is always a positive state (see VII.4) and attempted to defend the claim that life can be valuable (although it is not clearly valuable in all cases).***

People in depression, people with serious diseases without the hope for remission, or people who are enslaved, may not experience their life as valuable. This is regrettable. In some cases it seems true to say that their vital needs may no longer matter to them as a result.<sup>140</sup>

Still, you may find that your life is valuable to you. Or, you may think there is the potential for a quality existence, for things you find genuinely valuable. (Things like pleasure, satisfying activities, making a difference on things you value, positive relationships with others etc.) More than this, if these things 'hang together' in some kind of pleasing way, it is possible to have a meaningful, happy, truly satisfying life. In such circumstances, it seems that we have clear reasons for thinking that life is valuable. So, because death involves the loss of our life, death can rightly thought of as a bad thing for us.

If life is valuable (even if it is only potentially valuable) and we are mortal, then this implies that our time is valuable. Because we are mortal, we are currently in possession of something that is both finite and valuable. One could say that the 'finite resource' we are in possession of is *time*. We may not know how long we are going to live, but we know that the time we have lived is time we are never getting back. (This suggests that understanding we are mortal, and understanding that life is valuable implies that we ought to appreciate the value of our time).

Another aspect of fully appreciating our mortality is to fully appreciate the fact that one's life is unique. (It is a once in a lifetime opportunity). If (as I assumed in chapter I) we cannot survive our own death, the life you are now living is a one-off manifestation of a unique life. Human beings are physically unique. But also, because of our social nature, because the development of the self occurs in a unique social context, we might describe human beings as particularly unique.

If it is accepted that it genuinely matters to us that we experience our life as valuable, it seems that we have good reason for hoping that our own death is a problem for us. (As, only if our life is valuable will our own death be bad for us). Or, perhaps,

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<sup>140</sup> I argued that the reason why they might no longer care about their vital needs is that their deeper (existential) needs are not being met, or are not capable of being met. (In other words, we would be wrong to describe such people as not having needs.)

we will only feel that death is not a bad thing for us if life stops being valuable to us. Whether or not a particular individual's death is bad for them cannot be answered in the abstract. We would need to look at the details of their life in order to see whether their life is valuable. Only then can the question be answered.

*Chapter II: Is life absurd?*

I argued that Nagel is right to say that human beings act as though some things genuinely matter. I have argued that, on occasion, they can be mistaken about the things that genuinely matter. Still, given the fact that it is possible to know that some things genuinely matter, we can also, on occasion be justified in acting as though some things matter. In cases such as this, there is nothing absurd about the fact that human beings act as though some things matter. So, we can say that human life isn't necessarily absurd.

*Chapter III: Is work meaningless?*

We have seen that economic work can, on occasion be meaningless. But in circumstances where we find our work personally satisfying, or where it contributes to our ultimate concerns, there is no reason to think that work is meaningless.

*Chapter IV: Does nothing matter?*

None of the arguments that I examined for the claim that nothing could genuinely matter undermine the thought that some things could genuinely matter. There is then, no reason to think that nothing could genuinely matter.

*Chapter V: Does religion prove what matters?*

I have argued that we can show how some things genuinely matter independently of religious beliefs. So, religion isn't the only way to show that something matters. At the same time, the facts about human existence that I have used to show that some things genuinely matter are not ones generally denied by religious traditions. Neither are they facts that are in tension with scientific accounts of the world. So, it is possible to show that some things matter without adopting either a religious or a scientific perspective.

*Chapter VI: Are our ultimate concerns arbitrary?*

Given the fact that it genuinely matters that our ultimate concerns are effective, I have argued that it our choice of ultimate concerns (what we care about most) genuinely matters. We need to choose ultimate concerns that are capable of delivering a sense that our life is meaningful. We need to avoid choosing ultimate concerns which couldn't be effective, and we need to make sure we are not in denial about how satisfied we are by our lives. Because of this, our ultimate concerns are not arbitrary.

*Chapter VII: Does anything genuinely matter? Chapter VIII: Do other people matter?*

I argued that some things do genuinely matter. In particular, given the fact that we are self-conscious; our vital needs, our happiness and the quality of our relationships all genuinely matter.

## **6. Conclusion**

Given the conditions of our life, and the fact that we can take a perspective on our own life, some things matter to us (in a way that is non-arbitrary). We are capable of taking a perspective on any number of things (e.g. football matches, relationships, activities etc.) in such a way that we experience them as mattering. But, when we take up a perspective on our own needs, our needs are revealed as *genuinely* mattering to us. This does not mean they cannot be outweighed, but it does mean that our choices are made against this background. Whatever situation we are in, some things *already* matter.

Against this backdrop, having a sense that our life is a happy, meaningful one also matters to us. We can make mistakes about the kinds of things that will lead us to be satisfied with our lives, but we cannot be mistaken in thinking that we want to be happy. It has not been my intention to tell anyone how to live their lives (although I have been concerned to point out potential ‘dead ends’). In the end, if you want to know what will truly satisfy you, you need to look to yourself, and to your ‘authentic’ responses to the world.

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